

Transcript of Development Drums Episode 47 – Stranger than Fiction

Host: Owen Barder. Guest: Todd Moss

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OB Thanks for downloading Development Drums Number 47. My name is Owen Barder at the Centre for Global Development, and my guest today is my friend and colleague Todd Moss, who is a Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer at CGD by day, and a successful fiction writer by night. Todd writes in his novels about Africa and international relations, and coups and kidnapping, and political analysis and diplomacy. And we'll be talking about why and how he uses fiction to get his message across. Todd welcome to Development Drums.

TM It's great to be on the show Owen, thanks for having me.

OB Todd your books have a hero called Judd Ryker, who is a policy analyst, who finds himself working at the State Department, and he helps solve crises, a kind of Indiana Jones of the political world. Now you became Deputy Assistant Secretary for Africa, in the State Department in 2007-2008, and you were also sent off to reverse a coup. So to what extent are your books autobiographical?

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TM Everyone asks me that. You know, I first... I wrote the first book, *The Golden Hour*, in large part as just a fun exercise. I'd left government, I'd seen some kind of crazy, frustrating, exhilarating things inside the US Government, and I actually started writing a non-fiction book about how confused and dysfunctional the US Government is when they respond to crises. And I just decided it would be much more fun for me to do it as fiction, and I thought maybe I'd even reach a wider audience that way. And I did use a particular example, which was the 2008 coup in Mauritania, as the basis for the plot in *The Golden Hour*. I set...

OB Which is about a coup in Mali.

TM Right. But I set... I set *The Golden Hour* in Mali, because I thought many more people around the world have heard of Timbuktu, where some of the action takes place, and very few people have heard of Nouakchott Mauritania. So I did that just for familiarity. So it drew on a true historical episode, it drew a bit on what I saw and heard and wanted to share, but it's still very much fiction, and you know, before you ask, Judd Ryker is not me, but he does experience some of the things I went through.

OB So you write... as you say, you wrote the book about a coup in... a hypothetical coup in Mali. I say hypothetical, but about six weeks after you published

the book, there was in fact a coup in Mali with some uncanny similarities, with what you wrote. That's just coincidence right?

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TM It was coincidence, I mean it was one of... you know I had been watching Mali quite closely from inside government, and continued to watch it from outside, and it actually looked like things were going pretty well. They were less than two months away from the president retiring, and they were going to have an election, it looked pretty... it looked pretty good. So the coup was a terrible disaster for Malians, but it turned out to be a sort of lucky stroke for me, in that the news, particularly the BBC reporting on what was going on in Mali, we were trying to get an agent at the time, and this agent in New York had... was watching BBC about Mali, and hadn't realised that there were terrorists and French troops and all of that, and then he realised he had this sort of silly manuscript on his desk, that maybe he should take on this client. So that's kind of how it happened.

OB And to what extent are the experiences of Judd Ryker being sent of to Mali to try to reverse this coup, the idea... am I giving it away, so the idea of The Golden Hour is you only have so long to reverse a coup before it becomes established? So to what extent is that literally true? Is that how the State Department thinks about what happens in the situation of a coup, and what it needs to do? Is there a... is that kind of rapid reaction part of the State Department approaches these things? And is that part of what you were doing in Mauritania?

TM In a way I wish. So what happens... I think it's absolutely true that when you've got a crisis such as a coup, that you have a brief window where if you want to try to influence events, you need to make things happen quickly, or else interests start to get entrenched, people start to sort themselves out, and if you show up a month later, it's already... the path has already been determined. And certainly in the US I saw that people were trying to get moving quickly, but that our system is so convoluted, there's so many people involved, and there's so many competing interests, that we often get hung up fighting with ourselves, and we don't react quickly enough to be influential.

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And the central tension from The Gold Hour, which is also what I experienced in Mauritania, after the coup in Mauritania, is that you have a country that is a close counter-terrorism partner. The military in the case of Mauritania, was quite effective in attacking a faction of Al Qaeda called Al Qaeda and the Islamic Maghreb, and we were working quite loosely with them, well they also happened to have a democratically elected president, President Abdul Aziz, well what happens when the head of the military, your security partner, overthrows the democratically elected president, you can imagine there are part of the US Government that would like to carry on working with the coup maker because of security needs, and then there's also parts of US Government that wasn't to prioritise democracy, and they want to push out the military and get the democratically-elected leader back in, that's precisely where I was.

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OB So the book is in a way, a fascinating insight into this fight within the government bureaucracy, as you say, different interests, different parts of the US Government fighting for you know, America's long-term interest in democracy, versus short-term interest in doing a deal with the military. That part of it is intended to be telling the reader something about what lie is really like in the American Government, or is that a fictionalised exaggeration too?

TM I think if anything I had to simplify it for purposes of the story. It's very convoluted, more complicated, more bitter and more confusing in real life. And it's both that the US Government has multiple interests in many places, we have legitimate security interests in lots of countries, and we have legitimate human rights in democracy and government concerns, and they sometimes go together, but very often they clash. And it's not just that on a substance level that we have perhaps to make some trade-offs, it's also at a tactical level, which is that the agencies themselves are set up to fight with each other because they pursue different interests, and so therefore officials go through all kinds of bureaucratic theatre, and all kinds of back room negotiations to try to work that all out.

And that was what I tried to capture in *The Golden Hour*, not just that Judd Ryker has a dispute with... in this case the Defence Attaché at the embassy, about what we should do, but actually that the way that Judd Ryker has to go about kind of winning, or trying to out-manoeuvre these other people is in some ways, it's not a front-channelled debate around a table. The conference table meetings are all political theatre, it's making deals behind the scenes, and sort of out-manoeuvring, out-thinking your opponent. I'd actually... I'd originally called the manuscript *Back Channel*, and the way that everything gets done is not by having an open discussion across the table, but by sneakily pre-cooking all those decisions ahead of time, by using back channels to make things happen.

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OB So nobody should be surprised that governments have multiple interests, and indeed in a sense, that the point of a government is to resolve competing interests in a way that you know, over time tries to do justice to them all, that's what government is for. What I was surprised by, as somebody who's worked in the British Government, is that the mechanisms for resolving those different interests seems so dysfunctional. I mean perhaps I have a bit of a rare sense of view of how the British Government, but you know my sense is that you would get people to sit round the table, and somebody, you know you would write some advice, and then a Minister would make a decision, and then civil servants would go off and loyally do the thing that the Minister had decided.

And I wondered if this is partly a function of the politicisation of the top of the American Public Service, that people are political actors in their own right, and not merely functionaries of the elected government. I was just curious to know from your own experience, you know, whether you think that that set of issues about how

decisions are made I something that the American Government just has to live with, it's something you could fix, is it... you know, what's the... what underlies that?

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TM Well it's certainly true that we have many more political appointments that go many layers deeper in the American system, than they do in the British Government system. I'm not sure that that necessarily is the problem, I think even the political appointees, they're probably even more loyal to the top than say some of the civil servants might be, because the political appointees are trying to get everything done before their party is thrown out, which is usually every four years. And the civil servants, if they don't like something, they know that they can just wait everyone out.

What I do think is different in the US system is that our government is just so almost... you know almost incomprehensively huge, it's not just that there are so many people involved, it's that there are so many agencies involved, and this is getting worse. I'll just give you a ridiculous example, I remember from my time in government, we spent weeks debating whether the small nation of Comoros should be eligible for a GOA benefit. Now this is a country that had about \$80,000 a year in trade with the United States, and we spent many multiples of staff... of the value of staff time, arguing about this. And there were 12, 13, 14 different agencies involved, and when you get so many people involved in so many decisions, you get... you really get gridlocked and you get, you don't get the best outcome.

And particularly, even within the State Department, we now have a lot of bureaus and special offices that have a single issue. So there's for example, there's a special office on trafficking on person, that, the representative for trafficking on person, has zero incentive to compromise on trafficking on person's issues, that's all that they're to do. So if there's a country. Let's say you know Ethiopia, and we're trying to negotiate a security partnership and economic trade, well the trafficking on person's office can effectively hold things up for a single issue. And that kind of sort of dysfunction happens all the time.

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OB So I don't want to give the impression to listeners that the book is mainly about you know, civil servants sending each other memos, but that dysfunctionality is one of the characters in the book. Is that also true in your new book, Minute Zero, that's is just coming out, which is about Zimbabwe?

TM It is, you know it's about the different views between... you know two different people within the same government can look at the same situation and come to very different conclusions. In the case of... in Minute Zero, you've got a part of the government with Judd Ryker is part of, which sees an election being stolen, and a series of dictators and his thugs suppressing democracy and stealing away the people's rights and opportunities.

You've got another part of the State Department that sees that, you know what, Zimbabwe's not very important, it's actually quiet, people aren't killing each other,

the election's not perfect, but you know, that's Africa, it's good enough, let's not make trouble. And that's the sort of central tension there, where he's sort of fighting against Washington's indifference and trying to... trying to get things done.

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OB So you've been associated with Zimbabwe for many years, how much of this second book, *Minute Zero*, which is set in Zimbabwe, is based on reality, and how much of that is fiction?

TM Well once I knew I had to write a second book, it was immediately obvious that I would make it set in Zimbabwe. And what had happened is, back in 2008, when Zimbabwe had an election and Morgan Tsvangirai won the first round, there was this moment when nobody knew what was going to happen next, Mugabe... we knew that Mugabe had lost, but it took almost a month for the election results to be released, and in the interim the army and the police had gone out and attacked the opposition. And we watched... I watched this from Washington DC, going from a high where we thought Mugabe was finally gone, to a terrible low when we realised he wasn't going to give up, and in fact he was fighting.

And I really, you know that's something that's really hung over me, and I've wondered many times, you know what else might the United States, the State Department in particular, what could we have done you know in the days after the election, when nobody knew what would happen next? Is there something else we could have done that might have changed history? And that was... that's really the question that I tried to answer in a fictional format for *Minute Zero*. That's the concept of *Minute Zero*, this narrow window when nobody knows what comes next, and you can try to influence events.

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So it's a fictional story, you know it's not Robert Mugabe, it's a president named Winston Tinotenda, he's got a military general named Simba Chimberanga, who is controlling things for him. It looks like he's going to lose an election, and there's an internal battle about what happens next. That's where the Chimberanga has to work with the opposition, and the lobbyists and different people around Zimbabwe to try to alter the course of the election. So some of it is trying to think what might have happened in 2008, and... well maybe we'll just... maybe you can do before that.

OB Oh okay, so I'm going to ask you another question, so I don't want you to give away the ending, but to what extent do you think it is a good idea for countries like the United States or the United Kingdom to be so consciously trying to engineer a different outcome from the election in Zimbabwe, even you know, well intentioned you know, even if you believe that that is the democratic mandate? To what extent do those kinds of interventions work? To what extent do they have unintended consequences? You know, is that something that you... as you think about what might have been is that something you wish the United States could have... should have done more to change the outcome?

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TM I think the phrase regime change is you know, it's pretty loaded, it's actually used in the book, but you know there's something about... you know clearly there are unintended consequences, we usually don't really understand the circumstances very well, we usually have highly imperfect tools, and things often go in directions we don't expect. Here's no question about that, and that it's a very dangerous game to try and intervene in a foreign country and to influence the outcome of something like a presidential election.

At the same time there's an unusual amount of power and influence that say the British ambassador in Zimbabwe, or the American ambassador in Zimbabwe wield, just by the very size of the country that they represent. And if there's a moment in time, you know, if it looks like the army was going to rebel, or the police were going to riot through the streets of the capital, the very actions or words of say the British ambassador, or the American ambassador can either inflame things, or can actually help to suppress them. And I think that you know, without overstating this there's somewhat of a responsibility I think on influential powers, when people look to them for signals, that they use those responsibly.

And I know that the US embassy in Harare takes this responsibility incredibly seriously, that's why they watch very carefully what they say and how they act, because they know that people inside ZANU-PF, people in the opposition, people in the business community are looking to see okay, what are the Americans going to do? What are the British going to do? What are the Australians going to do? And I think that whether we like it or not, we have that influence, and it's a decision as to how strategically do we wield that.

OB And that book is coming out about now, September 2015, as we speak.

TM Exactly.

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OB And this is going to be a long run series of books, all starring Judd Ryker is it? Is that your plan?

TM Well right now I've got a four book contract with Putnam Books, which is an imprint of Penguin-Random House, and there's going to be... there's going to be four Judd Ryker books at least. And the third book is called... it's already... almost completed, it's called Ghosts of Havana, and you can guess where that takes place.

OB Okay, so that's moving away from your beloved Africa, to Cuba I guess.

TM It is, I didn't want all crises to be in the continent, so sort of you know, I still love Africa, there's a little bit of Angola in the Cuba story of course, but I don't want to be pigeonholed as only... that Judd Ryker only goes to solve problems in Africa. He actually goes anywhere that there's a... anywhere he's sent.

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OB So to what extent is what you're trying to do to change your reader's attitudes to Africa? You know, Africa is Africa and Africans are portrayed quite sympathetically in your books, as you would expect. Is part of this you using fiction to challenge people's presumptions about you know how effective America is and being effective Africans are for example?

TM Well you know, I certainly wanted to write a mainstream thriller for ordinary people who might not think of Africa except what they, you know, except seeing disaster news on CNN. I've been an Africa junkie, since I was a student there 25 years ago in Zimbabwe. You know, I think my family members, some of them thought I was kind of weird, that I had this Africa obsession, and now that Africa's becoming more important to the west than ever before, for security, for economic and for cultural exchange reasons, it just seems to me logical that mainstream thrillers which a lot of people like to read, why wouldn't you have more of them set in Africa?

Frankly it was a little bit tough, I had a couple of agents early on said, these stories, you know your story is great, but I don't think that... this is when I was looking for an American agent at the time, you know, I don't think American audiences really are ready for books set in Africa. I think that's changing, we're seeing more, but it's still, I still think it's sort of still out there.

OB So there's a famous Granta article, How to write about Africa, Binyavanga Wainaina, talking you know every... you have to have wild animals and all Africans have to be tall and skinny, or they have to be you know, very short, you know there's a kind of... there's a set of caricatures about Africa in fiction which How to write about Africa brilliantly sets out. Were you... were you conscious of that? Did you have that pinned up on your notice board as you were writing your...? How to avoid those things, or not to reinforce them, or...?

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TM Yes you know, it's one of those things, I think when you work on Africa for along time you're always... you've always sort of got your radar out for a cliché. I'm not sure I avoided it entirely, one issue that I definitely struggle with is what some people call the white saviour complex, well are you writing another story about some American that comes in and saves the day? And the way that I dealt with it is that in *The Golden Hour*, Judd Ryker actually confronts this head on, he's in a helicopter flying through the Sahara Desert, and he's wondering you know, am I becoming a caricature of everything I hate? Am I falling into this white saviour complex that he himself has been trying to dispel.

And you know, he doesn't resolve that, and I think that's probably true, that I'm not, I haven't resolved that, I thought about making the protagonist an African character, I just didn't think I could pull it off. And you know, I am who I am, I'm a middle-class suburban guy from Rochester, New York, I'm not from the streets of Lagos, I just don't think I could have pulled that off in a credible way. But I did actively try to make sure that there were three dimensional African characters, there's good guys and

bad guys from all different nationalities, and tried to portray you know, Africa the way that I have experienced it as an academic, as a diplomat, as a tourist, and tried to do that as accurately as I could.

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OB So it's an interesting choice to use fiction to convey your ideas, to reach an audience about them, and you've obviously, you know there are some themes, one of them we've just talked about, about the way the American system works. You're also obviously conveying messages in the character of Judd Ryker, about the use of analysis and data in making decisions, and you know to what extent it... so why choose fiction as your vehicle for this? Is that just to reach a different audience, or a different audience? Or did you... were you able to write in fiction, things that you wouldn't have been able to convey in some other way?

TM Yes, I think in a very practical sense, if I s writing this as non-fiction, I just, I would have to be extremely careful about classified information, and what I was revealing, and personal relationships with former colleagues that I wouldn't want to burn. And in fiction you can say whatever you like, it's much, much easier, and you can also create much more of a... you know it's easier to create tension. The reality is that fighting in meetings and writing competing memos is just not very compelling narrative, and so you can make it much more exciting through fiction. You know but you...

OB But you can also exaggerate right, and you can say, you're not accountable for being... for telling the truth at that point, and you...

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TM You know, you can exaggerate, at the same time you know, the reality in many place is just crazier and more outrageous than what you can dream up in fiction. So I didn't find, you know what I found constraining from fiction, is that I wanted to write a story that my friends back at the State Department, or people that are working in the White House now, that were there, they would still find I credible. I did not want you know, people doing you know, the face palm when they read this, and saying you know, Todd should have know better. So that was definitely in my mind as I wrote it.

OB And is it credible that... I mean this reflects my lack of understanding of how the State Department works, do they actually bring in people like Judd Ryker? You know this quant academic who comes in and tells them under... tries to model under what circumstances the coup will succeed or fail and so on. Does that... does that ever happen, and what happens... if it does happen, what happens to people like Judd Ryker in a place like the State Department?

TM Well it's actually not uncommon for academics to get pulled into special... into government positions, usually just on a temporary basis. You know Jeremy Weinstein, who's our friend and colleague, and is one of the leading scholars on guerrilla warfare in Africa, has been pulled in multiple times into the White House, he

was just Samantha Power's deputy at the UN. So it's not... it's not uncommon at all for academics to find themselves in positions of influence. And it's also not uncommon for special office to be created.

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So in the story, *The Gold Hour*, Judd Ryker comes in and he shows his data model, and he's named head of this new special office called the Crisis Reaction Unit, and I use the government's acronym, S/CRU. When it was based in my head, I had something called S/CRS, which was something created under Condoleezza Rice at State, which was the State Office for the Coordinator and Reconstruction and Stabilisation. And that was the kind of special office brought in to try to be cross-cutting for civilian responses after the war... after different wars or some kind of disaster.

And they dealt with, S/CRS dealt with a lot of the bureaucratic politics that Judd Ryker has to deal with, in fact I gave a book talk to the S/CRS crowd, and it was a little bit, it was half book talk, half therapy session, where people really wanted to unload some of their... some of their worst stories about this. So none of that is uncommon at all. What I think doesn't really happen, is that you don't get data models really impacting policy in the way that it's presented in the book. And actually Judd Ryker finds out that for all of his clever data models that got him the job, nobody want to listen to any of that, which is absolutely the case.

OM Right. So to what extent do these researchers... does these external ideas influence policy? You know, you set up this office, it's the kind of thing that seems like a good idea, to have this external expert, but do they... you now again, perhaps I'm projecting the UK civil service, I can you know, I can imagine that that's a solution to a political problem, which is, oh we'll set up some office, and then that's the last you hear of them, and meanwhile the system continues. So to what extent do people like Judd Ryker really begin to influence policy and change it? And to what extent are these just decorations on a system that is ignoring them? There's some sense in the book that you know, Judd Ryker kind of begins to understand halfway through what's really going on and that he's excluded from lots of things.

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TM Right. So it's... so there are mechanisms for getting research into the policy process, within the State Department, the Secretary has as special office that's called the Policy Planning Office, and the head of that meets directly with the Secretary and gets to say whatever he or she likes, and their team it's a mix of outsiders and career foreign service, but the idea is really to try to not be stuck in your day to day bureaucracy, but to bring new ideas into the process. That works well sometimes, sometimes not, but like any special office, you know the other offices react almost... I would compare it to you know an organ transplant, where the host body is sort of rejecting it. And they do whatever they can to keep these guys with their wacky ideas out of their... out of their business. And that's really what Judd Ryker finds, is that he comes in, he's very beholden to the Secretary of State's Chief of Staff, who's his

patron, and he needs to use the Chief of Staff to get anything done, even to get invited to the meetings he's supposed to be in.

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So that's where he's got to be quite clever in figuring out, okay nobody wants me here, how can I still have an input?

OB So you said earlier that you'd had some difficulty persuading American publishers that writing books set in Africa was going to sell, but it has sold well hasn't it, and it appears to have been a success? Is that... it's obviously because it's brilliantly written and a marvellous book, but is it also because Africa is becoming more mainstream? Because... do you think there is going to be more of a market for this kind of thing?

TM I think there is. We are seeing more books written, set in Africa, my publisher, Putnam has four or five different thrillers now, set in sub-Saharan Africa, so that's I think positive. I think you're seeing African partially because of the large and growing African ex-patriot community in the United States, particularly Nigerians. You're seeing a lot more African culture becoming more mainstream. You know we've seen a real success of African authors in the United States, and I think that's all just making it more normal, less exotic, and you know somebody at the airport, on their way to the beach, might pick up a book set in you know, Zimbabwe or Mali, and not think that that was weird, which might have been the case ten years ago.

OB This has been something that has been part of your think tank work too, your work at CGD, which is about normalising people's attitudes to Africa, particularly with respect to people thinking about investment and trade and so on.

TM That's right.

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OB To what extent do you think that... you know the danger is that we all get sucked into a narrative about you know, Africa rising, and so on, that is wishful thinking, that is you know, people like you and me who work in development, hoping that if we talk Africa up, that it will, that will be self-fulfilling. To what extent do you think, particularly investments perceptions about Africa, are lagging behind the reality? And to what extent do you think, actually there just genuinely are ups and downs and you know, investors are right to be sceptical?

TM Well there definitely are ups and downs, as there are you know, in all regions. What I would hope is that we would treat the countries in Africa, in Washington DC, we would treat them just like we think of any other region. It's not special, it doesn't need special promotion, but it's also, it doesn't need our pity, we don't you know, I would like to think that we would be developing relationships and partnerships with foreign governments based on our mutual interests. That the way we think about, what does America want to do in Thailand, would be no different than the way we think about Kenya.

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You know I think that it's just gotten treated first with such disregard, particularly once the Cold War was over, we had no idea if we had any interests whatsoever, but I think just as worse, just as total negligence, is treating it like some special stepchild that needs to be, you know needs to be held with kid gloves or something. So I would like to see you know, the agenda of the United States on the security side and on the economic side, just think about Africa through the same lens that we would look at other regions of the world, and that would be based on our mutual interests.

OB And to what extent does culture inhibit that? I mean you are contributing, through writing a work of fiction, which you hope will normalise the way people think about Africa, to what extent do you think that Hollywood and fiction, and other kind of... the way... the way Africa is treated in literature and culture has contributed to our inability or unwillingness so far to treat African countries in the way we would treat other countries?

TM Well unlike Britain, which has a long history with Africa, and lots of young Britons you know, visit Africa as completely normal. That was just not... it's becoming less unusual, but it's just not the case for the United States. It's further away, we just don't have those historical links, and certainly 25 years ago, when I went as a college student to Africa, I was the only one I knew that was doing that. I do, I still cringe when I watch regular American TV and there's some African issue that's thrown up there, and it's still treated like you know, like Mars. And you know, I still think there's a long way to go, but the more people... I believe the more that regular people see Africa as just another place, it's not a disaster, it's got its ups and downs, it's got its good and bad, that you'll see people just treat it like anywhere else.

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And I think a big part of that is the incredibly impressive diaspora that we have in the United States from Africa. They're the most educated immigrant group that we have, and among the most successful immigrant group that we have. And that's really changed as people get to know Africans, particularly you know, a country like Nigeria, which has such stigma. You know when people get to know Nigerians, when their neighbours are Nigerians, that helps to reframe perceptions quite a bit.

OB Can we talk a bit about how you go about writing a book? And I mean part of this is about how you manage your time, I'm going to ask you that in a sec. But you know, I was really impressed by how well written it is...

TM Thank you.

OB Well you know, I knew you were a smart person, and I knew you read books, but here are a set of skills to do with writing books I guess, did you go on a fiction course? Did your publisher help you? Or are you just good at writing? You know, did this turn out that this is something you're good at? How did you learn the skills to write a work of fiction?

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TM Well, the first book, I was completely making it up. I just... I actually gave my... I decided one day I was going to write a novel, I'm going to do it for fun, I actually gave myself... I said I'm going to give myself five years to do it, I'll try to do it in little bits and pieces, in the morning, here and there, whenever I could grab some time. And I did it, and I'd set it down for two or three months, and then come back, and it took about three, three and a half years to finish it, and... but once I had a contract, and I had an editor, I had to be much, much more disciplined about it.

My editor is wonderful, I've already learned... you know we've now, we've just finished editing three books, I've learned so much about how you take complicated stories but make them easy for readers to follow. And just so much from my editor Neil Nyrón. But I've had to be extremely, extremely disciplined now because I'm on a delivery schedule, every 12 months for a new book. And I've had to go from completely winging it, you know when I started I actually had no idea how it was going to end, for the Golden Hour, for books two, three and four, I've outlined, mapped out exactly what's going to happen before I write the first word. And that's sort of just learning as I'm going.

OB And in doing that, are you having to make sacrifices, either in terms of you know, thinking about the colour and you know, as you crank out... my sense with some you know, authors as they become successful, is that you know, it all gets shopped out to interns, and they just kind of crank out the formula, and you lose a lot of the texture that made the original books interesting and fun. And also are you having to make sacrifices in terms of accessibility in the story you know, you start to think about what does the audience want, rather than what do I want to tell them about or rail against, or you know shout about?

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TM Yes. Well so far I don't have an intern or there's no team, it's still just me, so I hope I haven't sacrificed anything. You know, I think you want to always keep your ideas fresh, you know I... just the other... last weekend I got what I think is a brilliant idea for book five. I wasn't sure I was going to write book five, but now I'm very excited to do it. So you want to keep... you definitely want to keep your ideas fresh, but you also... in thinking about the audience, it's less about really what I think what people want, than not being self-indulgent about what you want to tell them.

So I recognise that I'm an African junkie, and I could go deep on lots of issues that most people would not find very interesting. So you know, I think that's the balance that you try to strike. If you're not excited about the story, that's going to come out in the writing. And so you know, you have to keep it fresh, you have to keep yourself excited by that. Some of that is not knowing exactly what, you know where it's going to go, what's going to happen to your lead characters. So yes, I guess that's something all writers will struggle with.

OB And how do you do this, and keep down a full-time job? Not just any old full-time job, but as CGDs Chief Operating Officer, yes I see this in a minor way with the Europe programme of CGD, you have a much bigger set of challenges to manage, how do you combine these two quite challenging roles?

00:42:25

TM So I keep a very strict calendar, I put writing, time for writing fiction, on my calendar. I do it three or four times a week, I put 90-minute blocks, usually very early in the morning, so I'll typically write from say 5:00 to 6:30, or 5:30 to 7:00 in the morning. I'm fresh... I'm freshest early in the morning, the house is quiet. And then the other thing that I do, is I use an app on my phone called Remember the Milk, which I think I think I learned about from you Owen. Which I use... if I have ideas during the day, it all goes into that app.

And so then when I sit down to work, I've got a list of all the ideas that I had since the last time I wrote. And it's amazing, and I'll look at this list of three or four items usually on it, and I can't remember any of them you know, if I hadn't written it down they would all be lost. So I always feel that I'm trying to... trying to trick my stupid future self, which won't remember any of this. So it's between those two, between the calendar and my iPhone app, that's how I manage it.

OB And do you find now, when you, you know, are daydreaming on the metro, or the thing you think about when you wake up, is it mainly about what Judd Ryker's going to do next, or is it about what Todd Moss is going to write a paper about, looking at you know, how to create jobs in Africa, or how to get Africa to use its oil wealth better?

TM I do both. You know I think on the subway when I'm, you know I've got 16 minutes of white noise in my own head, I'm probably thinking more about the fiction. When I'm in the office working, it's pretty easy to block that out, and...

OB Yes, you have to say that.

00:44:26

TM Well you have to do that you know. It actually drives, it drives my family a little crazy, I'm pretty weird in that I can block out noise, I can sit in the kitchen... I've got three kids, and they can all be making breakfast and arguing and rushing around, and I can be staring at my laptop, and I will not hear a word. So I can do that you know, wherever I am.

OB And is the fiction writing, have you continued to be inspired? You told us you know, you've just had an inspirational idea for novel number five, could you imagine doing this full-time, quitting your CGD job? This becomes... this becomes your career?

TM Yes I would... I would hope not, in that you know, keeping a large foot in the policy world is where I get ideas, and I think I would find it quite isolating just

writing fiction all day. I love you know, being in the mix on the policy world, I think that's what inspires me. It's also super helpful on the fiction side, I think you quickly would lose touch with what was going on in Washington if I was just you know, in a cabin somewhere, typing away with nothing but me and my imagination.

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So I hope that I'll be able to continue to do both. I mean I guess if the books somehow became you know, fabulously successful, that there'd be a time where I'd have to make that decision, but we're... Owen we're far...

OB We're away from that.

TM From having to make such a call.

OB And you say you're learning things from the policy world that you bring into your fiction, what about the other way round? To what extent is writing fiction helping you think about what you do in the policy world? Both in the way... the ideas you have, but especially in the way you convey ideas and reach audiences, is there... have you learned much from this, that those of us who work in think tanks should be thinking about?

TM I think the best example of that is, when you're writing, you're actually thinking explicitly about your audience. What do they know already? What do I need to tell them? We say that we do this in the policy world, that we write for policymakers or we write for our academic colleagues, but I think we usually don't. And when you... when you really, when the commercial success of your novel depends on not making it too confusing for your audience, you're much stricter about making sure that you're clear, that you don't have unnecessary plot lines, you know you're not trying to confuse people, you're trying to make it as clear as possible.

That does apply I think in the policy world as well. There's no point in trying to show how clever you are to a Treasury official, if what you're saying is going to undermine the message you're trying to get to them. So I think it's just about clarity and brevity.

00:47:36

OB And to what extent has having, you said you have a fabulous editor, does... is one lesson that we all need a fabulous editor to keep... at least to teach us that? I mean in some ways we do at CGD, we have an excellent colleague called Rajesh Mirchandani, who edits this very well, but is that a part of the message? That you actually need some, you need some internal critics to help you express yourself more clearly?

TM Well it doesn't have to be your editor, but you clearly need a circle of insiders that you can trust, who are going to give you honest feedback, and not just tell you how wonderful it is. You actually need people who are going to say, this doesn't make any sense. When I write fiction, I've got three or four friends that I send the first draft to, that give me blunt feedback. My wife is my... is my best, single best editor by far.

I'm lucky she's also a writer, and a much clearer writer than I am, so she's great on that score. And then having... I mean having an editor like Neil at Putnam, who's been doing this for 30 years, and you know, he can help untangle time inconsistencies, or some convoluted plot where I've gotten confused. He can untangle it all, that's of course super helpful.

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In the policy world we have peer review, we have our colleagues that are kind of that filter, but you absolutely have to have people that will give you honest feedback. Especially people that are willing to give you bad news, like this is no good. It sounds like that's terrible news, but it's actually the most helpful feedback you can get.

OB And is there going to be a Hollywood version of Judd Ryker? Is this going to be... is this going to be a film franchise?

TM I don't know yet. I mean I think the goal... the first three books would certainly make a terrific television series. We're still at the beginning of this, my agent who is also working with television and film rights, has told me to just be patient. The first book is... hasn't been out a year, the second book is only coming out in the middle of September, so I think we'll continue to explore those possibilities. What's very exciting is that you know, for films a lot of options for films get bought and then never made. And... but the explosion in television series, the fact that Netflix and others are doing original content, the cable series, it means that writers don't get as much money as they might have gotten in the past, but the possible outlets for a TV series are you know, much, much greater. And I think that would be fun, but I don't harbour any illusions that it's likely, since everybody that write a novel hopes that it'll get turned into something on the big screen.

OB And when you imagine Judd Ryker on the big screen, who... what's in your head about the actor that would be playing Judd Ryker? Who is it? I'm just trying to understand how you visualise Judd Ryker.

00:51:05

TM Well Judd Ryker, he's not you know, he's not your typical thriller, adrenaline action hero, who's running around with guns and beating people up. He's a nerd, he's a data nerd. So you know, I've...

OB Johnny Depp maybe?

TM Well I think Rudd Ryker's a bit younger than Johnny Depp. I have lately been thinking, I know this is going to sound a little strange, but Zach Galifianakis has you know, he has that, I think that right mix of quirkiness and smarts, and is just a little bit weird, that I think he could be good. My wife thinks that that's a terrible idea.

OB Who does she... who does she envisualize?

TM She wants somebody who's you know, a bit more of a heart-throb I think. I'm more...

00:52:01

OB She wants to be married to Matt Damon rather than...

TM Yes you know, Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, or you know, somebody that you know, that might be in some of the fashion magazines.

OB One of the nice things, if it did get made for TV or movie, is that there are lots of strong women roles.

TM There are. There are, and you know when I've been doing radio interviews, almost everybody asks me about the strong women in the story. I mean most of all his wife, Judd's wife Jessica, who plays a bigger role as the series goes on, but also you know, it wasn't... that wasn't a conscious decision, I don't think where I was trying to be very particular about making sure that the African characters were portrayed accurately, and three-dimensionally. It came completely naturally to have strong female characters, because you know, the Secretary of State in the book is a woman, of course I worked for Condi Rice, we've had Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright, that just seems completely normal.

All of my bosses professionally have been strong women. I was raised in a house of strong women. I live in a house run by a strong woman, so that just seemed totally normal. But you're right, that would create lots of opportunities for great characters in a TV series, or a movie.

OB Todd Moss, thanks for joining me on Development Drums.

TM Great. Thanks Owen.

OB You've been listening to Development Drums with me, Owen Barder at the Centre for Global Development, and my guest today has been Todd Moss, Senior Fellow and Chief Operating Officer, and author of Minute Zero, a new book that is in the Judd Ryker series, but his first book, The Golden Hour, was published last year. Thanks for listening to Development Drums.