

Wynne Leon (00:02)

Welcome to How to Share, a podcast that celebrates how we inspire others by sharing our stories.

I'm Wynne Leon and in this episode, my co-host Vicki Atkinson and I are with author Marc Ross. We ooh and aahh over the electrifying world of Marc Ross's latest geopolitical thriller, *Attacking the Dragon*. In this episode, Marc delivers a compelling elevator pitch for his book, revealing how his distinguished career as a lawyer provided the real world inspiration

behind the gripping plot. We dive into a fascinating conversation about the intricate landscape of Chinese politics and initiatives and see how Marc boldly reimagines the classic Western thriller formula.

Join Vicki and me as we celebrate the art of reinvention, exploring how accomplished professionals like Marc transformed their expertise into page-turning fiction and embark on a thrilling second act as authors. Hear firsthand how Marc turned his lifelong dream of writing novels into reality, overcoming challenges along the way. This episode is packed

with intrigue, inspiration, and actionable insights for anyone looking to excel not just in one career, but two. Don't miss your chance to meet Marc Ross and fall in love with *Attacking the Dragon*, a must read for fans of international suspense and powerful storytelling.

you

A. Marc Ross (02:08)

Hi, Vicki, hi, Wynne So nice to see you both. Well, thank you for having me.

Wynne Leon (02:13)

we're, Vicki and I are thrilled to be talking with you because of course you've written this great geopolitical thriller, *Attacking the Dragon*, that was just released in September. So can you give us the elevator pitch for that book?

A. Marc Ross (02:28)

Sure, sure, I'd be happy to. As everybody knows, ~ China is very busy expanding, expanding its political reach, its economic reach, et cetera. And people aren't always very happy about that. So in my book, there is a secret organization, secret group, don't know who it is, that is attempting to pull China back into its borders and attacking the Communist Party.

Attacking its Belt and Road initiative, which is its main means of global expansion and it's doing it via terrorist attacks of different sorts. So the idea is well Trump goes with tariffs and Things like that here. We just kill him

Wynne Leon (03:14)

~ yes, right. And it sets up a great story. Right. Well, and you mentioned the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which we understand that as a lawyer, your work intersected with that very real Chinese initiative. Can you say more about how that sparked the idea for Attacking the Dragon?

A. Marc Ross (03:17)

We can him in the book.

The way it came about actually is I do write thrillers. This is my second published one. First one dealt with domestic extremists. So it's a little different. But I wanted to write something that was using my China knowledge and was using China's expansion. But I didn't want to write something that was like all the other books you've read.

So I came up with the idea of China being more the victim rather than the aggressor, which we normally see it in Western fiction the other way around, and decided that the best way to attack China would be through attacking its Belt and Road Initiative. So that's how it really all came about.

Wynne Leon (04:21)

Mm-hmm.

Vicki Atkinson (04:22)

I think Wynne and I, one of the things that we loved about your book, there's so much suspense and it's definitely a thriller, but there was so much, think, for me to learn about a part of the world that I don't know nearly enough about and about culture. But something like the Belt and Road Initiative was just, it was fascinating to me because it was so pervasive, you know, within the culture and had so much impact. But Honest to Pete is something I had never heard of before. Not even,

in passing.

A. Marc Ross (04:52)

Right. No, very, very few people have, unless you're involved in this. mean, several months ago, there was a Belt and Road Initiative conference, I think it Singapore, where they had several thousand people coming to it. So within its world, it's a big thing. They've done projects in over 120 countries. They even did one in Italy, although most of them are in underdeveloped or undeveloped.

nations, so in its own little sphere. But it's interesting that you don't hear, for instance, US politicians ever talking about it or taking action or because one could argue that it's really a form of colonialism because the idea is to spread China's influence. They also make money on it, but it's to spread their influence.

Wynne Leon (05:43)

Right. And it causes the countries that they help to incur debt that they owe the Chinese government. Is that right?

A. Marc Ross (05:50)

What happens is China says, we'll build a port for you as an example, ~ or a dam or an airport. This country doesn't have the money to pay for that. You're talking billion, few billion dollars. So China says, we'll have a Chinese construction company and Chinese experts lead the way. We'll use local labor to do it. Now you got to pay.

the Chinese company. Sometimes these are Chinese private companies, sometimes they're state owned companies. So for these countries to have the money to pay for it, they borrow money from Chinese banks, either private either private Chinese banks or government banks. So the money comes from the Chinese banks to the country. The country then turns around and pays the money to the Chinese construction company for their work. So the money has returned to China. But now

This country hopefully has a very good port, airport. hope they do. Although there have been some disasters. Now the country owes China or the Chinese banks a great deal of money. One of my expert friends tells me that there's over a trillion dollars in debt owed to China from the Belt and Road Initiative. That's only what we know about.

Wynne Leon (07:13)

Wow.

A. Marc Ross (07:16)

So let's work on the assumption that there's lots we never know about.

Vicki Atkinson (07:19)

And what's so fascinating about all of that to me is that there are all those, there are layers to it, you know, is sort of like a policy, you know, for a government, but then there are also, you know, those aspects of direct human benefit as well. So it's really hard to argue, you know, because of the potential for doing good that's still, that's, that's there as well. You know, how, how it's done is sort of like how the sausage gets made. You don't really want to know, but.

there can be some good outcomes for the people.

A. Marc Ross (07:50)

It's a very good analogy and clearly there must be enough countries that are happy with the results or the next country would know not to do it. But it continues to go on and China is shifting the way it does it a bit. They're moving more towards advisory and service things

rather than just these construction projects. But there's, for instance, a railroad that's been under construction in part of Asia.

now for years and is still not done and is a disaster. ~ So these things happen.

Vicki Atkinson (08:24)

Yeah. Fascinating.

A. Marc Ross (08:25)

It was a good launching point for the plot in the book.

Wynne Leon (08:29)

That is true. Well, and you're, you're ~ the American businessman that's at the center of your book, Attacking the Dragon, Wes Robertson. At one point he says, no, I don't know China, not even pretty well. And I disagree when foreigners say that they do, except for the few who go back to the Kissinger era. China is too big and complex and operates too much under wraps to claim that, or even frankly for

most people to call themselves a China expert. But yes, I up a fair amount of knowledge about business and political attitudes, as well as how certain affairs are conducted. We know you have a lot of experience. Is that how you count your wisdom when it comes to China?

A. Marc Ross (09:14)

I would not call myself a China expert. have spent enough time there and I'm knowledgeable enough that I had no problem writing the book and using what I know, places I've been into ranging from hotels I've spent, I've stayed in, including some rather scuzzy ones to tourist sites, to business meetings. I've met a lot of Chinese executives as well as government officials and party members. So

In that sense, I have a decent amount of knowledge, but to really call yourself an expert, by comparison, for instance, one of my friends is a professor at Columbia who has lived in China at different times and taught there. He's an expert. ~ know, I'm not in his league.

Wynne Leon (10:01)

Yeah, interesting. ~

A. Marc Ross (10:02)

But then again,

I don't think he could write a fiction book.

Wynne Leon (10:06)

Right. So some degree, if you know too much, it's hard to then bend the corners, right?
Yeah.

A. Marc Ross (10:13)

Yeah,

I think so.

Wynne Leon (10:18)

Yeah.

Well, and you mentioned before we started recording that a lot of the hotels and places that scenes play out are places that you really spent some time at.

A. Marc Ross (10:27)

Yes, they are and ranging from a hotel called China World in Beijing, which is an old hotel and has a very traditional Chinese feel about it, ranging from a musician performing up in the balcony in Chinese music or Chinese instruments. Although it's true, I actually have heard on these Chinese instruments ~ remakes of American type songs like Simon and Garfunkel's music.

Very strange to much more modern hotels, which are absolutely gorgeous. And, you know, the treatment is just fabulous at them. So yes, I've spent a lot of time there as well as once or twice in third rate hotels. When I got stuck somewhere.

Wynne Leon (11:13)

yeah.

Vicki Atkinson (11:14)

~

But you do that so well. think one of the things that we appreciated about your book is it's so action packed and you have to give it your full attention because there's so much going on. And for people that don't have a lot of background or experience, even with Chinese names, you know, I was paying careful attention, you know, to follow. But while you're doing all of that and the writing and there's so much going on with the characters and the people and the intrigue.

what you and Wynne are talking about is also so true. I felt like I was there. Your descriptions of place were so powerful that while the action was happening, I didn't feel like I was a fish out of water. I felt like I was in it. Beautifully done.

A. Marc Ross (11:56)

Thank you.

Thank you. The names are a challenge. But luckily, the names are short. I mean, if you were setting this in Russia and you had that many Russian characters with all those long names, that could be a little more difficult. But yeah, it is. Which is why, for one thing, there is a cast list of the cast of characters at the beginning of the book. And one or two people have said to me that they sort of put a tab.

on that and went back to it on occasion. ~

Vicki Atkinson (12:26)

was super helpful. I guess one of my questions about that is, you know, thinking about when you give characters names and books, were you extra, extra thoughtful about selecting names because of just any unintended references to families, cultures? Was that a harder thing to do?

A. Marc Ross (12:46)

That wasn't that hard for the Chinese names. The reality is China has such a large population that if you're using true Chinese names, surnames ~ and first names, et cetera, it is almost impossible to come up with a name that somebody doesn't have. mean, I have enough trouble with my name here. So there I didn't worry about, but when I write

characters in the US, like for Wes and Maria. Yes, I do the work to make sure that there's no, you know, no obvious that I can find person that has that name. I'll add an extra letter to a name, you know, to change it enough.

Wynne Leon (13:35)

Right, Well, so you've written two thrillers that you've published and we understand that two more are in the works.

A. Marc Ross (13:44)

Well, two more are in the works. ~ One of them, which just went out to my first set of beta readers, is actually a follow on to my first book. Same characters, but a different story. Sort of like you see in many movies. Let's bring back the gang, put the band back together. I'm also giving thought

to a sequel to Attacking the Dragon we'll wait and see how that does. And I've written a business thriller, ~ which I'm in the process of trying to see what I can do with at the moment. And that relies heavily on my experience as a lawyer. But although it's set in the business world, it's very much a thriller. We've got lots of fake identities, people getting beaten, people getting blackmailed.

All that good stuff you like in a thriller.

Wynne Leon (14:40)

So

good, and hopefully that never happened to you as a lawyer. Glad to know that. But you've written, I saw somewhere you wrote, ~ that you always meant to write novels, but it took a long while to get to it. Tell us about your writing journey.

A. Marc Ross (14:44)

No. ~

When I was in ~ college, I college, I debated internally whether to try and become a writer or to be a lawyer. lawyering was always the plan. And I spent two summers writing, made a deal with my father where I'd spent half the day writing and half the day working on the house and the yard. Such a nuisance, but it was, it was a great deal.

Wynne Leon (15:11)

Yeah.

A. Marc Ross (15:27)

And at the end of that, said, you know, I could probably write and make a living sort of like at that time, Harold Robbins was a big name in the world. You know, I could I could sort of do that level, but I was never going to be like the authors I love. Saul Bellows, Norman Mailer, you know, any of those people. So I said, all right, let's forget that idea. And so I went.

and went to law school and became a lawyer. And then several years ago, I sort of started doodling around with the writing. And I no longer care whether I'm ranked up there with Saul Bellows or the people today, know, DeLillo people like that, Pynchon No, I'm not them. And now it doesn't bother me.

because I'm in a different stage and this isn't my primary vocation. So that's how it got started. And I went back to it and started writing that first book and then just said, this is what I want to be doing. And so I just keep going.

Wynne Leon (16:38)

Yeah, well, there's so much true life in what you just said there, which is you learn to be you that you're just going to write as you.

A. Marc Ross (16:47)

Yeah. And part of the way I like to write is I don't want you to read my book and say, ~ this is just like such and such. my, my goal is to write something that someone who likes such

and such will like my book, but will not say that, it's just sort of the same, you know? And I, by the way, I love those thrillers. I read all the, you know,

investigator books, ex CIA, ex spy, doing this and doing that. I'm a big fan. I read all that stuff. But for my own writing, I want my protagonist to be different sort of people. So here, Wes is a businessman who is drawn into circumstances which he has nothing, no prior experience to fall back on.

Vicki Atkinson (17:39)

Yeah. Well, I think there were three things that stood out for me, where what you and Wynne are talking about, like really honoring your voice and not trying to be duplicative in any way. But there were two things that you wrote where I was like, oh, you know, you get kind of female readers also kind of thinking from a gendered point of view. And one was, I'm not sure I'm saying her name right, but Tao.

And she, for part of the story, she's using a cane and there's a description of her and she has a lot of power and she wields it very well in a particular encounter. And you describe her walking out of the meeting, marching out her cane aloft, right? It's like, you know, it was like a girl power moment. And then the scene where two characters, Wes and Marie are having

dinner in the state department and from a gender point of view, the server assumes that Wes must be the ambassador. But here's Maria who's a woman, a woman of color, but those little nuances thrown in. Then just the splash of humor. I laughed out loud about the games that translators can play when no one's paying attention. ~

A. Marc Ross (19:03)

I figured it actually goes on. I just think that's what they really do.

Vicki Atkinson (19:08)

But all of that to say, you know, that's how you come through, right? You know, and you're not being anyone else. But I think those were like little glimmers where I was like, ~ this is good.

A. Marc Ross (19:21)

Right. Thank you. I enjoy doing that. ~ You know, I know that some people may say, I can't believe he did that. It is a scene, as you know, where I have one of our villains ~ eating an ice cream cone while waiting for his secret meeting. You know, I haven't seen that in too many movies, but it was fun. What the hell? Yeah.

Wynne Leon (19:46)

Exactly. Do you think that taking the time, I'm like, had you become a writer when you were 20 something versus now after your business career? I mean, do think that that's how it was intended to work out for you?

A. Marc Ross (20:00)

That's an interesting question. Yeah, I imagine so I I've had a very nice career still have a very nice career as a lawyer ~ I've gotten recognition for my success as a lawyer my clients Appreciate what I do for them So unlike many lawyers who don't like being a lawyer. I like being a lawyer

I get annoyed sometimes as everyone does with what they do, but I enjoy what I call the art of lawyer. So I'm quite happy with the decision I made.

Vicki Atkinson (20:39)

that's so good. Yeah. But I like where Wynne was going with that because I think it's sort of like the evolution of you, right? All the things along the way that have contributed to who you can be as a writer and as a storyteller, I think. You can't look at anything that's been in your path and say anything was not purposeful because you're bringing it all forward when you write.

Wynne Leon (21:01)

Yeah.

A. Marc Ross (21:02)

I

think that's a very nice way to look at things and I hope that there is a lot of truth in that.

Wynne Leon (21:08)

Yeah. Well, I love that you've had two very successful career paths, you know, and, and this shows in Attacking the Dragon mean, ~ great book, action packed, you know, full of all the wonderful things that we love, place description characters as Vicki was just pointing out. mean, and so what a, what a blessing to be able to have both successful careers.

A. Marc Ross (21:33)

Thank you. Thank you. That's very kind of you to say. I appreciate it. And I tell you, why do I write? I write because I enjoy it. And when people say to me, hey, I really liked that book. ~ You know, that makes me feel really good. That's why I'm doing this for the mutual enjoyment of it and the fun of it.

Wynne Leon (21:56)

Yeah.

Vicki Atkinson (21:57)

So well said. You have to love it too. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (22:00)

That's true. And you're on work. Yeah, it is a lot of work. And you're on a book tour right now, which is part of the other part of the work, right? The marketing work, but you get that feedback.

A. Marc Ross (22:01)

I really do.

You know, it's interesting. ~ It is a big part of it and dealing with agents and things like that. ~ And it's hard not to feel that it's a distraction from what you really want to do, which is to sit down and write. But I guess that's part of it. And, ~ you know, we should all be so lucky that there's enough interest in us that we can do that.

Wynne Leon (22:39)

Yeah, well said. Well said. Because otherwise it just becomes a journal, which is, worthy all that other stuff. But if nobody's reading it.

A. Marc Ross (22:48)

Yes, I agree with you. ~

Vicki Atkinson (22:51)

My goodness. Well, thank you for writing Attacking the Dragon. Thank you. Yeah.

Wynne Leon (22:56)

And thank you for coming on to talk about this. It's such a great conversation to get the behind the scenes, the in-depth. So thank you for your time.

A. Marc Ross (23:04)

Yeah. Thank you. And I appreciate very much for having me and ~ I hope that the next one interests you as well. It's not set in China, but hopefully we'll find other things to spark you.

Wynne Leon (23:20)

I think your characters and your action, I think they translate across the world.

Vicki Atkinson (23:26)

Yes, we will save a seat for you always. So don't worry. Just you do your part. Yeah.

A. Marc Ross (23:31)

I will. I will indeed. Thank you both.

Vicki Atkinson (23:34)

Thank you.

Wynne Leon (23:42)

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