**Announcer:** Featuring graduates from the Humber School for Writers who have lived extraordinary lives and who've brought those experiences into their work. This is Love and Defiance.

**David Bezmozgis**: For this episode, I'll be speaking with Colin Buchanan, who took the program from September 2017 to May 2018. We aren't sitting in the privacy of a studio, Colin and I, today. That's how most episodes will be recorded, but this one is being taped live in front of an audience at the Toronto International Festival of Authors at an event we've titled "The Blackbox Session."

Part of the way I identify students for the podcast, is by their application letters. So let me read some selections from Colin's letter.

"Greetings. I'm submitting an application for the Humber Creative Writing Distance Course. I've been working on a novel which began with several short stories that I've realized are connected—whether by intent or not, I'm uncertain. The novel, whose working title is *The Rest of Everything*, follows an individual on a journey of discovery, as most novels do. Beginning with an involuntary institutionalization as a late teen, following to perambulations west and south through North America, returning eventually to Toronto. The main voice throughout remains the same person, though it changes in tone from chapter to chapter, depending on his life circumstances and, most importantly, the state of his mind. The voice, for example, is quite different when he's in a fugue state, as compared to when he's experiencing cocaine psychosis, which is again different from the voice when he's suffering a grieving period. The tone is changed, but the voice retains consistency of character.

Each chapter begins with a quotation from the *DSM*, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. That gives a clue as to the character's state of mind. After dropping out of high school to go into the world and seek my fortune—though not exactly in a Dickensian sense, more of a Bukowskian nature—I spent a great deal of time coping with mental health and addiction issues—my own and those of various partners. At 21 I experience a severe psychotic episode. The psychiatrists weren't sure whether to peg me as schizophrenic, bipolar, or just plain old psychotic. It lasted several months and has never returned. I consider it a pivotal period in my life, as it gifted me with the unique experience of going to a place where most do not return, and established a love and empathy for the downtrodden and overlooked, the dispossessed, what Pynchon called the 'preterite.'

Equally as impactful was the decade I spent living in the Mississippi Delta, working primarily in the blues music business. I got to know first-generation blues musicians intimately and was granted entry into their world. There was also first-hand experience with many of the race issues which still dominate the U.S. South. Yes, I was run out on a rail by the Klan in the early 1990's. There'll be parts of the novel that reflect on both the joys and sorrows of life in the Deep South. In short, I've been around a lot, paying attention."

So Colin, it's a pleasure to have you with us.

**Colin Buchanan**: It's delightful to be here.

**DB:** Reading just your application letter, I got a sense that this is somebody who can probably write. You can write the hell out of an application letter, *(laughter*) and I would assume that you could write-write. And then I read what you submitted. Given how well you write, why did you even seek out instruction?

**CB:** Because I felt I needed some direction from people who actually know what they're doing. I had taken a writing course at George Brown, where I got a lot of encouragement and a lot of support, and my professor there had gone to the Humber School a few years ago, and she mentioned that Sara was her mentor as well, and when I found out she was a psychotherapist, I was like, "Oh yeah, this is…I can double up on this." *(laughter)* "I'll get some free work." *(laughter)*

**DB:** A lot of students come into the writing program assuming they're gonna get some free work of that kind. That's not really what we're supposed to do…

**CB:** No.

**DB:** But we do end up doing some of it.

**CB:** But I'd meet her and have a coffee and I'd just kind of trick her into giving me some psychotherapy for free. *(laughter)*

**DB:** I also think that, given her background, she would understand where you're coming from and be able to meet you where you need to be. So I read the description of what the proposed book was gonna be. The book is not quite that.

**CB:** No, no, not at all.

**DB:** The manuscript as it exists now, and I've read your most recent version, I believe, 148 pages, but it contains multitudes. So here's some of what the book contains now: Toronto in the 1970's; the American South, South Carolina; the white and the black experience, poor, predominantly; Delta blues, from the black experience, which, if I'm not mistaken, a lot or most Southern whites wouldn't have engaged with in the way that you did.

**CB:** Not really, no, because it's primarily played in black clubs, and black and white don't mix a whole lot down there. Still, to this day. At football games and basketball games, they'll be cool for a couple hours together, but black people don't go to white clubs, white people don't go to black clubs.

**DB:** So it takes somebody from outside to either not know better or just not care so much.

**CB :** "Not know better and not care" is pretty much it, yeah.

**DB:** What else is in the book? There's harvesting and trafficking cannabis the American South in the 1970's. There's jail.

**CB:** A little bit of jail.

**DB:** A little bit of jail. There's subjective experience of psychosis or hallucination, either a consequence of psychedelic drugs or just psychosis. Institutionalization at what's now called CAMH here in Toronto, the Center for Addiction and Mental Health. And so we meet, we have the experience, not just of one person in the asylum, but also meet other people, other patients in the asylum, and they're drawn beautifully and fully. That's a lot in 148 pages.

**CB:** I had something to say. *(laughter)* I was kind of in a rush. *(laughter)* My father was a writer, he was a writer for newspapers back in the days when they weren't called "investigative journalists" or "media specialists," they were "newspapermen." He had a bad heart, and he died in '73.

**DB:** How old were you at the time?

**CB:** I was 10. But I didn't know he was sick. I didn't realize how sick he was.

**DB:** You didn't understand what that meant physiologically?

**CB:** No, no. I also didn't realize he was severely alcoholic. I didn't notice that, because he wasn't violent, he was funny. He was a funny drunk. Around me, he was a funny drunk. So after that happened, and I realized I had very little memory of him, I kind of became a little bit obsessed with memory, and I still…over the course of my life, I've put a lot of things into me that people say cause memory loss. But it hasn't worked that way for me. I still remember conversations I had 30 years ago. So I'm very heavily into paying attention to people, because as far as I'm concerned, that's all we have here, are each other, and I don't want to forget people. And everybody's got something fascinating about them. I'm not gonna say everybody has a story. Some people might have a sentence or paragraph *(laughs*), but I just pay a lot of attention to people, and look for what's extraordinary in people.

**DB:** So you were then living with your mom in Kingston. We've spoken a little bit, so I have a sense that your parents were really influential in related but different ways. Your father, from his writing, and your mother, because of some of the work she was doing when she was in Kingston.

**CB:** Yeah, she wound up working at Collins Bay Penitentiary as a classifications officer. Prior to that, she'd spent most of the 60's working on a big research project that was funded by the government of Canada into violent offenders and why they were violent offenders, and what we could possibly do to keep them from continuing to be violent offenders. So she spent most of the 60's interviewing murderers and rapists and armed robbers, and then she was working in the prison, and eventually as a parole officer, so I

used to think that I could get away with lying to her. *(laughter)* She would sometimes let me believe that she believed me, just to catch me later on, but I never got away with anything with her.

**DB:** What was her attitude towards the people, the inmates that she worked with?

**CB:** She was, frankly, a little bit intrigued. She ran away from home when she was 16 to play with a black jazz band. So she was always into outsiders, and she was able to find, sometimes she had to dig really deep, but she was able to find something in everybody that was worthwhile. And she liked to help people. When she died, she had been retired for six years as a parole officer, and at her funeral there were a half-dozen of her former parolees at the funeral, which I don't think many parolees go to their parole officers' funerals, particularly when they've been retired for six years. So she had an impact on people's lives, a positive impact, and that's what she wanted to do.

**DB:** So, your mom died when you were quite young.

**CB:** I was actually 25.

**DB:** I'd say that's quite young.

**CB:** That's young, sure.

**DB:** I mean, you know, your father died when you were 10, which was very young, so you were 25. By that point, you talk about in your application letter that you'd had a psychotic episode.

**CB:** Right.

**DB:** That happened before your mom died, yeah?

**CB:** Correct, yeah.

**DB:** So you had this psychotic experience, psychotic episode. And then, how old were you when that happened?

**CB:** Well, I kind of started getting involved in the mental health system when I was 20, and that was primarily anxiety, depression, alcohol and drugs, and it was a broken heart, is kind of what it was at its core, but I would say it was all the other stuff.

**DB:** A broken heart over what?

**CB:** Oh, a person, a human being, yeah.

**DB:** OK.

**CB:** It was nothing that she did, it was…

**DB:** No, I see what you mean, I was just…

**CB:** I kind of broke my own heart…

**DB:** No, I understand, I just thought it was leftover from some kind of grief from your father's death, or your mother was sick for a while, but it wasn't that.

**CB:** Well, there was some grief, because I never grieved my father, and no one showed me how, and I didn't know what to do, so I just, when he died, I basically went into shock for several years. But after I'd been kind of in and out of hospitals, I was in Kingston, and they started me on this antidepressant, which is no longer used, and it's called imipramine. And I found out pretty quickly that if you suck them like Tic-Tacs, you get high as a kite.

So I was abusing those, and then something kind of switched, and all of a sudden I was getting messages from the TV, the newspaper was written specifically to me by people I knew, it was batshit crazy. I went into a fugue state where I would try to be other people, and I ended up being somebody really famous. Uh, Jesus. And I dared a psychiatrist one time, I said, "Prove to me I'm not Jesus." And he couldn't prove it to me. He still put me on a form and locked me up, but he couldn't definitively prove that I wasn't Jesus. And during the whole time that I've drank and used drugs, I never had blackouts, very rarely had blackouts, except during that time where I had a blackout that

lasted about six weeks, because I would stay up for days on end, I was constantly moving. I had recurring bouts of priapism.

I ended up spending about three months, four months at, it was called Queen Street Mental Health Center then, on massive amounts of antipsychotics, and it went away. And at the time, my best buddies were both psych majors, and they were like, "Well, he's 21, all this stuff is hitting, so he fits the profile." They thought I was gone. And it never came back. It just didn't. I've been waiting for it to come back, because it wasn't entirely unpleasant. *(laughter)*

**DB:** You thought you were Jesus.

**CB:** He's a pretty popular guy.

**DB:** I mean, it's one thing to experience it, it's another thing to manage to write about it. I think you capture it in a way that's, I haven't gone through that, but I don't think it's necessary. I think anybody can read something and feel whether or not it comes off as plausible or true or not. You feel like whoever's writing this really knows what they're talking about, and also knows how to convey it, and that's not an easy thing to do.

**CB:** Well, I think someone who might write about it who hasn't experienced it, they'd have to be an awfully good writer to make it ring true, because it's a unique thing that doesn't happen to everybody, and to a lot of people don't come back from that. There are a lot of people out on the street asleep right now that are experiencing that, and it gave

me an even deeper respect and admiration for people who can continue through it. And still, to this day, I'm kind of a magnet for people who are mentally ill. They'll just come up to me and start talking to me. And I talk back to them, because they're people, and they're just different than other people, but they're still people. They're somebody's kid, somebody loves them, and it's a difficult life. It's a difficult life that I think occasionally has moments of ecstasy, but there's a great deal of despair in that as well. And so to get through it and not give up is something that I think should really be admired.

**DB:** So we've talked about that, but we didn't really connect that to the American South of the blues. It doesn't really seem like a natural connection, how you got from different parts of Ontario, and having this psychic break, psychotic break, but where did the blues come into all this?

**CB:** I always loved the blues, and about a week and a half after my mother died…

**DB:** What year would this be, and how old were you?

**CB:** '89, I was 25. I didn't know there was gonna be math. *(laughter)*

A friend just about literally dragged me to the Mariposa Folk Festival, I think it was in Barrie then, and as I'm walking in, I opened the program at random, not in the middle, and I see a picture of this guy sitting on his bed with a beat-up fedora with a guitar, and he's scowling, and he's just looking like a real serious guy, and I said, "This is the guy I'm here to see." And I saw him a bunch of times during that weekend. I became

a little obsessed with him. I moved back to Vancouver, and I cut the picture out of the program, and I put it in the middle of my wall, and I arranged my apartment around that picture.

And after about a year, I had tried to find some of his music with no luck, and I had a little bit of money that I got from my mother's estate, so I said, "Screw it, I'm gonna go find him." *(laughter)* "I'm gonna quit my job…"

**DB:** You were living in Vancouver at the time?

**CB:** I'm living in Vancouver, had a great apartment, a view of the mountains, had a great job. I got my driver's license, which I didn't get until I was 25, in the interest of public safety. *(laughter)* And I didn't even really know exactly where Mississippi was. I just knew I had to go to California and turn left, which is what I did. I knew what town he lived in, and I found him the second day I was there. And I just walked in and was like, "There he is." I'm like, "Holy shit, this is a real Delta bluesman," and he lived in a shack. It was a shack with no heat, had a little small air conditioner, and he lived on his bed. He had a little black-and-white TV, and I used to go hang out with him, and we'd watch *The Andy Griffith Show* together. He loved Otis on *The Andy Griffith Show*. *(laughter)*

**DB:** What'd you say to him the first time? You roll up, you're a young white guy from Canada, what did you say?

**CB:** I said, “Hello, Mr. Thomas.” His name was James Son Thomas. I said, “I saw you in Mariposa last year.” And he just kind of grunted, like it didn’t really register with him. And I said, “I just wanted to come down and meet you.” And after a minute, he said, “Come on in, sit down.” So we sat on his porch, and we talked about his dog. He had this big white dog that he called Snow. And I tried to ask him questions without looking like I wanted something, because I would find out later that a lot of people would go to Mississippi, and they’d want to learn how to play, they’d want to make records from the people, they’d want to film them, take photographs. But I had no ulterior motive. I don’t play, I don’t take pictures, I don’t make films, I don’t make records. I just wanted to hang out with him. And we became friends. We became very good friends. He was also a sculptor. He made really eerie skull sculptures, and coffins, full-size coffins with a woman’s skull in a dress, and hands folded over her chest. Really bizarre stuff. He was a gravedigger for most of his life, and just lived, like I said, he lived in a shack. He was shot by two of his ex-wives, and he always told me, he said, “If you’re gonna get married, marry a woman with bad aim.” *(laughter)*

**DB:** So when you got down there, what was your plan?

**CB:** I didn’t have one. I went to quit my job, and I said, “I’m going to Mississippi,” and they immediately knew why I was going to Mississippi, because in the shop I used to play really weird blues. It’d freak everybody out, but it was like, “This is my turn with the CD player, so y’all are gonna listen to this.” But they told me, “Go take a three-month vacation and come back,” and after I’d been there a couple weeks, I kinda decided, “I’m

not leaving." My three-month vacation turned into ten years, and I came back with a wife and a couple kids. Don't have the wife anymore, still have the kids, who aren't kids anymore. Well, sure they are, actually.

**DB:** And while you were there for the ten years, Son Thomas wasn't the only blues musician that you got to know.

**CB:** No, my wife's brother was kind of a blues, I don't want to say "impresario," because that implies money, *(laughter)* he had a record label and a record store, and it was a nonprofit, a nonprofit organization, not by design. *(laughter)* That's just the way it worked out. So I got to know a lot of musicians, and the first time I went to the store, I told this guy who became my brother-in-law that I'd gone to see Son, and he said, "Oh, well, maybe you should go see Mr. Eugene, he's at 324 8th Street," or whatever it was. I'd never heard of him, but I'm like, "OK," and I wrote it down, and drove up to his house, and knocked on his door, and we became very good friends. He was born in 1908, half-black, half-Indian, and so born in that time and living in those times, he saw some really nasty, nasty things. Because he was kind of an outcast even within the black community, because he was light-skinned. But he made his first record in 1937. He went to New Orleans and recorded for the Bluebird label. And then he just vanished for like 35 years, until a researcher for the Smithsonian found him. He could've gone and played, but he just didn't want to leave Greenville. He liked his place, and he just didn't want to leave.

**DB:** There's a character in the novel, Snicks, who has kind of a similar life story.

**CB:** Similar, yeah. He learned to read when he was 87. His 39-year-old wife taught him how to read when he was 87. So he was never a frail old man, let's put it that way.

**DB:** Maybe we could get a taste of what the actual book feels like, if you could read an excerpt. Maybe you could set it up a bit too.

**CB:** OK. This is the lead character, he's been to South Carolina, he's met this blues singer, he ran into him on the black part of town when he smelled him cooking ribs outside, and then found out a little bit about the blues from him. The main character is finally starting to make some headway with this girl he's pursuing.

And then he kind of gets uprooted, and his mother and sister need to take him back to Canada. And so this is him going to say goodbye to the character, his name's Snicks.

The smoker was out front of Snicks's place as usual, smoking, bathing the block of Saluda with the aroma that would stick in Tim's memory for ages.

"I gotta go back to Canada, Snicks, today. I wanted to say goodbye."

Tim was distraught, and began pacing the length of the store. "I don't want to, but I ain't got no choice."

"You do what you need to do, son," Snicks said softly. "You gotta stick with your mama and your sister."

“Maybe I could stay, get a job or something.” Tim was almost in tears. “Work for you.”

“You’ll be back. I knows it,” Snicks commiserated. “Here, I’m gonna give you somethin’ to remember me by.”

He went to the table with the records and voodoo materials. He gave Tim a black cat bone, reached into the back of the stack of records, and pulled out one of the copies of his record the Smithsonian had put out. “Plateau Blues” was the title.

“That black cat bone,” Snicks said, “is gonna keep you out of trouble, and it’ll keep your wick sick all night long.”

Tim was dumbstruck and a little embarrassed.

“Thank you, Snicks, I appreciate you. I’ll be back, I swear. I gotta go say goodbye to somebody right now.”

“That yellow-haired girl, I know it.”

“How do you know about her?”

“Son, those railroad tracks right there. I can see from out back the store. Y’all white folks keep a good eye on us black folk, but we keepin’ an eye on y’all too.” He chuckled a little bit. “I know you ain’t like the rest of the white folk down here, but that just how it be.”

“Well, yes sir, I gotta go say goodbye.”

“Look at the fourth song on that record, Tim. It’s a Leadbelly song. I twisted it on up a little on my own. Maybe it’ll remind you of both her and me while you’re away.”

Tim saw the fourth song was called “Yellow Women’s Doorbells.”

“Far out,” said Tim. “How’s it go?”

Snicks looked about the room, saw no one was paying attention, and started rapping his knuckles softly on the table with the records, two beats per line, and he sang:

"On a Monday, baby I was arrested,

On a Tuesday, I got hauled off to jail,

On a Wednesday, my trial was contested,

On a Thursday, nobody wouldn't go my bail.

And I'm all, almost done,

And I'm all, almost done,

Said I'm all, almost done now,

I ain't gonna ring those yellow women's doorbells."

*(applause)*

**DB:** Now the current title, working title of this book is?

**CB:** *Yellow Women's Doorbells*.

**DB:** *(laughs)* I want to ask you one last thing. We've been talking about the life experience that's found its way into this book. I guess I wonder what's the point of writing that derives from personal experience? I've done some of it. Is it an act of bearing witness, or documenting something that's dear to you, or paying homage to something you feel you uniquely understand, leaving a legacy? When you think about what you've

done here and why you've written the kind of book and manuscript you have, what is it that drove you?

**CB:** Kind of all of those things. It was kind of a way for me of figuring out kind of what happened to me. It's not an autobiography, but a lot of it is stuff that happened, and in a certain sense it's me explaining it to myself, and trying to figure things out. I got some stuff in there that's kind of funny. I like to make people laugh.

**DB:** There's that.

**CB:** There's that. And it's very cathartic, particularly writing the stuff about the breakdown. That wasn't easy, but it was something I felt I had to do for my own sake. And I like to present the preterite, the dispossessed, that's my tribe, the crazy people. I don't have any time for normal people, they bore me.

**DB:** What do you think somebody like Eugene Powell or Son Thomas would've made of a book like this? Neither of them lived to read it. Your dad didn't live to read it, your mom didn't live to read it.

**CB:** I think my mom would like it, because there's music, and there's a lot of people, a lot of different people, some of whom aren't very nice. My dad, I mean, I still…I still don't remember much about him. I think he would've liked it. I assume he would've liked it. I never saw Eugene or Son read, except I remember driving down the road with

Eugene when he was learning how to read, and he'd go, "Motel, beer," as we're driving down the road.

**DB:** But to know, let's imagine, he couldn't read it, but let's imagine that he could, the fact that a story was told about somebody like him, inspired by him…

**CB:** It was pretty tough to impress those guys. *(laughter)* They kinda, especially Son, especially when he'd get onstage, he would just kinda look at people like, "Show me something I haven't seen before." And not many people could. I think they might've been flattered. I got a picture of Eugene on the back of this book.

**DB:** And have your kids read this book yet?

**CB:** They've read parts of it. I want them to read it, because I deal with some pretty serious things in there, and I've always been really honest with them. They know about my struggles with demon alcohol, and they know I've had mental health issues. I don't see anything to be ashamed of in either of those things. It happens. Nobody chooses it. Nobody says, "I think I'm gonna be depressed for six months," or "I'm gonna be drunk for six months." It just happens. So I'm gonna let them read the whole thing. They've read parts of it, and they like it, so…

**DB:** It's a pretty beautiful work of art.

**CB:** Thanks. *(laughter)*

**DB:** Thank you all for being here tonight, and thank you, Colin, for spending time and talking about your work and your life.

**CB:** Well, thanks for asking me. I really appreciate it, and thank you to everyone for coming out this evening. You really made my night. *(laughter)*

**DB:** Mine too. Thanks, all!

*(applause)*

**Announcer:** On the next episode of Love and Defiance, we'll be talking with Tendisai Cromwell, who explores how to write about faith, dual identities, and where to draw the line between piousness and piety.