**Karen Long**:

Hello, I'm **Karen Long**, and you're listening to The Asterisk, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission. Today we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with novelist **Percival Everett**. Born in Fort Gordon, Georgia, raised in Columbia, South Carolina, Everett won the 2022 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in fiction for The Trees.

The idea sprung from the song Rise Up and the Lyle Lovett cover of Ain't No More Cane that Everett was listening to before playing a tennis game. He was also researching lynching. His sly story opens on a jaunty note, pointing to the woebegone and ironically misnamed Money, Mississippi, where mutilated bodies start accumulating and the past refuses to stay buried.

What The Trees became, in the estimation of the Anisfield-Wolf juror Joyce Carol Oates, is a profound novel. Quote, "Easily the most idiosyncratic, least classifiable work of fiction the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards has ever honored. This is a wickedly clever novel of ideas in the guise of genre fiction. A combination mystery, thriller, police procedural, and absurdist comedy," as Oates struggles to classify the unclassifiable.

Everett, a distinguished professor of English at the University of Southern California, has written more than 30 books, including poetry, the Pulitzer Finalist Telephone, and most recently, Dr No. He earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from the University of Miami and a master's from Brown. Everett lives in Pasadena, California with his wife the novelist, Danzy Senna. Welcome, Professor Everett. Welcome.

**Percival Everett**:

Thank you for having me.

**Karen Long**:

On The Asterisk, we like to jump right in into the art, and so I'm hoping you can read to us from “The Trees.”

**Percival Everett**:

Certainly. I'll read the section that I often feel is the heart of the novel. I'm told the book is funny at places. This part is not.

Damon Thruff wrote with a number three sharp pencil, sharpened with his Phi Beta Kappa penknife again and again. He scratched out names in a yellow legal pad. He scratched and scratched.

Bill Gilmer

Shedrick Thompson

Ed Lang

John Henry James

Charles Wright

Henry Scott

Arthur Young

George Dorsey

Mac Dorsey

Dorothy Malcom

Eugene Hamilton

Paul Booker

James Jordan

W.W. Watt

Lemuel Walters

George Holden

Will Wilkins

John Ruffin

Henry Ruffin

Eliza Woods

Anderson Gauss

Huie Conorly

Dago Pete

Laura Nelson

William Fambro

Isadore Banks

unknown male

Tony Champion

Michael Kelly

Andrew Ford

Henry Hinson

unknown male

Charles Willis

William Rawls

Alfred Daniels

Manny Price

Robert Scruggs

Jumbo Clark

Jack Long

Henry White

unknown male

Rev. Josh Baskins

George Buddington

Albert Martin

unknown male

unknown female

Richard Puryear

John Campbell

John Taylor

Ernest Green

Charles Lang

Ed Johnson

Andrew Clark

Alma Major

Maggie House

Levi Harrington

Jack Minho

Elbert Williams

Wyatt Outlaw

John Stephens

Perry McChristian

Felix Williams

unknown male

Cleo Wright

Lemuel Walters

Benny Richards

Henry Prince

Frank Livingston

William Miller

Smiles Estes

Jennie Steers

unknown male

16 adult men

John Peterson

Frank Morris

James Byrd Jr.

James Reeb

Frazier Baker

Joseph Smith

Francis McIntosh

George White

Zachariah Walker

Tom Moss

unknown male

unknown male

Calvin McDowell

Giuseppe Venturella

Francesco DiFatta

Giuseppe DiFatta

Giovanni Cerami

Rosario Fiducia

Sanford Louis

unknown male

Miles Phifer

Will Temple

Robert Crosby

John Heath

Matthew Williams

I pause here because after the publication of the book, I received a letter from a woman in Tennessee who supplied the name. The book reads, "David Walker, David Walker's wife, David Walker's 4 children," but this woman wrote to me from Tennessee and supplied for me the name of David Walker's wife, so I now read, "David Walker, Annie Walker, David and Annie Walker's 4 children." That's been corrected in some new editions of the novel and I'm pleased about that.

Raymond Gunn

Henry Lowry

Sam Hose

Jan Hartfield

Lee Heflin

Mrs. Wise

George Hughes

William Shorter

Joseph Dye

Orion Anderson

Allie Thompson

and Charles Craven

"Well, the fuzz is gone," Mama Z said as she entered the records room. She observed the open dossiers and thrust disheveled appearance. Damon looked up. "The FBI lady," Mama Z said. She studied Damon's red eyes and then the pages in front of him. "What are you doing?" "I'm writing their names by hand."

Damon sharpened his pencil over a sheet of white paper. Mama Z pulled the pad toward her and looked at the list. "Why are you doing this?" she asked. "Well, when I write their names, they become real, not just statistics. When I write their names they become real again. It's almost like they get a few more seconds here. Do you know what I mean? I would never be able to make up so many names. The names have to be real. They have to be real, don't they?" Mama Z put her hand against the side of Damon's face. By pencil, "Well, when I'm done, I'm going to erase every name and set them free." "Carry on, child." the old woman said.

**Karen Long**:

Thank you. Thank you so much for reading that. It feels like a ritual holding the names for the reader, but how is it for you as a speaker now that you've read them publicly on a number of occasions?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, not surprisingly, but also surprisingly, I still get the same reaction. I still get a chill when I read these names. Also for the sake of brevity, I skipped some names as I was reading it and felt a certain amount of guilt skipping those names. Even though in the book I do not use nearly as many names as I had, just because of logistics and strategy, and just having the novel work. So the names, though particular, unfortunately also become representative.

**Karen Long**:

Right. I can feel that tension in listening and reading simultaneously. I'm thinking about the way another piece of art holds names, that is the Vietnam War Memorial that you've spoken of. The combination of that art and the names has created a holy place, a holy secular place in our country. I'm thinking about that practice of naming and being a similar strength into The Trees. Is that what you want?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, yes, certainly that. That's a part of it. Naming is a performative act. It's what parents get to do to and for their children. Names do work in the world and there's a lot of power in naming in the same way that explorers, if you get there first, you put down your flag, you get to name that place and apparently even if the place already has a name by those indigenous people who might already have been there. So, the whole idea of naming necessarily contains a lot of... And I don't even know how to describe the power. It's in many ways incredibly human, but in other ways in vain and arrogant.

**Karen Long**:

I heard you say that you reread Tristram Shandy every year and part of that novel is the profound power to create the fortune and the nature of someone by a name.

**Percival Everett**:

Yes. In fact, the real irony of Tristram Shandy and what I would love to capture myself is the fact that the named figure never comes to exist in the novel at all. Yet the name carries so much so weight, we never get past that character's conception.

**Karen Long**:

And you end The Trees with a question twice from Mama Z asking the detectives if the scholar should stop writing the names, "Shall I stalk him?" It is a supernatural crescendo where there's understanding and not understanding what the continuance of violence and lynching is doing, at least as I'm reading it. So, there's a through line from the first page to the last on this conjuring of the dead.

**Percival Everett**:

Oh, I hope so. I always have to apologize. I had to look at the book to see what the last line, I forget what I write almost as soon as I've completed the books. I'm always trying to catch up when people ask me questions.

**Karen Long**:

I believe it. I believe it. I know you don't like to be asked interpret art because you believe art does its own work. So we're not going to...

**Percival Everett**:

Art doesn't need me, that's for sure.

**Karen Long**:

I also want to linger for a second over the way the violent rubes in The Trees foreshadow the deadly and foolish members of the January 6th mob.

**Percival Everett**:

Oh, well one doesn't have to be too imaginative to imagine the violence that Americans can perpetrate. So, I wasn't any way clairvoyant, as much as I know my country.

**Karen Long**:

You write in pencil like the scholar in The Trees, Damon Ruff. You don't outline, but you have a short map you've said and you play before you write. This is a fascinating process. So, what are you playing before you write? Is it music? Is it tennis?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, I play as a necessary part of work for me. Not necessarily the play outside of work, but the play within it, playing with the ideas. I find that order to think clearly about work, I have to in some way be distracted. And so fishing, playing tennis, riding horses helped me. Perhaps the word is relax, but also it gives my mind something else to do. I trust after doing this for so long that the thing my mind will choose to do in the background is work. I think the constitutional element in my character that helps me make as much work as I do, as the fact that I don't feel stressed.

**Karen Long**:

That's fascinating. I intuit that from the way you present as so comfortable in your own skin and so unhurried and yet are so productive, is it tuning yourself to a creature like a horse, which is so nervous generally.

**Percival Everett**:

That is a good way of putting it up. As I say to people who are around horses in any situation, you never calm any animal down by getting excited.

**Karen Long**:

Right. Or child.

**Percival Everett**:

Yes, exactly.

**Karen Long**:

There's also within your work and practice a real interest in numbers, you have a children's book that's a western caper called The One That Got Away. You're talking about numeral one from 1992 and then you skipped chapter 74 and 104 in The Trees. Can you talk a little bit about the place of mathematics in your life?

**Percival Everett**:

Again, that relaxes me. It's fun. I like logic, I like arithmetic. I like arithmetic instead of mathematics because my interest is in theory of numbers and I don't go to the place where the Greeks would've gone, where I think everything reduces to number at all. But I think it's good for us to puzzle over all sorts of things and language works because it is both mathematical and not. That's always interesting to me. I'll tell you why there's no chapter 74, the other one is too complicated to explain, but there were 74 listeners at the Sermon on the Mount and that became a significant number for me, even though I'm in no way religious. So, that was my private gesture.

**Karen Long**:

To the idea that nobody's listening to the Sermon on the Mount?

**Percival Everett**:

Exactly.

**Karen Long**:

So another person who thought a lot about science and math is Cormac McCarthy and he died the week that we are speaking. I'm curious about how that news struck you.

**Percival Everett**:

Well, I didn't know Cormac, or a serial fan of his work. We die and it's always said when anyone does, that he left an incredible body of work that will probably continue to certainly inform a lot of people, but also inform and instruct me. So, I thank him for that. Of course, lament his passing.

**Karen Long**:

One of the reasons I'm thinking about him is in the Twitter conversation, people were raising your name up after he died.

**Percival Everett**:

I didn't do it.

**Karen Long**:

For the Parallelisms of the Western for the confrontation with violence. Maybe I don't stay on Twitter either, but I thought, how would Professor Everett think about being lumped in as someone for readers of McCarthy to turn to?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, we certainly shared a landscape and a number of our works. I think NVIDIA's comparison of the works of any writers are not well-placed. His work is singular and idiosyncratic. If anyone thinks of me when they read McCarthy's work, then I'm flattered, but it doesn't go beyond that.

**Karen Long**:

Yes. And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English, in this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf book award. We'll now return to the conversation. Your own father, you're from a family of dentists and doctors read to you at bedtime from Lewis Carroll's Symbolic Logic, which is quite a thing to wrap one's mind around. You said it didn't bore you to sleep.

**Percival Everett**:

No, I think much to my father's dismay, one of the things I loved as a kid was creating syllogism. So which I learned from hearing that. To this day, the basics of prepositional logic I think are deeply embedded in me because of that.

**Karen Long**:

It's also Father's Day as we talk. So if it's not out of bounds, do you mind sharing a little bit about how you think of fathers and how you think about being a father?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, I guess the best thing I can say about perhaps my father and the way I try to be a father is I don't think about being a father. I just do it. I do what I can out of love for my kids and try to learn as much about doing from watching my wife as much as I can. I was very fortunate to have a father who was, and I can say this quite honestly, was perhaps the kindest person I'd ever known. And so, one of my goals is to be as he was in the world.

**Karen Long**:

I love knowing that, thank you. You also are a student of Mark Twain and that makes sense to me. You have remarked that if you can disarm an audience with humor, then you can move on to other things. I've been thinking a lot about the way humor can let the light in. You've also said that drunks and babies can say anything. I had a professor once who said a joke was the truth that went out and got drunk. So, can you talk a little bit about how suffering and humor can sit side by side?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, I'm sure I'm not smart enough to explain why it does, only that in the history of humans it has and I think it's a natural impulse. Of course in movies we watch it to reach absurd lengths where you will watch people who have survived a horrendous event where maybe several in their party have been killed and they survive. And we see them laughing because of their survival away from that fact, away from that. I can't imagine that happening. But at the root of it is a relief that one has survived something or is surviving. Absurdity allows us to continue with things that are too horrible to face head on without forgetting them.

**Karen Long**:

Right. It's almost a scaffold for the unbearable. I remember when you were here in Cleveland, the first thing you said when you came up on the stage was, "I wish I hadn't had to write this book." And it brings us right back to the reality of the names, whatever pleasure the art is seducing us with. I was really interested in the experience of being particular in Cleveland with the lynching of John Jordan here in 1911. You were kind enough to go to that place and take the hospitality of a Catholic priest at the Church of Ignatius of Antioch in the shadow of that lynching whose parishioners generations ago, no doubt participated in it. That feels like a possibly Percival Everett kind of irony. So, how are you thinking about all of that?

**Percival Everett**:

Well, any place you walk in the United States is nothing but irony, and this is the sadness of the United States at present. For some years there was at least an acknowledgement that cruelty, racism, sexism were things that one did not practice or you would not want to be seen practicing those things because they are pernicious and vile. This new America that we seem to be facing that does not exist. Racism has been replaced with a term, a bogus term called colorblindness. The racists want to claim that they practice this, which is why Donald Trump can say, "I'm the least racist person you will ever meet." We all know that's not true, but it's hard to... You don't argue with someone who makes irrational statements. It doesn't make any sense. But the practice, the activity of being unfair to people in this world has become lauded and acceptable. Whereas just 20 years ago, even in the face of some of the worst racists our country has known, and we've known many, it was considered objectionable and unacceptable.

**Karen Long**:

One of the ways to do battle is chapter 96 of The Trees where there is a certain president cowering under the resolute desk and the pratfall, the slapstick is he's screaming because he's trapped and he has gum in his hair, which he blames on the vice president and the monstrous baby hairiness of not caring about anyone but himself is dispensed with and depicted in two and a half pages. It's really splendid. Did you hesitate about adding something so specific to The Trees?

**Percival Everett**:

Only out of fear of dating the work. However, I think in perpetuity it will be good for us to always fear tyrants. So in that way, I'm glad I included it. I think comedy writers in general might have the impulse to steer clear of that sort of thing now, just because it's shooting fish in a barrel, it's just too easy to make fun of complete and utter fools. But complete and utter fools do exist and they threaten us. So, I included it.

**Karen Long**:

One of your fellow winners last September was George Makari for his non-fiction book Of Fear and Strangers. He told me that you and he had a splendid conversation recently under his auspices there at Rockefeller University. Can you tell us just a couple of things about that conversation?

**Percival Everett**:

Not really. He's really smart and I remember I learned a lot, but I don't remember the conversation that well. I also never listened to it because I don't really go online. I read emails and do Zoom meetings. Even my research is in the library, whether my own or the university library. I'm famous for not Googling, mainly because I don't trust the information I get. That distrust could be certainly misplaced. I don't know. But it reminds me, I'm old enough that when I went to school, people weren't yet using handheld calculators.

So I used a slide rule, which most of your listeners, I doubt know what it is, but it's a mechanical tool that allows computations and fairly complicated calculations. When we first had the handheld calculators, the Texas Instruments 50A, I remember it fairly well. It had a glitch and it would give you the square root of negative four. Of course, there is no square root of negative four. So I thought if I don't... This is the glitch I know which ones do I not know? And so it took me forever to believe in calculators.

**Karen Long**:

You and I were born in the same year, 1956. I remember one of the great pleasures of college was staying up all night arguing on the great questions that we were hoping to get our fingers on. I was shocked to see my children just Google answers and go to bed.

**Percival Everett**:

Yes.

**Karen Long**:

That feels like an impoverishment to me.

**Percival Everett**:

Well, with complete confidence that they've been given the right information as well. That's the scary part. Yeah.

**Karen Long**:

Yeah, because we all know behind the algorithms are people with all the foibles we pack inside.

**Percival Everett**:

Yes, and people who... About this, what is it? The AI writing, these things are programmed by people who are not artists. So, they cannot make art because you cannot teach experience. So, I laugh at the fear that people have of artificial intelligence replacing. I should say, I shouldn't laugh at that because I just realized as I said it, I have a fear of it because there's such a non-discerning audience for the writing of news that the bad writing will get by them. We can see it all the time when we read the AI. It's just like the AI voices we hear on video sometimes where the inflection is all wrong, where someone will come from Chicago, Illinois, and we know it's wrong, but the writing does the same thing.

**Karen Long**:

I found a sentence Googling, I'm going to cop to it from you are winning the Windham Campbell Prize this year. I love that prize. I love this sentence about your work, and I don't have a question attached, but I wanted to read it into the podcast for its own eloquence. And the Windham Campbell folk said quote, "In its mordant humor and philosophical skepticism, Everett's virtuosic body of work exemplifies fiction's capacity for play, vigilance and compassion for life's precarity in an uncertain world." I think you've touched on a lot of those elements for our listeners. So, I'm grateful for that. And before we close out, I'd love to hear a little bit about what you are reading.

**Percival Everett**:

Well, one book I'm reading is How to Stand Up to a Dictator by Maria Ressa, a Filipina who I just met recently actually. She's a Nobel laureate and she won the Nobel Peace Prize a couple of years ago. She's very smart. But the bravery of this book is remarkable to me. I don't generally read lots of this kind of work, but I've also been reading a lot of music theory and stumbled upon a book by a man named Phillip Ewell, which is called On Music Theory. It's about the inherent racism and sexism and the way music theory is taught in American schools of music.

**Karen Long**:

Oh, that sounds important.

**Percival Everett**:

I think it really is. And it struck a chord with me, no pun intended, because I've been listening to the composer Schoenberg for the past year trying to understand the real roots of surrealistic music. And I think there, it's an artistic response to a language that's been accepted as somehow the root of the way we should understand music. And as I talk about this with everyone, I bore them senseless, but I...

**Karen Long**:

I'm sure not because I've been stimulated hearing your voice again, so grateful for it. So, grateful for your writing. I don't quite know for the purpose of praise, but I feel compelled to do it. I'm just going to let that sit and say the next time you're in Cleveland, let's go hear some music.

**Percival Everett**:

Thank you. You have a great orchestra there.

**Karen Long**:

We do. It's a date?

**Percival Everett**:

Yes, by all means.

**Karen Long**:

Thank you. Thank you. And thank you for your time today.

**Percival Everett**:

Well, thank you for having me.

**Karen Long**:

Bye.

**Percival Everett**:

Cheers.

**Karen Long**:

The asterisk is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby, with help from producer Tara Pringle Jefferson. Cleveland Public School students working with the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society, wrote and performed our original score. I'm Karen Long, manager of the prizes. Visit Anisfield-Wolf.org to learn more on the history of the award about previous winners and upcoming events. And thank you for listening.