

WRITERSMOSAIC

Jarred McGinnis

In Conversation with Colin Grant

'I had dreamed of my soon-to-be parents waking up to the ochre shades of the New Mexican desert hidden under fresh snowfall. The world was muted to black and white. That morning, Momo woke up knowing that she was pregnant. Immediately upon waking, I wanted to tell Sarah about the dream, but she was already away for work in Rome. I kept checking my phone for when Momo's status switched to active. As soon as the red circle turned green, I phoned to ask her about this dream.'

— Jarred McGinnis

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Colin Grant talks to Jarred McGinnis about his latest book, *There Is No Meant to Be: A Family Story*.

[Music]

Colin Grant (CG): I first met Jarred and stole an idea from him. He was writing in a night, a special night, called The Special Relationship, a spoken word night. And we borrowed heavily from that for our own night, which is called SpeakySpokey. So, Jarred, it's your second book. First book was called *The Coward*, which was fiction. And this is kind of a memoir. We'll get into why it's only kind of a memoir later on. And I know that you also have—well, I knew this—you also have a PhD in artificial intelligence. Did you employ any of that in the writing of this book?

Jarred McGinnis (JM): [Laughs]. No, I outsourced it. Yeah, no. [CG laughs] The old fashioned way of getting work done cheaply.

CG: Well, we're going to speak about that, how you've come to write the book in this way. But before we jump into that, I was on the judging panel that awarded you the Hay Eccles award a few years ago, three years ago now. What has been the benefit,

would you say, of this award in terms of the writing of the book, but also the research that you were able to do?

JM: Yeah, I mean, it's quite a generous cash reward. And that's a huge difference, right? I mean, I could write full time.

CG: Yeah, tax free?

JM: What's that?

CG: Tax free?

JM: I live in France, so no, not at all [laughs]. But it really was a big support. Having access to resources. I miss JSTOR on a daily basis, just because I always have some weird thing I want to look up for something. But also [missing name], the director, if she didn't know who—if she didn't have the answers, she knew somebody who would. And just really digging into that. And it's really interesting. I mean, ultimately, the book, because of the research, went completely diverged. And I realised that I had a different story. I thought I wanted to tell one story, but the story came completely different, it came against—

CG: Yeah, but the award is made primarily because there are archives that might be helpful in the Americas of the British Library that will yield some writing potential. And that's clear from the initial stories of the Jarred family in America being descended from a line of horse thieves.

JM: That's it. So, I'm the first son of the first son for seven generations. I knew four of my great grandparents. I knew my great grandfather, total of five. And they're all storytellers. They lived in Missouri, and every summer we'd visit them, and I'd have those stories. My great grandma knew people who fought in the Civil—the American Civil War. She'd tell me these stories. So, I had been carrying those. And the story that opens is something that was told me. And I started thinking, *why*—so, she—I was young. So, all our family stories are about 'they tried to kill us, but we're still here. We're harder than death.' I was like, *why is she telling me all this?* As an adult I was like, *why is she telling me all these quite horrific stories?* And I realised it was she had a hard life, she had a very hard life. She, yeah, just her father remarried, her mum died very young, several, several—lots of kids. I forget how many now. It's in the book. I think it was six or seven.

CG: Well, you wrote the book.

JM: I wrote the book, but I don't remember how many. I definitely checked my numbers and then immediately forgot it, like a good grandson. But she had a hard life. She was rented out, basically. And then she met my great grandfather, it seemed like a better bet. And it worked out for me, but it was tough for her.

CG: Well, a lot of memoir writing relies on the unreliability of memoir. I wonder whether this thing has happened to you which has happened to me, is that sometimes now, because I've written a lot about my family, when I want to access a memory, it's fixed, and it's the memory of the book, the book's version rather than the looser version that preceded the book.

JM: I mean, that's the kind of dark art we practice, right? If you're doing your job right as a novelist, you're implanting false experience. If you've done it well. And that's where novels are the best in this prose form because for it to feel lived when you're writing a novel, you have to do it really well and it has to feel like that experience. When you're writing a memoir, you're up against this lived experience. So, you just have to say, 'Sally tripped'. Or you just have to say, 'Aunt Sally'. And what that means to you as the person who knows Aunt Sally is just that wealth of experiences. But now how are you going to get the person who's never met Sally to feel all that experience? And that's what I was

trying to do in this, is to make them live just like fictional characters, but being bound by the stories that were told. And the stories contradict. And I, very early on in the book, make sure you know that I know that family stories contradict. So, my guiding rule was if somebody tells me this story, I have to treat it as true. And I was raised—it was a story all my life, I was told I glowed blue for three days. My mum said it was blue, my dad said it was yellow, but the story matched otherwise, that they brought me, put me in the bassinet, and I glowed. And my mum thought the American airforce had irradiated her baby. And so, I grew up with that story. And they believed it. And I don't know. I was there, but I—pre-linguistically, so I couldn't write it down or anything.

CG: Yeah, so you're the seventh generation of first-born sons. So, two hundreds years of abusive, alcoholic men in the McGinnis family. Did you manage to avoid that?

JM: Well, this—I mean, this is the interesting thing is that I thought I was going to—what is that history of—what is the toxic masculinity? What is it about being a man, raising a man, raising a boy to become a man? And then as I was researching, it got boring because like poverty and addiction is boring. It's almost—there's no narrative there. And then I had a realisation. I wrote 200,000 words. It was like a documentarian. And I cut it down to just what you have. Don't worry, it's only 65,000. You would not want to read 200,000. And I was cutting it down. And what I realised in that story, and it comes

out in this, that I realised the story I was telling was wrong. It wasn't about these I'm the first son of a first son for seven generations. It's difficult to say. At each key moment in my life, I knew that I was loved when I needed to know to survive. And that was my mother, my wife, who I've known for a very long time. And then I didn't have a little boy, I had two little girls. And I could get space to raise them differently than I was. And it's so amazing. You spend your life going, *I'm going to do it differently*. And then you're confronted with parenthood. And you're like, *I'm doing the same damn stuff that you did*. Because that's how you were raised. You didn't know how to do it any other way. And my—and that's—and actually—

CG: But you fought against that, haven't you?

JM: I did. But I think it—I fought it because those women made the space to be able to. I always wanted to. I didn't want to do that, obviously. But it was just they had made that space to be a different type of man. And you think about, *why did I survive this?* And, *why didn't I go down that same route?* And I think it's what I'm playing with the title. It feels, yeah, it feels that I—it was destined to do something different. But just if you look at my life, I—it's been jammy. And it's hard for people to believe that when you're in a wheelchair because clearly something traumatic has happened to me. But I

wouldn't trade it. If I had to lose what I have to walk, I wouldn't do it. I've had too good a life. And it's all happened after my car accident.

CG: Wow. Well, that reminds me of Dostoevsky. So, I wrote a book about epilepsy. My brother had epilepsy, as you know. And Dostoevsky had ecstatic seizures, these auras that would accompany a seizure. And he said that if there was a cure for his epilepsy, it meant he would no longer have these ecstatic auras, he didn't want to be cured because it had informed the way he wrote and felt and was a human being. Now, there's a line in your book where your kids are asking you about why you're in a wheelchair. And you say, 'I don't owe anyone my pain, not even my daughters.' But you've written a several hundred page book about that. Do you want to explain that contradiction?

JM: [Laughs] Yeah. That's it. It's a contradiction. And we leave it there because that is the contradiction. I think the way I do it my way is [because] memoir is fraught with either celebrities or people just have had this horrible thing and a horror, the trauma tourism. And I was like, well, those things happen. Life is bad. Life—so, nobody gets out alive. Sorry to tell you.

CG: Newsflash.

JM: Yeah. But I'm going to talk about trauma, but it's not going to be the point. The point is that actually I have this—I want to write about those tiny little beautiful moments that you have with your kids, particularly with your kids when there's just something tiny and amazing and beautiful, and it just feels as vivid as trauma. And that's what's interesting is trauma is vivid, and I do talk about—I get flashbacks, just like in Hollywood when the Vietnam veteran goes into a firework display or something. And I don't want to experience that. So, when people ask you, 'What happened to you?', I give some glib response. But I owed it to this book that I didn't think it was fair to ignore trauma, but also it's not the point, just as life is mixed. And I wanted to do something different. Everything about this was reading a bunch of memoir and trying to use the grammars of the genre to do something new and interesting.

CG: Yeah, well, sometimes you seed that trauma or the depiction of it to other people. So, there's a moment when you come home from hospital after a terrible accident, and you're being looked after by your aunt, I think, and there's a baby monitor. And you're howling, and you're in such pain, and you're saying, 'Why me?,' I suppose. And your aunt recognises that you're just grieving, and that has to be something you must be left to go through by yourself.

JM: Which is incredible. And the reason she is there because I don't remember it. She told me that. And so, I particularly said, 'I can't live like this.' And she thought, she—and the extent of—you write all of it, and then you tighten it down, so it doesn't bore people, and now it can bore you. And she said, 'It wasn't about you can't live in a wheelchair, it's like you can't live with this depression and it's just utter destruction of your identity.' And *The Coward* was about that destruction of identity. And I was like, I had kind of settled with that. I understand who I am now.

CG: But you did get jammy. You met this woman called Sarah, who I've met, you lucky devil.

JM: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

CG: And you talk about her being the steady shipper, you're the flip flop guy who—

JM: I mean, very much. It works because of that. I say she is the rock and I am the thrashing sea. And it nails our relationship completely. Yeah. When I hear of like relationships where there's two writers in a relationship, I was like, *I don't know how that ever works because we are drama*. Yeah, I mean, I bet you cause a little ruckus.

CG: Me?

JM: Yeah [laughs].

CG: Moi?

JM: When it's not going right and you're just rolling on the ground going, 'Oh, no, no, no. I don't want to do it.'

CG: Well, my drama is when I come home and I'm—or I've been at home, and I have secretly come home, and I'm writing, I would come down and bore my kids silly with some sort of research. And at one point, they'd be saying, 'Dad, Dad, nobody cares.' Did you get that with Sarah and the kids?

JM: Not with—Sarah is my light read when I just need a little ego boost. She says, 'It's wonderful, it's wonderful.' My children, I bet, will not let me off so easily. I'm seeing glimpses. They're 10 and nine right now. I'm seeing them. I mean, they don't like my accent in French. So, it's pretty hard to take it from a 10-year-old going, 'Oh, no, Papa, bon accent.' That's hard to take from a 10-year-old because she's right. I have a terrible accent.

CG: Yeah. Can we talk about why this book is difficult to characterise in a genre because it's not straight memoir, is it? So, what did you make to perhaps include some fictional elements?

JM: Well, so, I've always been interested in constrained writing. I started out as a short story writer, and that's why I love short story. It's still the form I love. It's just so hard because you can play with the form very directly, and it's not too exhausting to the reader, but you can really play. And so, I'm built like that. And the same with *The Coward*. It's more of a straight novel, but I was obviously playing with things. For me, in my head, I have constraints.

CG: Just to explain, there's a character in the novel, *The Coward*, called Jarred McGinnis.

JM: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah. And I'm Jarred McGinnis, yeah. But that was a much more straight novel because I was only using my lived experience to tell a fictional story. This constraint here was if somebody told me it, I had to—I just wrote it as true, I didn't discuss it or think about it. Difficult. There was, outside of my family, it was free game for my misbehavior because I love misbehavior. And I hope the reader is with me, and I try to give the reader hints that there's going to be shenanigans involved. But

they're always outside. I'm not interested in the facts outside of the family. Right. So, there's certain things that happen. Because I want you to go, *did that happen?* And Google it, and be like, *son of a bitch, that little liar.*

CG: Well, shall we talk about the monkey or the ape in the East London pub?

JM: [Laughs] Yeah. Yeah. Kevin.

CG: Kevin. [Laughs] Maybe you don't want to let us know whether it's true or not, but it does introduce an element of, *is this possible that this character—*

JM: If somebody tells me the story, I can use it. But Kevin is—again, I'm interested in that tension. I want the reader, same with the response of *The Coward*, people are like, *which bits are true?* And I've positioned it as a novel, so that means nothing is true. It's fiction. But that wasn't satisfying to people. And so, now I'm like, *okay, how do we do this where I'm like, I'm going to let you know that things are coming?* And there is a point, and this is a clue, so you can—when the bits got too difficult and too hard to write about, I tend to elevate it to allegory. And I seem to be able to get away from that. And I don't know if his name was Kevin, but he did exist.

CG: It's Kevin to me.

JM: Yeah, I mean, Kevin's a funny name. And that he's in Bethnal.

CG: Thank God you didn't call him Colin.

JM: Could you see that email? [both laugh] No way, sir. I'm touching that with a ten-foot pole.

CG: But you're in the bar. I suppose I should explain and contextualise because it's tough being a writer, and it's tough being a writer who's bringing up two kids because his wife's gone off to work and he wants to write. But it's tough bringing up kids anyway. So, sometimes you might just go down to the bar to escape that. And there's Kevin and such likes.

JM: Yeah. So, I mean, it's—and again, that bar is an amalgam of Bethnal Green bars. So, I was finishing my first book. My wife was working this crazy job. I never saw her. And it was difficult. We had two kids. And you just—your relationship gets lost. And when you have kids, you'll know that it's very hard to maintain all these relationships. And it was just a real sad, lonely time in my life. And it's interesting. I made sure my wife read it

because I do use her real name. And I thought she was crying at the end. And it wasn't; it was that chapter.

CG: Really?

JM: And I feel terrible that I would relive this, what she finds is a very dark period, a very sad period, in our relationship. But it had to be there because I had made the rule that I would tell you the truth. This is a life lived. I'm not going to hide the sad bits. But it hurt her anew. And that makes—I feel terrible. She gave me permission. I didn't write it against her permission. She understood why I had to write that chapter. Because she was there, and she just said, 'My voice wasn't there.' And that's what she cried about. And I said, 'It's because I wasn't listening.' And that's why that chapter works. But I understand—and she said, 'I understand. You can publish it. You have my great—you have my blessing.' But it just felt terrible that I had made her sad again.

CG: Yeah. So, one way you can get beyond this personalised feeling of what you're doing and how it might impact on others is to think of yourself as a character in the story that you're writing. Did you do that?

JM: I mean, but don't we all? I mean, you have to—I think to get at it, you have to. And this is the adventure for me is to know yourself. So, there's a concept of dramatic irony. Where do you know dramatic irony? This idea that the reader knows more than the character. And that's a nice tension. So, you know Iago is going to do over Othello, but Othello doesn't.

CG: Wait, what?

JM: Yeah, sorry, did I ruin that for you guys? But yeah, don't trust Iago [CG laughs]. But when you're writing memoir, you are Othello, and you are probably also Iago. And to get past that dramatic irony, and I wanted to see could I delve in there and tell myself—use the rigor of a novelist's imagination to your own self. Don't do it. It's very unhealthy. I should have become a trained Buddhist before I delved into that. Because it's hard. There's a reason our psyche puts things in front of it. And when I teach memoir, I'm like, 'It's possible that you can't write this, that your brain is going to not let you.' But it was just because I was interested.

CG: Yeah, well, the temptation when you write a memoir is to make yourself the hero. And you clearly did not in this book.

JM: Yeah [laughs]. Yeah. And that—

CG: Well, yeah, obviously, you're a great fella. But you've got some foibles there.

JM: And also—and I wanted to make sure that I wasn't the centre because I've read tons of memoir, and the ones that annoyed me the most—do I name? I'm not going to name names. I'll be nice. But I know who I can name: the dead. I can [missing word] the dead. Philip Roth, one of the masters of the 20th century nonfiction and toxic masculinity. I mean, documented it in great detail. But he was always like, 'It's not me, Gov, that's fiction.' Surprise, surprise, he's a wrong 'un. He's got a memoir called *The Facts*, which are so far from the facts. He just constantly would like, 'And then this blonde [missing word] just led me astray.' And I was like, this man, who clearly does have insight into the darkness of the male human spirit, can't bring himself to admit that he is also a wrong 'un. And I always found that fascinating, what that project was. And I mean, he—I don't think he knew. I think he really believed that they had done him wrong.

CG: Yeah. I think I drew a line in reading Philip Roth when I read one of the stories where he talks about a character like himself opening up the freezer and masturbating into the freezer. I thought, *this guy's not for me*.

JM: [Laughs] We all have our limits, Colin.

CG: But one of the great things about Jarred is just what a great reader of your work and other people's work. And I'm sure we'd love to hear a moment from the book. It gives a flavor of the skillful writer that Jarred is, but also a flavor of his relationship with his mother, Mommy.

JM: Momo. Momo

CG: Momo. Yeah, who has a kind of similarity in the sensitivity and feelings about dreams and—

JM: Yeah, so, that's it. My mum—it's interesting. My mum's quite witchy. And when she calls me up often and says, 'I've had a premonition', I pay attention. Often the dead visit her. And I don't make any jokes about this. And we talk about it seriously. Because I think she's trying to communicate something. And I grew up in the South, and that's not unusual for people to talk about the dead and the ghosts. They live much closer to this world than—and I'm a scientist by training, so—

CG: You were telling me earlier about haunted blue.

JM: Oh, haint blue.

CG: Haint blue. Yeah.

JM: Yeah, in the South, you'll see these in the old style porches – because it's hot, and so you want to sit on the porch, catch a breeze – often there's a particular type of blue. And I think it's largely in Georgia, but it could be throughout the South, that's painted blue, and it's called haint blue. And so when the ghosts come on your porch, they think the sun is out, and it's a blue sky, so they go away. And that kind of stuff is just normal. If somebody comes up to you and just starts talking—I have trouble when I read other people writing about Florida. Because there's a book that came out a while ago that was like alligators and ghosts. I'm like, *man, I could get something weirder from a 7-Eleven on a Tuesday night than this whole novel*. So, I'm quite hard on people trying to write about Florida. It's weirder than you could ever imagine.

CG: But you're interested in Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner, people like that?

JM: That's how I was raised on that. And it's funny.

CG: And they're dark Gothic, aren't they?

JM: They gave us *Where the Red Fern Grows* to read as 10-year-olds. Again, and the climax of that one – it's been out for a while, sorry – but it's about this kid who saves all his money to get a hunting dog, it gets into a fight with a mountain lion, and as he's bringing it home, its intestines get caught on a tree and unspool. And they're giving that to kids [laughs]. And it was very Jesus-y, so it was really dark. But I remember as a kid going, *I love this stuff*. So, it's in my DNA.

CG: And what kind of stories do you read your kids?

JM: So, they are soft. It's amazing. I'm like, 'Hey kids, let's watch *Pumpkinhead*. It's part of your heritage.' [Both laugh] So, now it's become a family joke when it's my turn to pick the movie, 'Let's watch *Pumpkinhead*.' 'No, Papa!' So, yeah, we watch Studio Ghibli. I've gotten soft. I would rather watch Studio Ghibli. Kids' movies are too shouty.

CG: Let's hear about you and your mother's relationship.

JM: Okay. I'll tell this.

[JM reads from *There is No Meant to Be*]

'I had dreamed of my soon-to-be parents waking up to the ochre shades of the New Mexican desert hidden under fresh snowfall. The world was muted to black and white. That morning, Momo woke up knowing that she was pregnant. Immediately upon waking, I wanted to tell Sarah about the dream, but she was already away for work in Rome. I kept checking my phone for when Momo's status [that's my mum's nickname in the family] switched to active. As soon as the red circle turned green, I phoned to ask her about this dream. She said, yes, the day she was pregnant with me was the first time she saw snow.

I asked, 'Was it a premonition?'

She laughed, 'No. The night before, I was lazy and we didn't take any precautions. Sure as shoot, when I missed my next period, I went to the doctor. I knew. You were wearing a coat that went to your ankles. It was beige. Beige suede with embroidered flowers and fur trim. I love that coat. But when we moved back to Florida, I never got a chance to wear it again.'

I asked if she remembers wearing a brown beanie.

'You know me. Everything's got to match, even my underwear.'

I told her I saw her shuffling through the snow, making tracks, catching the flakes on her tongue.

'Oh, yeah, we played like kids.'

'You were kids,' I remarked.

'Before we went back inside, I made snowballs and put them in the freezer to save. Your dad said, "You don't have to do that. It'll snow again.'"

I picked up the girls from school. Maude ran to me, holding her handmade cloud before her like a lantern. Dangling below the cotton ball nimbus were cords of blue construction paper. It was a beautiful object. Kids make you all kinds of uninteresting crap *ad nauseam*: dry pasta necklaces that they won't even wear, slapdash doodles on scraps of paper, sticky taped egg carton nonsense that doesn't look like a bear at all, not at all. During their month-long fanaticism for origami, if I needed to print anything, I had to eviscerate a paper kitty or a whale.

'This was worse than Blu-Tack,' I said to Maude, the highest honour a father can bestow on his young progeny's creations. I suggest that she tack it on the wall beside my desk where the rest of the good art goes. Between my exaltations for Maude's creation, Zed grubbed for praise for her love mandala that she made.

'Afraid not. Six out of ten at best. Better luck next time, kid.'

The young man stops us. He had a fifth of something, nearly gone and disappeared, the last slosh of golden brown before throwing the bottle into the street behind him. He excitedly asks if the girls were my daughters. He was talking too fast. At the time, my French was okay, a B1 level with oak clusters if I'd had my coffee. He poked one of the cherries I was holding, called it a strawberry, and laughed at his mistake. As his French flew past, I caught streaks of New World Spanish. He had a tattoo of an AK-47 on his arm. I think he said his dad was dead. He wasn't a threat, but I tried to move us along. The girls stared. After we crossed the street, I asked Zed what he had said. She told me that he was saying that I should be proud of being a good dad.

Less than an hour later, I'm yelling at Zed. As I was yelling, I realised I wasn't angry. Frustrated, yes. It was their dance class that we should be getting ready for. It was grotesque to shout, but she was yelling back, which threw wood chips on the ugliness burning in me. I went to my room to reclaim my self-possession and sat with the disgust I felt for myself. When I came out, Zed was ready, but Maude was not.

'Fine, we're leaving without you.'

She burst into tears, saying she couldn't find her shoes.

'Okay, let's look for them.'

They were in the shoe cupboard. She hadn't looked. She hadn't looked for them.

I threw them in the hall and shouted, 'We're leaving.'

Later that night, we were on the couch together, and Maude told me, 'You shouldn't push me when you're mad, Papa.'

This afternoon wasn't one of my best performances, but I hadn't pushed her. We had walked to the dance class with her ten paces behind us, crying the entire time. All I had to do to fix the situation was to stop and hug her, and that would have been enough. That was it. I understood the mechanisms of Maude. It might not work forever, but that day, it would have been the solution. But I hadn't, and in that little moment, a tiny moment, I was not a good dad, and I could have pulled out the splinter that I had introduced, but I didn't.

'I'm sorry, Maude. I shouldn't have yelled at you.'

She continued, 'At school, the teacher says, you shouldn't push me even if you're mad because I could fall and hit my head.'

'Okay,' I said, still feeling guilty though.

I have pushed her. Moments where she refused to move, and I have pushed her. She was right, so I told her that she was right. I should never push, and I repeated my apologies.'

[Applause]

CG: Yeah, I found that very emotional book. I love the book, as you know. But if you really want to know what I felt about the book, you should read *The Observer*. I reviewed it for *The Observer*. It's online now, and it's going to be in the print edition on Sunday, which I'm very happy about. But one of the things that comes across is your desperation, not desperation, but your keenness to become a good father. And there's a line in the book where it says, about this notion of devotion and love, 'When the girls look back and see the magic that I used to open the parking gate was a remote in my pocket, I hope though I may have disappointed them, I've never failed them.' Can you explore that? What do you mean by—

JM: That's as good as it gets? [Laughs] Yeah, yeah. Well, just that thing of I was failed by my father because of addiction. He wasn't there. He was—it was difficult. But so did his father, and his father before him. And I think I'm doing okay. And every time I come like, man, as you see, I feel very bad. But I don't think there is success in parenting. It's just

that you do the best you can with what you have and just keep that as a focus. And my mum, my mum had terrible parents. It was—I mean, it's just what she dealt with was frightening. And if she could find space to forgive her mum, my job was easy. And again, I learned this from her. And there's no—I don't need to carry that. I don't need to do that memoir where I'm like, 'This is where they did me wrong. It's their fault.' I mean, you can feel that. But at a certain point, you got to decide either to keep it or not. That's going to be what defines you. And so, yeah, it's—I just think you're going to disappoint them, right? You're going to get it wrong, obviously. And they're going to find you embarrassing. And are your kids old enough to parent you now? Are they trying to parent you?

CG: Well, not trying to parent me, but I get advice from them.

JM: You give it about five more years [CG laughs]. I feel like my mum's a widow now, and I just do feel like I'm parenting her now. And I try to step back from that. I'm like, she's a grown woman, this is the first time in her life she hasn't had a man, a Florida man, telling her what to do. Whatever the heck she wants, let's just make it happen and do that. And, yeah.

CG: To what degree did you think you had to get other family members on board in writing and publishing the memoir?

JM: I thought it was essential. It just seemed right, right? So, my grandfather passed away, so I would have given it to him. I don't know if he would have even read it. That's an interesting thing. I gave it to his brothers who are still alive to make sure they're okay because I talk about their parents.

CG: And what's their response?

JM: Yeah. They're like, 'Well, you made dad a little saltier than usual, but I understand what you're up to.' And it's interesting, when I was writing this, I was talking to him all the time. And, man, now they don't stop. I'm like, *where was this three years ago? This is great material*. But family—what I wanted to capture as well, the family talks obliquely. And when you're a kid in the family, you hear these whispers. And there's a real pivotal scene in the very beginning when I'm about to hook up with eventually my wife. I'm driving from Texas to Florida to see my family. And who will become my wife is there as well. I stopped to see my family. And I use that moment of this is my heritage. And I try to weave this moment, quite a lovely moment, kind of intense moment, with all the stories that came back and the stories that I've heard.

And the one key one that I never got a full story, and I never could quite get it, and it felt a little weird picking at it, and that's how I present it, is that at one point, my great-grandma allegedly poisoned my great-grandpa because he was a drunk, he was violent. I'm not clear if it was her he hit or my grandfather, but she put what's called Indian turnip, which is Jack-in-the-pulpit is what it's properly called. It's a root that grows by the marshes. And if you cook it, you can eat it. If you don't cook it, it makes you vomit, but also your lips blister shut. So, it's really horrible. It's very horrible. And that's the kind of family gossip that went. And I never got a clear story, but that was there. So, I thought it was necessary that I had to get their approval. And so I've sent it to—my dad read it. And actually, there's a line in the closing chapter of where I feel with my dad, which is actually taken from—he wrote it. He wrote it to me on the draft.

CG: Yeah. What's the line?

JM: Let me get it right because my dad wrote it. Basically, I said I had put my heart really hard to him. I was like, you know what? I don't need a relationship with this guy. I had kids, and he's an amazing grandpa, like a really above the call of duty for grandpaing. I was like, I don't need a dad, I don't need to be parented, but my kids could have a grandpa like I had. My grandpa was great. He's just this really mighty man.

They all were. All the old men were—I have nothing but affection and love for them. I didn't have to deal with them. And my kids could have that. And I said it was my hard heart that stopped me having a relationship with my dad. And on the draft that he read, he wrote, 'Between your anger and my shame, we were at an impasse.' And I was like, that's such a good—that's such a—that's the thing about the truth; we writers work hard to get at it through craft, but at some point, even the kind of amateur, when they see it clearly—we work very hard to see it clearly. That was so clear to him. And I put it in, and to my annoyance, a writer that I admire greatly said, 'My favourite line—
[audience laughs]

CG: It's a pretty good line.

JM: 'It's that line.' And I'm like—

CG: It's a pretty good line. Pretty, pretty good.

JM: I put it in italics.

CG: But it sounds like he was, at that moment, enlightened.

JM: He's kind of—no, he is. He's been on the straight and narrow. He's been a very different man. And part of the book investigates whether it was just was the grandkids, was it kind of a length of sobriety, was it me with the first book? Because *The Coward* is a novel, but it deals with a father and son relationship, so he'll identify certain things that happen in it. And it's funny, with the first book, I was really worried about the first book, what people were going to say.

CG: What were you worried about?

JM: Well, just like my family will recognise things. But they understood the difference between the—it's funny now, my whole family talks very knowledgeably about autofiction. And I've been talking about it for years. And I was like, 'Annie Ernaux is a huge fan of mine.' My grandma didn't listen to me. Then Annie Ernaux won the Nobel Prize winner—won the Nobel Prize, and now she's like, 'He writes like Annie Ernaux. He's like the American Annie Ernaux.' Very funny.

CG: Yeah. So, I mean, we visited this notion of not revisiting your pain. But at some point, you feel you have to throw some red meat to the people who want to read that. There's a line here, I'll give you a line as a prompt, talk about the plethora of scars on

your body: 'Sore tooth atrophic marks where transmission blocks seared into the meat of my arm and back.'

JM: Yeah, so, how do you make a reader appreciate just how awful it is? You have to go very—and I'm interested, obviously, I'm interested in writing about body. I'm very aware of it. Or—and so it's—you get to—I mean, you have to get into the—if you're going to tell the story, you got to tell it right.

CG: But I suppose the question is to what degree do you need to tell it right? I mean, of course, you mess around with the truth in this book. So, when I was—I mean, we've written—

JM: But that's how it happened. Yeah, I mean, there was an example of something I felt it would be unfair to write about. And not—if I'm going to take you on this journey, like I said, I don't owe anybody my pain, but I feel like I made a contract with the reader to be honest with them. And people want to know what happened to you, what happened to you. And I was like, you've come this far on the journey, you're now interested in me as a person, not as a wheelchair user. So, that was fine. And that is the exact story because, again, there's—the idea was that there are certain notes between—I wanted these books to be a diptych, that if you read *The Coward*, you're

like, *okay, that's one thing. Oh, that's what—how he actually got hurt.* So, in that regard, I was—there's little signals between the two. You could read separately, but that's an example of that.

So, an example, what I would have done in fiction, but not in this one to that point, is in the beginning of *The Coward*, the Jarred, the character, has something that happens to paraplegics called autonomic dysreflexia. I don't get autonomic dysreflexia. My injury level is far too low. But at a certain point, you're susceptible to this. And it's a horrible thing. Your basically autonomic system goes all out of whack. Your temperature goes up. Your heart races. It's very, very dangerous. This is why at a higher level, they don't live as long. In *The Coward*, that character can have that. I would never write some pain that I haven't felt in a memoir to almost stolen valor because there are people who are actually suffering that, and I would never try to pretend that I have that. Whereas in the novel, that's fair game. I need you as the reader to feel just how painful it is to get hit by a truck. And so *The Coward* starts out with that very physical detail and then slowly gradually disappears the physicality.

CG: What comes across very clear to me also is the restrained anger you feel towards some of the people in the medical profession. There's a line after your accident where

the surgeon has been working on you, and you write, 'He hadn't bothered to set my foot facing the correct direction because "I wouldn't be using it anyway".'

JM: Well, so, no, it's not against the medical profession, it was that guy because he was an asshole. That's messed up. Whereas my orthopedic surgeon, the lady who saved my life, the one who gave me Seal to listen to, Seal and Whitney Huston.

CG: Oh, really?

JM: So, I was in ICU with—I had ICU delirium. And they were topping me up with morphine and all kinds of stuff. And I had all these weird dreams all set to Whitney Huston and Seal. Very weird trip, man. I would not recommend it. No, no, not medical professionals in general.

CG: Some people in the medical profession.

JM: Well, that guy was an asshole. And another orthopedic surgeon.

CG: I know a few of them myself.

JM: Surgeons. He was Dr. Savage as well. I couldn't—and there's an example of something you can't do.

CG: He wasn't called Dr. Savage.

JM: You couldn't write it.

CG: Was he called Dr. Savage?

JM: He was Dr. Savage.

CG: Come on now.

JM: Dr. Savage wrote that. And surgeons are just mechanics, but with ego. They're just meat. You are meat. I say like surgery is meat, and surgery is—butchery is work and we are meat. And he was, no, that doesn't have to do with the medical profession. I think he was a jerk before he was a surgeon.

CG: So, I was at medical school, as you know, for five hard years.

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm just trying to say they saved my life.

CG: Yeah, no, no, no, no. Great, yeah. But when you're in the first year of medical school, the first patient that you operate on is a cadaver. So, it's a dead patient. And the idea is that Hunter, this great surgeon, wrote about why you should dissect because 'it steadies the hand, it hardens the heart, and it stills the mind to the necessary inhumanity of surgery'. That's what they—so they're drawing any kind of emotion from the body that they're operating on. You're just a body. You're not someone who's just—

JM: Yeah, exactly. But I have to say, if he hadn't set my foot, I would've had far more troubles in life. It's just shocking that his opinion of that.

CG: One of the things that comes through very clearly in the book is the notion that actually, even though you're here talking to us on the stage, the injuries that you sustained are going to trim the amount of years that you live, and that will impact on the relationship that you have with your children.

JM: It's brutal. And those are those things of like, that's brutal. And I think that's where this had to be memoir. That had to be me really looking at that. And it makes me terribly sad.

CG: And it might explain, maybe we shouldn't talk about the strange gear change.

JM: I think it's fine. Yeah, I think we should warn people.

CG: Okay. Okay. The warning, to those who think this is going to be a straight memoir, there's a moment that comes when Jarred suddenly ages to an age that he's older than he is now, and his wife dies, and he has two adult children. And at the moment, his children, they're children. Yeah. So, talk to us about why you made that decision and what that did.

JM: It was really hard won. I couldn't figure out why nothing was working. And it literally took me another year to write that bit. And now it's the bit I'm most proud about. Because when you have kids, and it was really—it's in core to this book. When you have kids, you start thinking about how you were raised, you start thinking about your parents, you start thinking about when they're going to go, especially when their partners start dying. My mum's a widow now. And then you start thinking, *well, it's going*

to happen to me. And when I was writing this, the aunt that you mentioned and my stepfather died. So, it was there. It was very present. And I just started thinking about what is that? And actually what it is is it's the best ending to a life you could imagine. It's sad, but it's—and it's brutal. I'm done writing about myself. Digging around the red and black of you for this long is not healthy. I live in France, and I work in the library. And when I figured this ending out, I'm typing it and just bawling my eyes out. But luckily I'm a foreigner, so they're just like, *foreigners*. People just let me [laughs] *You're so fool, les Anglais* [laughs].

CG: It's hard, but it's to our benefit. I think it's a tremendous book.

JM: I think it was—

CG: The bravery of what you did there is something to admire as a writer and to think, *woah, this guy's got some balls.*

JM: It's intense. Like it's not—I had to have participate—anticipation—anticipatory grief. And then I did the audio book, and I was a total pro. I was very proud of myself. Went in there, bam, bam, finished early. Wow. And I read that, no problems. And everyone was

worried about me with that one. I was like, *I'm good. I'm fine*. I stepped out of the publisher and just started bawling. And I felt the grief I will feel.

CG: Yeah, of course.

JM: But again, that's—and to get that on the page and to not shy away from that, because that's often what you do as a writer is we're all thinking this. *The Coward*, how many times people came up to me and were like, 'Thank you for this. I was thinking this. I didn't know how to say it.' And yeah, Kae Tempest, in his event, said that, 'If you are able to write, you better write.'

CG: Well, what I try to do is I try to think I'm writing to people that I like. And I'm not ashamed to share with them. In fact, I want to share with them. And there's an honesty that is beautiful, I think. And we often pull back from that, don't we?

JM: And I think you recognise as well if you're being too sentimental and false. And I think I did a good job of showing the complexity of the relationship between my imagined adult kids. And I deliberately mixed their names and personalities because I didn't want them to think I'm writing about them, I'm writing about an imagined them. And it's not going to be perfect and clear and bells and whistles and all this kind of

thing. And they're going to be adults, and they're going to be slightly embarrassed by my French, as they are now. That was the easy bit. I will never get the gender of certain words right. And them—and showing those difficult moments, especially near at the end of life, it's quite—and to write it real. And it's hard. I can see why people use fiction to work on that because it's much safer. You have that safety glass between you. You step away from it. This book haunts me more than *The Coward*, definitely.

CG: I'm going to read you a line now because we're coming to the end. And it's a big shout out for Sarah, your wife that I've met, who's adorable.

JM: She's the main character.

CG: She is the main character. She's the hero, man. She is the hero. So, this is how much of a hero she is. This is how you imagine giving advice to your kids when they meet someone who is in your position. Sarah met you when you were 21. You'd say to them, 'Leave him. The boy is cute and all, but don't be charmed by his humour and his excellent parking options.'

[Audience laughs]

JM: Yep.

CG: Yep. That's about the size of it. So, I think we'll leave it there on the note of celebration of your wonderful choice and your dedicated wife, Sarah. This is a wonderful book. If you don't believe me, read *The Observer* and find out how Colin Grant thought about it. But for now, can I invite you to join me in celebrating the wonderful Jarred McGinnis?

[Applause and music]

JM: Hey, thank you very much.

[Music]

Presenter: Jarred McGinnis was in conversation with Colin Grant. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

[Music]

Jarred McGinnis was in conversation with Colin Grant

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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