

Wynne Leon (00:05)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast about learning, teaching, giving, and growing.

you

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode I'm with my co-host Vicki Atkinson talking with novelist Doug E. Jones. Doug recently published his fourth novel, *Take Me Back to Chicago*, with Eckhartz Press. It's rich with characters, music, and the feel of Chicago in 1974. Doug gives us the elevator pitch for the book and we get a great sense of how he sets up the hero's journey for his 26-year-old protagonist.

We talk about the differences and similarities between his novels and Doug tells us what was so compelling about 1974 and some of the popular characters of the time and place like Joe Pepitone. Vicki and I wondered how writing novel differs from being a TV show writer and Doug gives us a peek into the writing room for the hit show *Charmed* where he worked as a production assistant and writer.

We highlight just a couple of his great lines from the book, and it's easy to see why Doug is a great writer for all formats. This is a great episode where Doug not only shares the arc of his book journey, but also a sense of his personal one too. *Take Me Back to Chicago* is a great book, and it makes for a rich episode. We know you'll love it.

Doug E. Jones (01:37)

you

you ~

Hey Doug! How you doing?

Wynne Leon (01:54)

Great, Vicki and I are so excited to talk with you because you have written this fantastic book, *Take Me Back to Chicago*, and it's so rich with characters and music and the feel of Chicago. ~ Can you give us an elevator pitch for your book?

Doug E. Jones (02:10)

Well, ~ I do like what I wrote on the back. And that is, I wanted to include ~ some Chicago characters, so to speak, ~ just to kind of ~ poke at the memory of the reader ~ who is a little bit older. And ~ it literally is being taken back because they were in Chicago in 1974. So I'm just going to read this off the back of the book. And that is, what do Joe Pepitone

Bozo the clown and George Morley have in common nothing but in 1974 Chicago they mean everything to Rick as he tries to pay off his dead father's debt to the Irish mob. So I

tried to include, you know, Joe Pepitone was a iconic baseball player, not for his ability on the field, but more for his ability off the field and was very popular in the ~

60s and early 70s. He played for the Yankees. And then of course he played for the Cubs and as a young kid, he just kind of You know really caught my attention and I dug into him a little bit more and we can get into that later But Joe Pepitone of course, Bozo the clown is just an icon in Chicago

Wynne Leon (03:27)

And is Bozo from Chicago? I mean, did that start?

Doug E. Jones (03:31)

There were other Bozos, but WGN became a super station and the reach, not just in Chicago, but throughout the Midwest. That's why you get a lot of Cub fans ~ and Bozo the Clown fans. So again, in the 60s and 70s and on into the 80s, Bozo was just part of every little kid's life. Especially in Chicago, you ran home at lunch even just to watch Bozo Circus.

and then ran back to school. You could do that in those days.

Vicki Atkinson (04:06)

Well, and I loved how you took the storyline between the main character, the protagonist, his name is Rick and his daughter, his seven-year-old daughter, Elena. It wasn't just a reference to Bozo in the game Bozo Buckets, but Elena was fixed and determined that she was going to get tickets to play. But how that found its way as a thread through the story is just so delightful about.

This character, Rick, that you'll tell us more about and who he was as a complex young man, but also a really endearing father.

Doug E. Jones (04:43)

Yeah, you know, wanted him, you know, be your heart of gold character, but, know, rough around the edges or or perhaps just was raised in a in a rough environment. Right. So, he's a father. He's a widow and he's a young man just trying to make his own in the city. And as it says in my little elevator pitch, you know, his father dies and leaves him with this big debt. ~ No one is

caring that his father died because his father was a scoundrel and he's proving it from the grave. So Rick's got this, you you want to put your hero in a hole. And so Rick has this \$50,000 debt in 1974 that might as well be a million dollars for him in that time period.

Wynne Leon (05:34)

Yeah,

especially as a young father and widow. mean, it's just, it's it's quite a quite a predicament. Now, we read that you met your wife in 1974. And which is the same year this book in which this book is set is 1974 kind of a magic year for you.

Doug E. Jones (05:46)
Correct.

Well, you knew I wanted the 70s are a magic decade. My second novel, Disco Inferno, takes place in 1979. And I just wanted to stay in the 70s, but go a little back, you know, a little further back. 74, I mean, I'm not, you know, a numerologist by any means, but in Chicago, you do get certain numbers stuck in your head. I mean, if you'd said to a Chicagoan in the 80s, you know, what does 23 mean to you?

Well, you know, that's Michael Jordan. I definitely grew up with the idea of numbers in my head, you know, especially coming out of the Cubs, whether it was Ernie Banks at 14 and Ron Santo at 10. And these numbers just stick in your head. And 74, like you said, I met my wife and she's kind of I did sprinkle. mean, there's real characters that I talk about Chicagoans in the book.

whether it be a sports figure, I talk about rock figures, but I also incorporated real people that I knew, just friends growing up. When Elena is talking about her friend, Angie, moving from Crilly Court, and she's all alone now, and the girl is Angie, that's my wife. My wife really did live in Crilly Court. She really did move from Crilly Court to Evanston, and that's when I met her in 1974. So I was able to...

Now obviously she didn't know a girl named Elena. Yeah. father named Rick, but I did sprinkle real people, friends of mine in the story at the appropriate age. so they could have been.

Wynne Leon (07:36)
Yeah, and the way you write about Elena is so sweet. mean, one of the lines that you write about ~ her observation, she's such a good observer. And one of the lines that I love is she says, the more wrinkles Elena has found out, the more stories. Right.

Doug E. Jones (07:54)
Right.

Vicki Atkinson (07:56)
So.

Doug E. Jones (07:56)
I also, you know, I wanted to have strong female characters like her and her mother and Rick's ~ love interest in the story. And then I decided at some point, you know, it was a

limited POV that I wanted to give like Elena and Rick's mom, you know, a section of the book where they could, you we get their point of view and how they're feeling and.

and what they're going through. And I did that with Elena and that was fun. ~ And then it was interesting what you were talking about earlier, know, these, it's historical fiction. So you're sprinkling in little Easter eggs. And I said, you know, Elena's gotta have a Cuddly Dudley. Again, a Chicago thing. ~ It's a kind of teddy bear from the Ray Rayner show that we all grew up with.

Vicki Atkinson (08:39)

Yeah

Doug E. Jones (08:49)

You can put those things in, but then I was like, it should also be relevant to the story. So she didn't just have a cuddly-duddly. As we later find out, the cuddly-duddly plays into the drama.

Vicki Atkinson (09:02)

~ yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It gets a little kidnapped. Oops. Did I say that? Oops. Did I say that? But the other thing that you do that I think is just, was such a treat for me because 1973, 74 were sort of magical years, you know, for me too. And, and when you brought up things like, you know, the Eagles and America and Jefferson Starship and know, songs like Radar Love, you did such a good job of like,

putting the characters into the music and their everyday experiences, know, those scenes and vignettes. just, for the reader, it will feel a little bit like time travel, which is, you know, such a, from me to you, you know, the biggest praise I can offer because it felt like immersion, but not heavy-handed. Does that make sense?

Doug E. Jones (09:49)

Yeah, it's a fine line, you know, between ~ exposition and, ~ you know, having something come organically from the story. So I just did it where Rick turns on the radio. So what song is playing in July of 1974? So let's go Google the pop charts and and find a cool song for Rick. ~ And ~ yeah, That was a lot of fun. The research was a blast.

Like you said, it just brings back memories. And that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to, ~ you know, take literally take people back. That's why I chose the title, which is a Chicago song. Yeah, it's but we're also going back to that time period. So, you know, water that lawn water that memory with his memory with as many little tidbits as I can. You get the course is a huge part of that.

Wynne Leon (10:44)

Yeah.

Yeah. Well, and I feel like I love that you just gave us that Easter egg about Cuddly Dudley. Cause I, you know, didn't know that that was a particular to Chicago character.

Doug E. Jones (10:57)

Yeah, so yeah, that's also a fine line between the Chicago reader, obviously is who I'm catering to first. It's great if other people can read it and get something from it too without feeling like they're just going down ~ a Chicago street, but to enjoy the story as well. Right. So yeah, that's. Yeah. ~

Vicki Atkinson (11:20)

Yeah, there were just so many smile-worthy moments thinking about, know, Fahey Flynn and Bill Curtis and Walter Jacobson and just those sprinklings. And there was something else that you did that just made me literally LOL. I know. It was the reference to Empire Carpet. If you're not from Chicago, may not get that, but it was just like, can't get away from this guy and this song, right?

Doug E. Jones (11:45)

Right, right, right. I just had a blast writing this book.

Vicki Atkinson (11:50)

It was so good.

Wynne Leon (11:51)

Good. So, you usually write for TV, is that right?

Doug E. Jones (11:55)

Yeah, I did. That's how I started. That was the dream. ~ I worked on a TV show called Charmed. It was sisters and witches. excuse me. I was totally out of my wheelhouse as far as story. But what I did learn was that everything comes from character. So yes, I didn't know witchcraft. I didn't know sisterhood. But that was quite a learning process. And I was on

All 178 episodes started as the coffee boy making copies of all the scripts, which was a nightmare because you needed, you know, hundreds of scripts and there would be changes. And then eventually ~ by season four, just kind of worked my way into the writer's room and eventually was put on staff. So it a great, great situation. But then, you know, ~

I did make the switch to novels, which were completely foreign to me. ~ Basically, because in Hollywood, it's very fickle. You don't know what's going to hit. Even the people that claim to have a hit don't know that it's going to hit. And we had a pilot after Charmed

with some mermaids. And we even had Roger Daltrey from The Who to be our bad guy. Which was incredible.

We shot a pilot and it looked good and then there was some tinkering from the network ~ and then the network ended up not picking it up and I was like, boy. So I've got to switch things up here and eventually back to Chicago. ~ And yeah, just the past year I've been in or past few months I should say I've been in Portland.

Wynne Leon (13:42)

Yeah.

So does it feel lonely to write novels after being in a writer's room for TV show or is it freeing? ~

Doug E. Jones (13:50)

is

freeing. in the writer's room people will you'll you'll you'll just be so pleased with yourself because you're in a room with 12 people and you'll come up with this great idea and you can't wait to kind of blurt it out and raise your hand and then it's also very common for the other 11 people to just say you know Doug that's

Wynne Leon (14:10)

Yeah.

Doug E. Jones (14:12)

That's ridiculous. That's stupid. That's wrong. Very cruel. And, you know, you're also limited, you know, to your to your show, to financially, you know, there's there's a certain amount of money you can spend on an episode. And even if you even the episode before might have gone over budget, which means your episode might be next and you're going to go under budget. Yeah.

So there was a lot of limitations and there was a lot of talking heads. ~ writing books was just, I didn't know how to write a book when I started, but very liberating.

Wynne Leon (14:54)

Yeah. So if you have to go under budget, does that mean you have to do less drama or less characters or less?

Doug E. Jones (15:01)

Well, sure, like, you know, every time an actor has a line, you're paying them. If you have a bigger actor, you're paying them more. If you want music, if you want a song people are familiar with, that costs more. In the show like Charmed, where we had magic, like a

fireball. How much is a fireball for him to throw one fireball? Well, that's \$1,000 for him to one

Wynne Leon (15:24)

I said, hilarious. Thank goodness you didn't have to pay for the music for this book. ~

Vicki Atkinson (15:32)

Yeah.

Doug E. Jones (15:33)

Well,

we eventually will.

Vicki Atkinson (15:35)

yeah.

Wynne Leon (15:36)

Yeah, yeah. As a novel writer, least you didn't have to worry about that.

Doug E. Jones (15:37)

it and then buy the rights.

Vicki Atkinson (15:43)

Right.

Yeah. Although, well, my gosh, my brain is on fire. one thing I went and I just read the interview you did with our publisher friend, your publisher, ~ my Rick Kaempfer And I mean, I feel like we should be bowing down to you because you worked on a reboot of Love Boat for Aaron Spelling. And I didn't realize that Aaron Spelling was the creative genius behind Charmed. How did I know this? Right.

Doug E. Jones (16:12)

television.

Vicki Atkinson (16:13)

That's crazy, right? That you've had that exposure to, you know, someone who was kind of iconic for creating shows. But I love what you just said about was the mermaid like show also a Spelling production? that?

Doug E. Jones (16:28)

Yes, it was. And I think that might have been a little bit of the problem when we didn't get picked up. ~ They kind of white breaded a little bit in the casting. We were looking to do

something a little more edgy or diverse and not that Aaron was against that, but ~ and I'm not even sure if it came down from him, but ~ back to your first point, Working with someone like Aaron Spelling, he was there, he was involved. And if I had a script that was mine, ~

the show runner let me take it through the process casting. ~ And then those initial meetings where, you know, Aaron kind of signed off on everything though, you know, he had a light touch. was, he was letting people, he had a lot of shows. ~ So kind of letting people do what they do. But yeah, being in meetings with someone like him who had been in the business ~ forever and creating Charlie's Angels and. ~

all that. It was really interesting to see him in person and seeing him work. ~ So that was a lot of fun.

Wynne Leon (17:28)

So that's so interesting because I mean, Love Boat talk about iconic 70s, right? I mean, that was so good and takes us right back to your novel, Take Me Back to Chicago. I think it's your fourth novel, is that right? Correct. But you've done different sort of genres on First Look, young adult, travel adventure, murder, mystery. What makes a good idea for you?

Doug E. Jones (17:54)

Well, I do have to say that they all start in Evanston slash Chicago. So that's my hometown. That's where my roots are. That's where everything will emanate from. I had been to India and Nepal and Thailand where my first book takes place. I certainly didn't have a story at the time.

But I always knew that I wanted to write a novel in that setting. I was just fascinated by those countries, just so different than ours and wonderful at the same time. So I knew I had to have a backpacker novel. If I'd kind of lived it, I just had to find that story probably 20 years after the fact. And then,

Sorry, so yeah, character starts in Evanston, ends up in India, and then in Disco Inferno, these characters starts in Evanston and ends up on the south side of Chicago. Kind of the equivalent to India, know, another world. But yeah, Disco Demolition Night in Chicago was a big night. And again, in so many people's use in Chicago, that was just an iconic ~ moment. then ~ again, having been to Costa Rica,

Wynne Leon (18:55)

You

Doug E. Jones (19:11)

I worked in Costa Rica and wanted to set a story then there in Costa Rica. So again, three Evanston guys go to Costa Rica for surf camp and mayhem ensues.

Wynne Leon (19:24)

love that you tied that all together. That's awesome. So all good ideas start with Chicago.

Doug E. Jones (19:31)

So

the other thing that I've been paying attention to recently is, know, Tarantino, Quentin Tarantino, ~ to say he writes the movies he wants to see. And then I saw him being interviewed and he said, you know, his movie comes on the TV on a Saturday night as he's flipping through the channels, he's going to sit down and watch his movie. He's highly entertained by his movie because that's what he made him. He made him for himself. So in a way. ~

this book with the rock and roll, with the sports, with the city, with the iconic, you know, Cuddly Dudley and Bozo Circus that we grew up with. ~ Those are things that I wanted selfishly in my

Vicki Atkinson (20:12)

But I think there's a richness also that, and it may be a lesser thread, but it was one that was really compelling to me about the character Rick and his brother Ronnie, who didn't make it home from Vietnam. And then the really beautiful storytelling that you did about why it was that Rick didn't follow him to Vietnam. He had kind of like a freak accident and didn't make it past the physical, but it was a little bit of like shade and shadow about

you know, what this main character, what he carried, you know, that little bit of guilt that, you it was just, it was a beautiful addition to the book about who he was and so perfect for time and place, you know?

Doug E. Jones (20:56)

Thank you. Exactly. Like you said, time and place. was part of the reality. the early to mid sixties, people were, you know, signing up like this was World War II when you were doing your duty to America and that changed overnight and ~ unfortunately continued way too long. And ~ yeah, Rick lost his brother and ~ that's part of his life, part of his grief and

He lost his wife at a very early age. And so he's trying to tow this line for his daughter. He can't leave her. And then of course his mom has had loss and so he can't leave her either. So he's got to be real careful what he's doing with the Irish mob here. And he's put it off. He's put it off for a couple of weeks. July 4th deadline came and passed and he's still got to round up this money.

Wynne Leon (21:48)

Yeah, yeah, I mean it does it it ages him real fast. I mean he's he's dealing with some big problems Yeah, but yeah, so you're gonna have to tell me more about Joe Pepitone because I'm not I'm not I'm not familiar with him get tell us about that character

Doug E. Jones (22:05)

So Joe Pepitone, for me, being seven, eight, nine when Pep is playing with the Cubs, he just was the epitome of cool. He was one of the first guys that kind of grew his hair out. In the early 60s, you look at the Mickey Mantles and the Whitey Fords, and it was a lot of crew cuts. Right. And he was the first one that came in with some hair.

Vicki Atkinson (22:31)

Yeah. Which is so ironic considering what you do with that and I'm just, won't give it away, it's hilarious.

Doug E. Jones (22:39)

The thing is, and I guess I can tip the iceberg a little bit, know, so Joe played first base and ~ he had all this hair and he batted left-handed and that just completely appealed to me being left-handed. I mean, we were kindred spirits from the start, but there was always a rumor that, and you didn't know back, there was no, let me watch that game again, or let me check on the internet, it's gonna be all over, but there was a rumor that Joe's.

wig fell off as he came to first base one day. But of course that couldn't be proved. It stayed in his helmet when he took his helmet off. And then of course he quickly put it back on. ~ again, that's just a rumor when you're seven, eight years old and there's no way to prove it and the news isn't gonna cover it. I thought it was really interesting and I heard he was a little bit of a playboy or an off the field. ~

kind of Lothario. ~ I just kind of dug in. I read his autobiography. He grew up in New York. He was Italian. He was kind of like the next, you know, hope, you know, from the Yankees had such a lineage from Ruth, the Garrick, to DiMaggio, to Mantle. And Joe Pepitone was next. was a Brooklyn native. ~

Vicki Atkinson (23:57)

A little Sinatra mixed in,

Doug E. Jones (24:00)

All the gangsters loved Joe Pepitone They just thought he was the best. you know, I just thought he was this great, literally, character. And I was like, I gotta work him in the book. He wasn't on the Cubs in 74, but I was like, I gotta get him in here. I gotta figure it out. I mean, I didn't know. Everything happened very organically, as far as the story. And so as I dug into him and discovered certain things, like, God, he wore this wig. ~

dug in a little bit more and found a nugget of a origin story that was true. ~ And then of course, took it off on my own and dug it out. Kind of very, I call it a wicked witch of the West moment where, you know, get me the broom of the wicked witch of the West and that's like, what? That's impossible. And so I used that with Joe Pepitone again, in too much a way.

Vicki Atkinson (24:56)

It totally comes through because it is so it's it's real but it's also kind of goofball crazy at the same time. ~

Doug E. Jones (25:05)

and dangerous like, okay, we're, we're Cabrini Green. Oh, no, you're kidding me. This is a setup. This is a joke, but, um, you know, I think the idea is to have fun. I consider this a beach read. Um, I just, you know, not hurt your brain too much. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (25:25)

It's got great writing and I gotta tell you one of my other favorite lines just to get your reaction to it. ~ He really went around the block to make that point, thinks Rick So he's gonna make him earn it. ~ I love that line.

Vicki Atkinson (25:42)

Yeah,

that's a good one. And one of my favorites had to do with ~ the conversation about the father, Rick's father, Teddy, or Ted or Teddy, Theodore, right? But ~ I won't say who the character is, but he's, he's described as being a man Rick's father, who couldn't pick a horse if it was crossing the finish line. So bad, right? He's just, he's a

Kind of a born loser, right? But yeah, I like that a lot. And I also, you know, we have to ask you about the character, Javi, and kind of like this buddy thing going on, and you make a really great reference, you know, for those who remember the Johnny Carson, Ed McMahon days, you know, about, you know, Ed was on the payroll, Javi was on the payroll, but tell us a little bit about that relationship between Rick and his buddy, Javi.

Doug E. Jones (26:36)

Well, I think it's always good to have a new relationship. Rick has his buddies and I could have just kept it to his little crew that he grew up with. And of course I do include them. But it's nice to have a new friend, a new partner, someone you're gonna butt heads with, someone that you maybe don't understand culturally. It was great to ~ have a Hispanic character.

you know, a lot of diversity. He's got his friend Buzz, who's, you know, half black and half white. And, you know, I wanted to include, you know, other people, other cultures, other

neighborhoods in Chicago. So, Javi's been there and Rick doesn't know him just like we don't. So, it's a discovery and they butt heads and Javi's kind of goofy and silly and fun. And they got to get to know each other because that's who he's going to rely on.

Right now, in this instance, he's going to try to bring Javi into his world and see if he can't round up this money.

Vicki Atkinson (27:40)

Yeah, and the scenes of their banter, you know, it just, yeah, we're just so good and so real and so, yeah, just totally enchanting. Yes.

Doug E. Jones (27:52)

I do enjoy the ~ kind of guy talk, ~ where guys are just talking about girls or sports or just that kind of busting each other and just teasing each other. It was a lot of fun to write as well.

Wynne Leon (28:11)

Yeah, yeah. Well, it was a lot of fun to read and so much fun to talk to you about it. We'd love, mean, it just you describe it as a beach read. I think it's just a great ~ entertaining, you know, rich story with fascinating characters and descriptions. So thank you so much for coming on to talk to us. Take Me Back to Chicago. Thank you.

Doug E. Jones (28:32)

Sure, of course. Thank you.

Vicki Atkinson (28:36)

Thank

you.

Wynne Leon (28:44)

Thank you for listening. Our music was written for us by the incredible duo of Jack Canfora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration see aviva.com A-V-I-T-I-V-A dot ~

Doug E. Jones (29:00)

you