

Ditch Diggers #55

February 9th, 2018

- [Original podcast here](#)

Mur: [00:00:00] *Ditch Diggers* #55.

Theme Song: [00:00:04] Ditch Diggers appear, ain't no wannabes here. With some not so nice advice for your writing career. To be clear, no punches will be pulled, but the punch may be spiked, how they like before they get on the mic. To my left we got the mighty Mur Lafferty, and if I piss her off, believe me, she'll come after me. And her co-host Matt F'n Wallace on the right, yeah she may be half his height, but she could take him in a fight. So settle in folks, buckle in, and boot up. Time to meddle in a way to make you write or shut up. It's hard work, but the perk is that it's fun and exciting. Facebook will still be there when you're done writing. Ditch Diggers!

Mur: [00:00:49] Coming to you live from Morgan Freeman's border crossing, it is the *Ditch Diggers* with Mur Lafferty, Matt Wallace, and special guest Christopher Brown. How are you guys?

Christopher: [00:00:57] Great thanks.

Matt: [00:00:59] Welcome to the show, Christopher.

Christopher: [00:01:03] Thanks for having me. Delighted to be here at the Border Crossing. I like border crossings.

Mur: [00:01:08] Yes, that's-

Matt: [00:01:09] It's more a cerebral border crossing. Morgan Freeman doesn't believe in physical borders.

Mur: [00:01:15] That's true.

Christopher: [00:01:12] I knew that about him. He's an open planet kind of a guy, isn't he?

Mur: [00:01:18] He is.

Matt: [00:01:18] He is. This is really where you cross the border to expand your mind.

Christopher: [00:01:25] No checkpoints, no shakedowns, no interroga-- well, but there will be interrogations.

Matt: [00:01:29] More like expansive questions, you know? Self-reflective questions that we have to ask ourselves to achieve the next level of enlightenment.

Mur: [00:01:43] Exactly.

Christopher: [00:01:43] Right on.

Matt: [00:01:44] I mostly come here to see the colors, but that's just me.

Mur: [00:01:45] (laughs) So I want to apologize in public to Christopher. We did a recording for *I Should Be Writing* a couple of weeks ago and it was a complete disaster. My recording was just ... it was awful, and it was unsalvageable, and I was so embarrassed because I've been doing this for so damn long. This kind of thing shouldn't really happen, but it did. So Christopher was very kind enough to agree to another interview. We decided to do *Ditch Diggers* just so I don't bore him with the exact same questions. So please welcome ... be welcome to the show, and thank you so much for giving us time again, Christopher.

Christopher: [00:02:22] Oh, thanks for having me. It's a great pleasure and that was a great conversation, disaster notwithstanding. I enjoyed it, and I look forward to talking to you guys about some different and maybe overlapping things.

Matt: [00:02:36] I was just going to point out I had nothing to do with the disaster and it was all your fault.

Mur: [00:02:43] You know, it's funny, I was waiting for you to point out how inept I was and you weren't real quick on that. I'm a little disappointed in you.

Matt: [00:02:48] No, I'm not saying you're inept. I'm just saying in this case I'm blameless-- It's really more about being happy that I'm blameless in this instance, because usually I'm not blameless. Usually I'm hip deep in the blame when things go awry. So I'm just enjoying the view from being removed from the blame.

Mur: [00:03:06] I see. Okay. So Christopher, your book is [*The Tropic of Kansas*](#). It came out last year?

Christopher: [00:03:12] Yeah, *Tropic of Kansas* came out July of last year from Harper Voyager.

Mur: [00:03:16] Yeah, so tell us a little bit about it and why I was so clever to bring up Morgan Freeman's border crossing. Did you catch that? Did you catch it?

Christopher: [00:03:26] Yeah, I did. I picked up on that. Yeah, as they say, border crossings are a particular favorite topic of mine. Yeah, *Tropic of Kansas* is a kind of dystopian road trip that opens at a border crossing, specifically a Canadian/U.S. border crossing, when a homeless teenager, the orphaned fugitive of political dissidents, gets deported back from Canada to a U.S. that's been walled off from the other side, and finds himself promptly detained in a Midwestern Guantanamo, escapes and finds himself navigating his way across the titular tropic of Kansas, a barren American heartland that's suffering from sort of ecological and economic exhaustion, finding his way through an America that's gone a little bit third world, including a sort of

dictatorial government run by a charismatic CEO turned into a fascist President, something that when I wrote it in 2013 and '14, I was sure was too implausible to buy. Anyway, and then his foster sister, who's a government lawyer, has escaped the tropic of Kansas to get to the big city. She's coerced by the government to go hunt her lost brother down. And in the process, undercover in the underground, starts to wonder whether she's been on the right side, and finds him and finds herself in the revolutionary sanctuary of New Orleans on the frontlines of a revolt whose fuse they're about to light.

Mur: [00:05:35] That's a-

Matt: [00:05:35] So basically you're a prophet, Christopher. That's what we're saying here.

Mur: [00:05:37] Yeah. I was about to ask, how did it feel two years ago watching all of the politics unfold and think ... were you thinking, "I wasn't writing a user manual, dammit"? Or ... ?

Christopher: [00:05:45] Yeah, you know it's really funny because I really ... and as a kind of a business writing thing, it's sort of interesting because I finished this in November of 2014. And this idea of the CEO president and stuff, it's not really a new idea, it's been kicking around for a long time. Mitt Romney, a recent example, right? That kind of was ... or that certainly the businessman or businesswoman leader figure. But I finished it, and I sent it out to some friends and was trying to start getting it ready to send it out, but then I started to ... I don't know, you go through phases where you're like, "Oh, should I work on this more?" I was like, "Is this stuff too implausible? I don't know if anybody's going to buy this. This is sort of like ... who would believe this kind of crazy stuff?" And then it literally started happening as I was getting ready to shop it, and it caused me to hustle a lot more and it ended up I think probably being helpful. And I think it was a lesson for me. And how what was often viewed as prescient by science fiction writers is often just a function of being attentive and observant as a practitioner of science fictional realism and picking up on things that are already going on around you, that sort of following the (over-quoted, but always pretty accurate) Gibsonian aphorism, which in this case maybe is that "the dystopia is already here -- it's just not evenly distributed."

Matt: [00:07:41] Right. So you're not ... you're just being observant. You're just reacting to what's going on around you and extrapolating it. That's really the thing.

Christopher: [00:07:49] Yeah, I mean it's like ... Yeah, because I was like ... Remember, I started outlining this in 2012 probably, or thinking about it, and I was like, "Oh yeah, what would that be like if you had a CEO running the country and running it like a CEO? Having worked in corporate environments in my day jobs over the years, those places are not democracies, they're dictatorships. Hold on a minute." And that ended up being a lot of fun to play with and lead to a lot of stuff that may not be prescient. But yeah, I think just paying attention to what's going on in the world around you and writing with an effort at a kind of imagined realism I think can work out pretty well.

Matt: [00:08:45] Well, I got to tell you, I'm actually really interested in ... Since we do a business focused podcast here, I'm actually really interested in how you feel the times we live in,

the times that came about as you went out to sell the book, affected you both selling the book and how it's affecting the books of life in publishing right now. Is it a good thing that it's kind of mirroring our reality? Or is it a bad thing that it's doing that? Are people Do people want to read your version, or does it kind of avert them because they want more escapism with everything happening in the world? Do you have any kind of data on that? Or any kind of experience you've had yet?

Christopher: [00:09:25] Yeah, you know that's a great question, Matt. My view has sort of always been that topicality is sort of a double-edged sword for a writer. And you have to really strive not to ever try to write too immediate ... ripped from the headlines should only ever happen by accident, because if you actually try to rip your story from the headlines, you're guaranteed pretty much to miss the window and be "Oh so 2016," you know? I mean, you're already--

Matt: [00:10:05] Right. You're dating yourself, yeah.

Christopher: [00:10:05] Yeah, but if you're doing a good job of writing, if you believe that ... if you're of the school that sort of all science fiction, even stuff set in the future, is really about present, and if you're trying to approach what you do with some rigor about drawing from the material of the [inaudible 00:10:37] world, you'll hopefully end up with some level of seeming prescience because the things you're going to find interesting to write about are things that maybe haven't gotten a lot of attention because they're just sort of interesting to you. But I think in terms of writing about dark version of the ... I mean, *Tropic of Kansas* is a pretty bleak book. I mean I had two different reviewers call it ... well, Barnes & Noble called it ... the B&N Sci-Fi blog called it "the feel bad book of the year."

Mur: [00:11:18] Oh no! (laughs)

Christopher: [00:11:18] And Book Riot called it ... Liberty of Book Riot called it "the brilliant feel bad book of the summer." And they're right. I was trying to write it with a kind of honesty about people. It's written from the perspective of people at the bottom of this dystopian society, working people struggling. And it ends up in a hopeful place. But you've got to go through some dark territory to get there. I think it helps and it doesn't help to be writing about a somewhat honest dystopian funhouse or horror house mirror of the world we live in. But the book's done very well. I mean, it went to second printing very quickly.

Matt: [00:12:11] Oh, fantastic! Congratulations.

Mur: [00:12:12] Awesome.

Christopher: [00:12:13] Thank you. We got pretty good critical reception. And it's on some long lists and some reading lists for the year, so I feel very, very fortunate with that. And yeah, I think topicality is really tricky. I think there's a lot of dystopian narrative out there, and that on the one hand people ... there seems to be a sense in the business that there's a kind of unquenchable appetite for it. I mean, you see a lot of creative writers from the literary side of the fence trying to write dystopian speculations that have literary chops or whatever.

Matt: [00:13:07] Under that whole allegory loophole. That if you call it allegory, it can be literary and it doesn't have to be genre and be banished to the back of a bookstore.

Christopher: [00:13:14] Yeah. Yeah, I mean it's just the manner in which those divisions are drawn persistently eludes me. But yeah, there's this idea that people love dystopias, but I think in the ... in like 2017 my impression was ... I mean, I try not to look too much at Amazon reviews or Goodreads reviews, but you go look once in a while and you get a good sampling, right? And some people [inaudible 00:13:37], they're like, "Yeah, give me this, and give me some opportunity for revolutionary redemption at the end, but let me see the suffering of the people." Other people are like, "Come on, man. I want some popcorn." Right?

Matt: [00:13:59] Right.

Christopher: [00:13:59] And fair enough, you know?

Matt: [00:13:59] No, no, yeah.

Christopher: [00:13:59] So that's kind of my take on that.

Matt: [00:14:01] I think you hit on some really interesting points there. You know, the thing that occurred to me while you were talking about that was we talk a lot about never trying to write to the market or predict what's going to be popular in the marketplace. But you don't often hear trying to be so topical that you're trying to nail current events with the ... which is really the same thing, but in a different way. And you're right, if you try too hard to be too on the nose or too topical, you're going to end up looking dated, where I think since what you did was ... it really, whether you were reacting to the world or not, you were writing what you were interested in and what moved you. You weren't trying to chase a news trends, so it ends up standing on its own. But I think that's a really good point. Just in the way that we say "don't try to write to the market," you shouldn't try to chase the news because you'll never win that race. I think that's actually really good advice.

Mur: [00:14:59] Also there's a third way of looking at this, and maybe I'm just defending myself, because I'm working on a sort of totalitarian book and I'm not chasing the news, but it's on my fucking mind a lot. So that's kind of what developed the idea. And so it's not technically chasing the news, but it's definitely affected by current events because you write about what you're always thinking about. Well this is on my mind a lot more than usual, so I think that's what has been driving my ideas.

Matt: [00:15:36] I don't think there's anything wrong with that though, Mur. I don't think it's the same thing either. I think it's more about intention. Your intention is not to sell something as being "well this is what the world ... this is what's going on right now and I've captured it perfectly in my fiction and this is ..." that's not your intention. You can't help but be informed by what's going on around you, especially if you're a creature of empathy which, as you know, we all tend to be. Yeah, I think that's a different thing. And honestly the right way to go about things. It's those natural influences that occur to you. It doesn't ... the intent doesn't change, you know?

Christopher: [00:16:15] Yeah, but I think ... Yeah, I think you're both right about that. I would say I'm dealing with it now kind of the opposite way because now I'm working on ... I've got a two book deal in the fall for ... back with Voyager for the beginning of a new series sort of nominally set in the world of *Tropic of Kansas*. Now it's a very different story. It's a kind of a dystopian legal thriller. The elevator pitch was *Better Call Saul* meets *1984*. So the first book I'm working on now, and I'm setting it in the same world, and I'm trying to make sure I don't sort of actively react to the world around me in a way, and to the current events or ... William Gibson has his book coming out I guess in April now. *Agency*, his new novel. And there was a piece he ... There was an interview with him in the New York Times about it a couple of months ago. And the book is ... it's kind of (I saw an early chunk of it) ... It's a kind of almost like a ... it's set in the very recent past, basically in like the year he's writing it in 2016. And kind of elements of a technology business thriller about somebody tracking down an emergent AI. He said that after the election, he suddenly realized that the world in which he was writing the book no longer existed, and he had to change it so that the book was taking place in an alternate universe in which Hillary won the election.

Matt: [00:18:05] Oh wow. I did not know that. That's trippy.

Christopher: [00:18:08] I thought that was an interesting take on that problem, and one of having to be immediately re-engineering your book as a consequence of what you're ripping from the headlines.

Matt: [00:18:21] No, that is something ... that is definitely another angle that I had not considered and definitely a radical and very interesting solution to that problem. Now I really want to read the book.

Christopher: [00:18:31] Yeah, I'm curious to see how he does that.

Matt: [00:18:35] But that's a very good point. Yeah, you do ... You may feel the need to ... That's just so heavy though, like the world that I'm writing no longer exists. Just to accept that concept, man, and be able to intelligently apply it. I'd be so bummed out by just that realization, it would probably cripple me from writing anything about it. Props to him for being able to pivot.

Christopher: [00:18:58] Yeah, maybe that's his therapy. Who knows.

Matt: [00:19:01] Ah yeah, maybe we all need to write books where Hillary won the election, I don't know. But I can definitely say that I ... whatever you're doing, whether in his case he was writing something so specific to what was going on that he had to change the whole world when the world around him changed, I've certainly felt the effects of current events in my stuff. And the stuff I've been dealing with, like with my *Sin du Jour* series, has nothing to do with politics or really reality in any significant way. But one of the things that happened halfway into this series was everything with the election and current events and all these things, and I've been feeling very dark the last couple of years. And I was writing kind of a lighthearted urban fantasy comedy series about chefs in New York cooking for supernatural creatures. And now because of how everything that's happened, like three books in it sort of stopped being a comedy series and people noticed. So, I've got a lot of reviews asking, "Three books in, where's the funny gone?"

Why is everything so dark all of a sudden?" So I think it can bleed in on you, no matter what kind of stuff you're doing, you know?

Christopher: [00:20:11] Totally.

Matt: [00:20:12] Yeah, and it's hard not to reflect that ... again, even if your writing has nothing to do with being topical or being on the news, it's really just about, again, I think, empathy and your emotional state, and the way you are reacting to that news can bleed into it. And there's nothing wrong with that. I think you got to write true to yourself in any respect. And even from a business standpoint you might ... people might look at that and say that was probably not the smartest thing to do, Matt. You should have found a way to continue to be funny and maybe a little lighter. And I don't agree, for my money. I had to go with the direction that I felt was true to me and the way I was at the time. And I think the story's better for it, I think it's deeper and richer for it. If it turned a few people off, I don't regret that decision.

Mur: [00:21:06] You can't please everybody. We know that.

Matt: [00:21:06] Yeah. I didn't mean to make it all about me all of a sudden. I just, I felt that was something relevant to the issue.

Christopher: [00:21:11] And I think you said it in two different ways. You have to be true to yourself, and you have to write what moves you. And that to me is the nub of it. And that to me is the best path to success and the best path to producing the best work. It may have varying economic implications depending on the particular circumstances and cultural context, but that's kind of the only way to go in my book.

Matt: [00:21:33] No, and I agree with you, Christopher. And that's something I'm sure we've touched on that in the past, Mur, but I think it's always worth reinforcing is it's not ... you do have to be a smart business person, but you can't put the business before everything when you work in a creative medium. That's where we start. We start off with the creative side of things and then we figure out how to sell it, and you can't put the cart before the horse, which I think is what this whole conversation has kind of been about. And I think that's a conversation that's always worth having. Because people ... It's easy to mix them up, man. You get into this thing with the purest of intentions and then before you know it you're dealing with agents and editors and reviewers and critics and readers and all these other influences. And you're dealing with this industry that's unfamiliar to you, you're trying to figure out how to navigate it. It's easy to lose sight of what your original intentions were and start adapting both yourself and your work to try to suit everyone else's ... what they perceive to be [inaudible 00:22:37] the industry. So don't do that. Stay who you are. Stay true, Ponyboy is what I'm basically trying to say.

Mur: [00:22:31] Oh god. I want to go off of something you said earlier, Christopher, because we talked about ... you mentioned the book being on some long lists and stuff, and we were going to go into discussion of awards because awards season is, with the Hugos, officially open with lots and lots and lots of people talking about their own eligibility. People they like eligibility and stuff. And if I remember correctly, this is up for the Compton Crook Award?

Christopher: [00:23:12] It is. It's on the long list for Compton Crook Award, yeah.

Mur: [00:23:16] Which is the best first novel given out at Balticon every year.

Christopher: [00:23:17] Yeah, exactly.

Mur: [00:23:17] It's been ... yeah.

Christopher: [00:23:17] So I was delighted to be included among some amazing books on that list.

Mur: [00:23:23] Yeah, good luck! I'll be rooting for you.

Matt: [00:23:26] Yeah! [crosstalk 00:23:27]

Mur: [00:23:26] You'd be in the same club as Paolo Bacigalupi and Fran Wilde and Myke Cole, so a lot of really great books have won that, so you're in really good company. But as you said, there are ... well there's always a lot of angst, and Matt and I've been talking about this the past like two episodes. So I was wondering your take on it, how you approach the ... all this. And I'm waving my arms around.

Christopher: [00:24:01] Yeah, you know it's all kind of new to me. And by the way, Mur, congratulations on that Philip K. Dick Award-**Mur:** [00:24:08] Oh, thank you!

Christopher: [00:24:08] ... nomination. That's awesome. Which is for paperback originals, right?

Mur: [00:24:17] Yes.

Christopher: [00:24:16] And to me it's like one of the coolest awards.

Matt: [00:24:19] It is very prestigious. It must be said.

Christopher: [00:24:20] And very, very ... I think it kind of a very independent ... It's very unlike the Hugos and the Nebulas in that there's basically a jury selected by a board and they read all the books and they confer amongst themselves and they're sort of ... they're inoculated from outside influence. But of course, the big genre ... the biggest genre awards I guess, right? The Hugos and the Nebulas, there's a sort of mass voting component to both and it's ... I've never felt entirely like a native to science fiction even though I've been in the scene for a long time. That part of it is sort of new to me. I've been kind of watching and learning. And the most exciting thing that happened to me so far during award season, was watching and trying to figure it out. Are there things I should be doing to try to do my job? You know, for my book and for my publisher and for my characters to help promote this? And I got, in one week while I was noodling on that, I got two letters of appreciation from people who were recovering from homelessness. And it was this ... they were both these very touching notes about how they came across the book in a library and how some of the ways in which the book had dealt with issues

about the main character who's homeless resonated with their own experience. And then one of them noted it was ... noted similarities ... influences of both Walker Percy and *Bomba, the Jungle Boy*. But anyway, it was sort of this thing where it's like the number one thing is getting ... it sort of reminded me of the importance of just that connection with readers and that unsolicited and how immensely profound and meaningful that can be. But, I don't know, I mean I feel like in terms of how you go about ... I think it's a good exercise to try to make sure your work is on the community's radar screen.

Christopher: [00:27:03] I have no idea how you go about doing that in a way that is particularly effective. I think for ... (I don't know, I'm kind of blathering on), but I think for novels, I was very delighted to have *Tropic of Kansas* show up on the list of first novels for the [2017 *Locus* Recommended Reading List](#). So there you have people up and do the work for you. I think for people with short fiction and novellas and so on, it's a really important undertaking of the community, of people talking to each other and sharing notes about the work that's excited them, and that's really what I've been trying to do as much as anything, is trying to figure out in the sort of spirit of a kind of karmic approach to it, is thinking about the work that I've read in the past year that's eligible that I'd love to see out there. I mean, you look at like, when you do your own Nebula nominations, right? You're not going to nominate yourself.

Mur: [00:28:15] Yeah. You're unable to nominate yourself

Christopher: [00:28:15] And trying to spread the word about that. And I don't know, I mean that to me, it's more rewarding to be trying to promote the work of friends and especially ... I can think of ... I mean, there are friends who I think have produced amazing work, or others who aren't even people I know well, who produced amazing work, especially short work, that I'd love to see get more attention. And to me that's the really exciting thing about the awards is when I can give attention to works that might otherwise have been kind of slipping under the radar screen but really deserve more recognition because they are really great.

Matt: [00:28:57] Absolutely, and that happens so rarely, I think that it definitely is one of the coolest things to see, especially with the bigger awards like the Nebulas and the Hugos. For my money this season ... and I'm always pro promoting your stuff for awards. I think there is ... and every awards season, that conversation has to be had on social media. Like telling authors: it's okay to have an eligibility post. It's okay to tell people "I wrote this stuff this year. It's eligible for these awards, and please consider reading and voting for it." It's totally okay to do that, and the fact that we still have to tell people that every single year, I'm not sure what that says about the community or the stuff surrounding the awards, but it's probably worth taking a look at. This year, however, personally I've been much more focused on promoting other stuff than my own stuff for two reasons really. The first being I don't have anything that's going to get nominated for an award this year, and I just I know enough about awards and the industry to know that, so I feel like it's kind of wasted effort on my part to just be out there shilling for myself. The other is I just find it much more personally rewarding to do that. Mur has this book that's out that actually has a good deal of buzz around it because everybody's talking about how it's up for a Philip K. Dick Award. It's been getting a lot of Nebula buzz. Mur doesn't want to hear about any of this because it wrecks her. But I'm going to talk about it. So, I kind of tend ... She's not on the Twitters because she's practicing self-care, which I always encourage. That's a good thing. But I

am on the Twitter, so I've sort of taken it on myself to kind of be her promotional machine for *Six Wakes* for the Nebulas and Hugos this year. So much just to create a hashtag. It's [#SixWakesHatTrick](#) because that's what we're looking for, Mur. We're looking for the hat trick. All three, babe. Philip K. Dick, Nebulas, and Hugos. It's happening-

Mur: [00:30:54] (sighs)

Christopher: [00:30:54] Yeah!

Matt: [00:30:54] ... and you've just got to accept it. But not just Mur's ... I've been pushing Mur's really hard because I really want Mur to get the ... because I think she ... first of all, I legitimately think she has a really good shot this year with *Six Wakes*. I think *Six Wakes* deserves it, and I think Mur deserves it, so that's why I'm doing it. Also Mur is a very good friend of mine, and I would like to see you get the award, Mur. So that's why I've been doing that. But in addition, I've also been just highlighting other authors whose work I really enjoy, who I think have been under-represented or unrecognized by awards, and so this season I've really just been focusing on that. I've mentioned maybe once on Twitter "this is the stuff that I have eligible" and whatever, but for the most part my tweets have focused ... my tweets and my posts have focused on pushing everybody else's stuff, and I think that's a good thing to do during awards season. That's something I encourage as much, if not more than, pushing your own stuff. And you know, there's something to be said in the philanthropic approach to marketing. I think the more you use your platform to expose others, I feel it's like putting good karma out there in the world. That karma comes back to you in ways that you never expect. And so it's just personally and for other people and for the community, I think it's worth doing and something I encourage. But again, I totally support everyone shilling their stuff and letting people know that they wrote stuff that's eligible for an awards. You have to do it. In a lot of cases if you don't do it, no one else will. You can't expect other people to do it. And Christopher you mentioned the *Locus* Reading List and those "bests of" lists and recommended lists, those are ... can be very essential to awards. But if you don't make those, which a lot of worthy books and stories don't, then you've got to take it upon yourself to go out there and create the awareness, and it's totally possible to create the kind of awareness and get people into it if you've written something that will resonate with people or something that's good enough for it to catch on. You just have to let people know it's out there. So those are ... it's a little scattered, but those are my thoughts this awards season.

Christopher: [00:32:47] No, I agree! I think you put it really well. You're right, it is important and appropriate too, the work of letting people know about your own work. But the real joy and the real cultivation of community comes from spreading the word about other work that's exciting to you. Especially stuff that maybe merits more attention than it might have gotten. And I think that is an integral part of what makes the science fiction and fantasy community great.

Matt: [00:33:29] I totally agree. Mur, where are you at on the ... how to approach awards season? Now that I've thoroughly embarrassed you, I'm sure.

Mur: [00:33:32] Yeah, I'm not real sure what to do with the awkwardness of Matt demanding three nominations from me. So I'll just sit here awkwardly.

Matt: [00:33:43] I'm not demanding *from* you. I'm demanding other people nominate you.

Mur: [00:33:47] Of me, then. Or something.

Matt: [00:33:51] Don't feel personal pressure. It's not on you, it's on everyone else.

Mur: [00:33:57] I know. There's absolutely nothing I can do about it. I believe in people promoting themselves. Also, because on a marginalized level, people (and that includes marginalized people) tend to talk about white dudes' books more than anybody else's. And sometimes it's a conscious effort to go: okay, I'm reading a lot of white dudes right now. I need to step away and see what else is out there. Because it's not just the only stuff, but they get more reviews and stuff like that. And so if people put you down for promoting yourself, that's just completely unfair because you're actually speaking up and saying, "Hey, there's something else out there." And you know, that goes for non-marginalized people too, because I know a lot of white dudes who don't have their stuff talked about who need the boost as well. I'm trying to do what Matt's doing. I did make my award eligibility post, but I'm trying to focus on other people who I think may not get a lot of attention. I was absolutely thrilled--

Matt: [00:35:11] You haven't used the hashtag yet, I just want to put that out there. You haven't used the SixWakesHatTrick hashtag yet.

Mur: [00:35:15] Why would I do that?

Matt: [00:35:18] (laughs)

Mur: [00:35:18] That is like an asshole move, okay? Really.

Matt: [00:35:20] Actually the reason I brought that up is because I hadn't done enough talking, and I just wanted to put that in there real quick. It would be wrong for Mur to use that hashtag.

Mur: [00:35:27] Yes.

Matt: [00:35:28] It's okay for me to use that hashtag, which is why I'm doing it. Because I have such a genuine enthusiasm for her book, and I'm not the one who wrote the book and honestly, I have no vested interest in the book winning an award. It's not my book. I'm not with the publishers. I'm not with Mur's agent. I get ... Mur's not giving me a cut, so I--

Christopher: [00:35:41] No kickbacks?

Matt: [00:35:42] No kickbacks at all. I just genuinely believe in it. So I could be out there doing that. Mur should not be using the #SixWakesHatTrick. That would send the wrong message. So I actually did just want to make that point real quick because I think it's worthwhile. Please proceed, Mur.

Mur: [00:35:58] Yeah. The careful thing is letting people know what you have eligible but not saying "vote for me." And it's a fine line, but the line is there and most everybody knows where

it is. So that's pretty much where I stand. But I have discovered something ... and this is a self-care thing I usually talk about in my other show, but I'll bring it up here ... is that I've discovered when I feel bad about something, say somebody gets exciting news and I get stupidly childishly jealous or something, I've discovered that promoting other people when I feel like that is a very good use of my energy because that makes me feel better. So I've been trying to promote other people during awards season, especially if I'm feeling crappy about something, because that is like me doing something good that brings happiness to me. So it's actually self-care when I say, "Hey guys, consider clipping. or Alasdair Stuart or something." It's all about me, really. That's what it is.

Christopher: [00:36:58] It's so true.

Matt: [00:36:58] No, but I think that's a great tip, Mur. I think that's totally valid and a good way to channel that ... You're turning the frown upside down, Mur. You're turning negative into a positive. And I respect that. No, that's great advice. I think that's great advice for the right reason, too. If I could pivot back for just a second because this just occurred to me, but I want to tell this story. And I don't think I've told this story on *Ditch Diggers* where we've talked about awards. I got on a kick a while back where I was ... I found on YouTube old episodes of Harlan Ellison's old sci-fi show from like '93.

Christopher: [00:37:31] Whaaat?

Matt: [00:38:32] He had a little segment on the Sci-Fi Buzz on the Sci-Fi Channel where he would talk about various stuff. And however you feel about Harlan Ellison, it's a very interesting snapshot of the period, and I recommend everybody check it out just because in terms of historical documents it really captures a lot of the SF/F scene of that time very well. But I remember him ... He did several episodes on awards and talked a lot about the Hugos and the Nebulas because he won like 50 of them. But I do remember in '93 he talked about how "Well it's finally happened folks. This year people went on the Internet and begged people to vote for them for the Hugo awards and they managed to get on the ballot." And I just remember being ... That's the way he put it. But I remember thinking when I saw that, I bet what people really did was just the early version of eligibility posts. Is where they went on the '93, '94 message boards and were just like, "Hey everybody, I wrote these things this year and they're eligible for awards, and I'd like to be considered for them." I sincerely doubt they went on the Internet and message boards and just begged everyone, "Please vote for me, I sincerely want to win." Maybe they did. I don't know. I don't actually know what the text was, but I just remember thinking how I really feel like he was reacting to the concept of telling people that you have awards eligible work, because that used to be such a taboo thing. Either you were nominated for awards at one point in time or you weren't. You didn't talk about it, right? Campaigning was not a thing that was done by authors. And it was just such an interesting thing thinking about the difference between those times and the times we live in now, and obviously I categorically disagree with the way he was reacting to the technological means authors suddenly had to promote their stuff. Because we just said it's totally okay to promote yourself and let people know you're awards eligible, but just that attitude. That attitude of "it's so inappropriate to let anyone know that you have an awards eligible work," and somehow the cream should just rise to the top. Which is not a thing. Like you were talking about, Mur, we lose so many marginalized voices and so many people who are not

promoted in mainstream medias unless someone brings attention to them, you know? I guess what I'm trying to--

Mur: [00:40:01] And a lot of times you've got the problem of really popular people. When you're popular and you keep creating, you know that snowballs itself. But it's not just marketing that they put behind the big stuff. There's Harlan Ellison, we recognize him. And when we see Harlan Ellison has a new story out you think, "Oh, Harlan Ellison has a new story out. Must read the Harlan Ellison story." And even if somebody else wrote something freaking amazing, you're not going to see their name clue into "this is something I have to read." So once you get to a certain level, you just can kind of coast on your name awareness and that's another way that certain people ... and I'm not even talking about marginalized people, I'm talking about really successful authors and stuff can get their stuff in front of people.

Matt: [00:40:48] And even if you're not intending to coast, that's a thing that just happens. It becomes a thing of like ... even if people, and I think especially if people haven't read ... because you know, every year you have plenty of people who vote, who maybe they know the novels they want to vote for, but they haven't had time to read all the short stories and the novelettes and the novellas and everything. So it's like voting ... It's like any kind of election or any kind of awards things, you tend to go with names you know. So if you have a ballot of short stories that you actually haven't read any of, but you recognize a name, there are plenty of people who just check off the name they know and go, "Well Harlan must deserve to win it again this year because I know he's very good." So it even becomes a thing of not "well I'll read his story because I know him ... I'll just vote for the name because I know the name and I don't know any of these other names." That's totally a thing that happens. That's why it's necessary to go online and not beg people for votes, but make people aware, raise that awareness.

Christopher: [00:41:44] Well that's also why it's really important for us all to try to do our part to help promote diverse voices, new voices, fresh voices, people who are doing innovative work, and to try to help use this platform that the awards and the attention that this kind of seasonal attention to a big body of work, to kind of look across the field and try to help people see the range of new stuff that's coming out. I mean, I think there's a lot more interest in translation of works of science fiction and speculative fiction from the Chinese language because of *The Three-Body Problem* winning the Hugo. I think there's a lot more interest in other kinds of diverse voices as a consequence of some recent awards and nominations. And I think that's a really great thing that the awards can do and give us all fresh food to react to in our own work.

Matt: [00:42:55] No, very well said, Christopher. I think that's a very good point. I would add, in the way that it's our responsibility to promote this stuff, it's also our responsibility as authors to go out and seek this stuff to begin with and read beyond our normal comfort zones and our usual channels. Find new stuff to read and take in. And I think it's essential, not only just as a community thing, but for our growth as authors, I find it's very important to go out and do that. Do both those things, yeah.

Christopher: [00:43:21] In 2012, I co-edited a book called [*Three Messages and a Warning: Contemporary Mexican Short Stories of the Fantastic*](#) with another writer-slash-lawyer named Eduardo Jiménez Mayo. And this was all contemporary Mexican short fiction, wide range from

really literary fabulism to Mexican science fiction and some really interesting horror stories, pretty good horror stories by women.

Matt: [00:44:10] Ah man, that sounds amazing! I had not heard of that before.

Christopher: [00:44:14] Oh, well yeah. And it was a cool book, it almost happened by accident, but I mention it because it was ... we got the nomination for the World Fantasy Award for Best Anthology in 2013. And to the point we were just talking about, when that book got the World Fantasy Award, from the perspective of a lot of these Mexican writers, many of whom were my friends or acquaintances, you would have thought that it was like an Academy Award nomination.

Matt: [00:44:34] Oh no, of course, yeah.

Christopher: [00:44:41] It had such a huge impact on their sense of the validation of the value of their work, especially for the ones who are Mexican science fiction writers, where there's not as a developed genre community. And the impact of that kind of recognition of works that might not have the benefit of all of the kind of accumulated goodwill that say a really established author has is huge.

Matt: [00:45:03] No absolutely, I think that's a fantastic point and just very ... Is that, I'm just curious, is that anthology still in print? Is it still out there?

Christopher: [00:45:11] It is. It is. It's available from Small Beer Press. The press run by Gavin Grant and Kelly Link. Yeah, and there's a lot of very sort of short stories, and I translated a few of them and it's amazing work, and yeah because it is, it's really hard to ... it's challenging to find, to go and find, work like that in another language obviously, and to put together ... putting together any kind of a multi-author anthology is challenging, and doing one of works in translation is really hard. So it was sort of to Gavin and Kelly's credit, and really to my co-editor, who did a big chunk of the work and probably produced more than half of the stories. And I feel like there's more and more interest in work like that, international literature of the fantastic, because I think people have a hunger for it. And I think the awards can really play a huge role in helping people be aware that that kind of stuff is even out there.

Matt: [00:46:27] No, I totally agree, and I think that that's a fantastic point. I will be sure to include a link to that anthology in our show notes too for everybody. And I encourage everybody to go check that out.

Christopher: [00:46:37] Thanks.

Matt: [00:46:51] Very cool.

Mur: [00:47:01] So we have a couple of questions. Jessica writes: "After listening to the last podcast on the money taboo, I have a question that is tangen--" (I can't say this word, damn it.) "tangentially related." Basically, she wants to know about ... in this economy with student loans and debt at an all-time high, should she apply to grad school? She's specifically mentioning the

fact that I went to Stonecoast and made it sound amazing, and somebody else had told her that she should do this. She has a supportive partner, no children, and yet wondering if she can get the writing education without spending all that money. You guys ... either one of you want to tackle this first?

Matt: [00:47:29] I mean, I don't know if Christopher has an MFA, but I know you do, so I think you're the one with the ... all the perspective, Mur.

Mur: [00:47:37] No, I think not getting an MFA also gives you the perspective of what not getting an MFA ... yeah.

Matt: [00:47:46] I understand. The thing is that I'm going to say you don't need one. So you're going to have to be the one who explains the value of it.

Mur: [00:48:01] Okay.

Christopher: [00:48:03] Let me ... I mean, I'll try quickly. I mean, I went to law school rather than getting an MFA, which was not in any immediate way helpful to my writing. And I was in Iowa City where a lot of my friends were in the MFA program at the Writers' Workshop. And I think the great advantage, I think, of getting a fine arts degree like that in your field, is if you can do it at a program where they not only help you hone your craft, but they also will help you with the kind of professional practices and with learning how to think about it as a vocation. And if you get an MFA, you have a certification from which you can get a job teaching and making a living teaching writing, and I think in that respect it has kind of great potential and that there's a lot to be said for it.

Mur: [00:48:54] Yeah. I mainly went because actually wanted to learn, which so many people find baffling. They're ... People say, "Why would you want to get an MFA because it doesn't guarantee publication, or even help you towards publication, and that they're going to ... like you absolutely need a law degree, etc." But I found it useful, and now granted, I did not have student loans at the time, so I don't know if ... that probably would have affected my decision had the concept of increasing my debt load been so prevalent, because not only do you have the tuition to deal with, you also have travel, unless you live in Maine. So, because it's a low residency program, so you have to travel there twice a year. It was awesome. It was very helpful to my writing, and I don't regret one bit of it. But I think that there are so many people who have succeeded, I mean, SO many people who have succeeded without MFAs, that if you decide not to do it you're ... I don't think you're going to ... you haven't harmed yourself. It can help, but not doing it is not harmful, if that makes sense. So, you can look to the other ... maybe consider one of the six week courses, like Odyssey or Clarion or Clarion West. Because a lot of people have said the ... what you get out of that is like an MFA condensed into six weeks. It's an intense six weeks, but if you talk to a great many of the really respected professional authors these days, many of them went to Clarion. So many. And so, maybe consider that because, while not free or cheap, it's a lot cheaper than an MFA program. So, there's that.

Christopher: [00:51:13] That's really great advice. And maybe Clarion is probably the maybe an even faster track into at least writing genre work.

Matt: [00:51:25] I would definitely say so. Yeah, I've heard, like all of us, I've heard so many success stories based on Clarion. And also, it just, it gives you a certain kind of cred with a lot of people in the genre because everybody knows it, whether they went or not. Everybody knows Clarion. Yeah, I agree with everything you said, Mur.

Mur: [00:51:49] Awesome. And that is all of our *Ditch Diggers* questions.

Matt: [00:51:56] That was a good question.

Mur: [00:51:57] It was. It was a really good question. I do want to say, before we say goodbye to Christopher, that I have a copy of *Tropic of Kansas* and I'm happy to give it away if you want to send us an email and put "giveaway" and "*Ditch Diggers*" in the title just to make sure it doesn't go into the wrong mailbox for me. I'll do a random drawing next week and we'll give away this awesome book, and I'll be sad to see it go, but good to spread the word of this fantastic, dire book. But Christopher, you want to tell us a little bit about where to find you online?

Christopher: [00:52:21] Sure, you can find me at christopherbrown.com or on Twitter [@NB_Chris](https://twitter.com/NB_Chris) or Instagram [@ebitdada](https://www.instagram.com/ebitdada), but just go to christopherbrown.com and it's all there.

Mur: [00:52:38] Excellent. And the book is [*Tropic of Kansas*](#), and it is out now. Matt, you want to shill?

Matt: [00:52:42] Yes, well on the topic of awards season, and on the topic of Hugo nominations opening, did you know, Mur, that *Ditch Diggers* is eligible for Best Fancast at the Hugos?

Mur: [00:53:01] Is it?

Matt: [00:53:01] It is. Did you further know that we were actually nominated last year for a Hugo?

Mur: [00:53:01] That, I forgot. I totally forgot about that. I need to--

Matt: [00:53:04] And did you further know that while we were in serious contention, we did not win that Hugo?

Mur: [00:53:10] I do know that.

Matt: [00:53:12] So it would be so dramatic if this year we return and were triumphant at the Hugos. I think that would be an amazing Best Fancast Hugo story.

Mur: [00:53:25] It would. It would be a fantastic story.

Matt: [00:53:28] So, if you want to folks ... if you want to create an amazing Best Fancast Hugos story at this year's Hugo Awards, nominate *Ditch Diggers* for Best Fancast and support us in that category.

Mur: [00:53:40] And you'll make Harlan Ellison angry.

Matt: [00:53:12] Make Harlan Ellison angry because I asked you to do it. It's okay. He's angry about a lot of things. It's how he lives. It's how he sustains himself. In addition to that, I personally have a book out right out, it's called [Gluttony Bay](#), it's the penultimate book of my *Sin du Jour* series. The final book, [Taste of Wrath](#), comes out in April. So if you've not yet gotten into the *Sin du Jour* series, you still have time to catch up before the end, and you can enjoy it in real time with the rest of us. Also my other novella series, [Rencor: Life in Grudge City](#), about luchador buddy cop masked Mexican wrestlers, and all kinds of mystery and mayhem, is also out now from Parts Unknown Publishing. You can pick that up on Amazon in print or paperback. That's my shilling, Mur

Mur: [00:54:22] Yeah. Well you can see my ... the fine show notes that Matt will write up for us will be on [murverse.com](#), and you can support our Patreon at [patreon.com/mightymur](#). And did you know we are doing transcriptions now? That's right. You will see the full transcription of this episode with all of the um's and uh's and awkwardness and swearing included. But the way to do that is to ... if you want to see it immediately after we get it done, you support the Patreon, even at just a dollar. And everybody else will get to see it at a week later, because I'm not going to force people to pay for accessibility. And my other stuff: [Six Wakes](#), science fiction/fantasy--science fiction/murder. And then [I Should Be Writing](#), which is my workbook nonfiction book based on my last ... on my other podcast. Can't talk no more. Good we're ending this.

Matt: [00:55:27] It's the book you can write in, Mur. It's the book you can write in.

Mur: [00:55:28] It is the book you can write in. That's right. Thank you so much for being on the show, Christopher. And Matt, I'll talk to you next week.

Matt: [00:55:30] Absolutely. Thanks, Christopher. It was good having you on.

Christopher: [00:55:35] Thanks for having me, guys. It was a blast.

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