



**Title: Murder, madness, obsession**

**Interviewee: David Grann**

**Duration: 7 minutes, 48 seconds**

### **About this transcript**

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

### **Introduction**

It wouldn't be a stretch to call David Grann a literary gumshoe.

In this episode of Bookpod, Grann talks about *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes*, a collection of stranger-than-fiction articles written for various magazines in which he explores the murder, madness and obsession that all too often define the human condition.

### **Presentation**

The book contains a dozen stories and they all have overlapping themes. They all involve elements of obsession, murder, madness. They all contain elements of intrigue.



They all involve characters who in some ways are using the art of detection to try to either unravel an external mystery, a criminal mystery or even trying to unravel the mystery of their own lives.

And I would say the other thing that binds them is that these are all extraordinary stories. And there's a quote I use in the introduction from *Sherlock Holmes* where he said, "Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent." And I think all of these stories fit that template.

#

I do think these stories often provide glimpses, however fleeting, of the human condition. There's a story of the prosecutor who is investigating the Aryan Brotherhood, one of the most brutal prison gangs. He's this kind of very soft-spoken, almost sensitive person, who is investigating and taking on one of the most murderous organizations in the world.



And you have the case, for example, of this Polish detective, who is kind of working class, a very kind of pragmatic person. He's investigating a cold case, a murder case, and he suddenly comes across a novel by this avant-garde, celebrated intellectual, post-modernist and begins to find clues in the novel – well, he begins to find clues that he believes to an actual murder. And this great empiricist suddenly has to become a post-modernist to try to solve the case.

I had a wonderful Polish fixer and translator. It was very funny because – well, it wasn't so funny. The main character in that story was a guy named Krystian Bala, who had written this novel that is very morally disturbing. I mean, it was a post-modern novel, it was kind of a loose play on *Crime and Punishment*. But it was one of these books that self-consciously written to be pornographic, to offend, to subvert any kind of bourgeois sensibility and traditions.



And because I didn't speak Polish, and the book had not been translated into English, I needed her to literally read the book for me, read it aloud to me, so I could take notes and understand what was in it since that was one of the central pieces of evidence in this case. I couldn't do that story without having read the novel.

It's a very embarrassing novel to have someone read to you aloud. So we would sit in the public squares and she would read me sections, and I would kind of tell her to skip over sometimes the more lurid pornographic sections and just stick to the other parts. But she was extremely helpful, because I couldn't have done that story in that case without having such a great translator and fixer.

She also helped me get into a Polish prison where he was staying. And sometimes, especially a lot of these stories take place all around the world or in difficult places, and you often need to find somebody on the ground who can help you navigate that world.



#

The characters are motivated by different forces. I do think they are motivated by a sense of injustice. They really are. And I do think that drives them. Sometimes by their nature, a lot of them are somewhat kind of soft-spoken or, you know, they don't always fit the stereotype of what we think of as the detective, this kind of overbearing, outspoken detective.

I do think, though, they burn often and are driven and are as driven as anybody else by a sense of injustice.

So I think the person who is tackling the Mafia in Youngstown, which was probably the last truly mobbed up county in America, is a man that I think when you peel him back, burns with a certain motivation. I don't think these people could take on these organizations if they didn't have that. And many of them face threats to their lives, literally threats, bodily threats. Sometimes their families are threatened.



I mean, here was someone, a Mafia man – “the honorable gentleman from Ohio” -- who really rose to the highest levels of power, and he was a man who was clearly tied up with some of the darkest, most sinister characters, and was deeply corrupt.

I use the word "allegedly" just to be careful, but he was found guilty in a civil court of taking bribes from the Mafia, and he was eventually convicted, although it took justice to catch up to him decades. And by that time he was a populist hero and a man who walked through the halls of Congress known only for his kind of charming eccentricities and was known as the honorable gentleman from Ohio.

The characters are motivated by the truth, which often seems elusive. Going back to the lead story, there's a story about Richard Lancelyn Green, this foremost *Sherlock Holmes* and Conan Doyle scholar in the world who has devoted his life to try to unravel the mystery of Conan Doyle, to try to write the definitive biography of him.



And he is deeply obsessed with him. And, you know, he lives in an apartment where he has every book, every movie, poster, every piece of memorabilia. I mean, he is surrounded by elements of this elusive quest, his quarry, which is to understand Conan Doyle and this character Sherlock Holmes. And so he was a quieter person, but he burned deeply with this obsession, and I think in his case he was chasing, well, it was a biography in that case. But he was chasing the truth.

#

I try to be as Sherlockian as possible, although, like many of the characters, I'm fallible and some clues will sometimes remain out of reach. But I try my best to piece everything together, to find everything. And I would say that in the course of these stories, I become very single-minded about them. I really want to know the truth. I really want to get to the bottom of them and know everything I can. And so I will end up in that chase doing



things that are totally out of character for me: Going out on a skiff in the middle of a cyclone chasing the giant squid, ending up nearly a thousand feet underground, crawling through water tunnels with sand hogs, interviewing and sitting and facing members of the Aryan Brotherhood who, frankly, scare me.

I don't always think about those things until afterwards, because in that moment what I'm really thinking about, just like my characters, is getting to the truth or getting to the end of my search.

### **Valedictory**

For more information about David Grann, visit his contributor page at [www.newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com).

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.



See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.

### **Related links**

David Grann on murder, madness and writing for The New Yorker

<http://niemanstoryboard.us/2010/04/05/david-grann-on-murder-madness-and-writing-for-the-new-yorker/>

David Grann on Charlie Rose Show

<http://www.charlierose.com/guest/view/6598>

The mark of a masterpiece (The New Yorker)

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/07/12/100712fa\\_fact\\_grann](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/07/12/100712fa_fact_grann)