

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 David Albertyn, who took the program from May to December 2017. Part of the way I identify students for the podcast is by their application letters, which read as fascinating capsule biographies. I'll read some selections from David's letter. So here goes.

“I graduated from Queen's University in 2006 with a BA Honors, where I majored in Film Studies, and where, apart from a screenwriting credit, I took two courses in creative writing and several in English Literature. While there, I had a short story published in the literary journal *Ultraviolet*.”

David Albertyn: Yes, that's right. *(laughs)* I wasn't lying. *(laughs)*

DB: “And I've written blogs for the Congolese advocacy group *Congo Global Voice*. Other than writing, I've coached tennis for over ten years. I've competed at a high level in both tennis and track and field,” which factors into what we'll be talking about.

DA: Yes, sounds good.

DB: “Though I’ve yet to sell a novel, I’ve written two and I’m working on a third, which I hope to develop through the Humber course.” And you go on to say a little about the first novel, which in your second year at Queen’s... “I started my first novel and steadily developed it over the next ten years.”

DA: Yes. (*laughs*) It was a long time...

DB: Which is a good chunk of time.

DA: Yes.

DB: “When I finally felt it was worthy of publication, I tried to sell it, which is when I discovered it was far too long by industry standards. I continued to pitch it to agents and editors over the next 18 months, repeatedly revising and rewriting in that time. By the end, I’d received many bites, some of them seemingly very promising, but ultimately all passed.” Then you mention that you wrote a second novel, which also hadn’t been picked up, and you mention a manuscript called *Undercard*. “I feel that my third novel *Undercard* is to be my best. Taking place over one 24-hour span in the lives of three estranged childhood friends, now 30, converge and conflict in their hometown of Las Vegas. Casinos, boxing, Black Lives Matter. The fate of the city is intertwined with that of these damaged yet dynamic individuals and their brutal pasts. Thanks for consideration.”

DA: (*laughs*) It's so funny, I don't remember writing, I don't remember that at all.

DB: Why don't we start a little earlier than that? Maybe you can just tell me, tell us, where you were born, and give us a sense of your early life?

DA: So I was born in Durban, South Africa, and I lived there until I was 10 years old, and then my family, my immediate family, immigrated to Toronto in '93. (*laughs*) I started writing at a young age. I started writing stories when I was about six years old, and I started getting into sports when I was about 9 years old, and I was very interested in both growing up through high school and university, and subsequently.

DB: Your family's originally not from Durban, you're from Johannesburg?

DA: Yeah, yeah. Both my parents were kind of all over South Africa, but they met at university in Johannesburg and got married in Johannesburg, and then came down to Durban for my dad's work. So he started out as a union organizer, and then he became a lawyer, a labor lawyer, and then a labor arbitrator.

DB: And what did that mean, what did that kind of work mean? Because this is during the apartheid era...

DA: Yeah, so he was banned by the government. So at the time, in South Africa, in the apartheid government, they had this thing called a "banning order," it just sort of

restricted freedoms of an individual if they had it, and basically they were watched by the government, by the security police, so my father got that for helping organize unions, I think in the textile industry, which sort of, some young white students had been involved in, and part of the trade union movement was a big part of the anti-apartheid movement. So my dad was banned for five years, and then he became a lawyer after.

DB: He was somebody who was opposed to the regime.

DA: Oh, 100 percent. He was very involved, yeah. And when we go back now, all the people who were kind of like big deals in South Africa, maybe not know, but you know, subsequently, he knows personally and stuff like that, it's quite cool.

DB: So the family, the politics at home were fairly progressive.

DA: Oh yes, very progressive, yeah.

DB: I mean, I raise all this because in a way, it comes up in *Undercard*. This idea of activism in a family. Black activism. And you're a white South African, a white Jewish South African writer.

DA: Yes, that's right. *(laughs)* Right, right.

DB: So there's some idea of taking on that material and having familiarity with it.

DA: Yes. yeah, that's an interesting point. Yeah, it is, uh...I didn't think of it like that, but maybe, yeah, that is why I felt more kind of drawn, I guess, to that subject matter, material, and especially Tyrone's character, not to give too much away, but a significant theme for him is that his parents are these...it's funny, I never actually related it to myself, but his parents are these dynamic activists who have passed away, and you find out why in the book, and he's been in the Marines for a number of years, and he's just come back from the Middle East, and then everyone wants him to be an activist like his parents. Yeah, and I think maybe for myself, just knowing my dad and mom, being with my dad and being sort of involved in his work, it is something you think, that you want to at some point stand up for, positive things, I guess.

DB: So you talk about going to Queen's and starting to write when you were there. Do you want to talk a little bit about what that book was, and what got you into it?

DA: Sure, yeah, I can talk a little, yeah. I dealt with the Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the DRC. Really, initially I just wanted to do a cool kind of action thriller set in the jungle, and I thought, "I'm from Africa," so I just picked the African jungle, the Congo, and then when I started to research it, it really grabbed me, and I was learning a lot, and it was like, in my twenties it was my hobby. I was just reading about the Congo, everything, the history, everything that was currently going on at the time. Politically, it really shaped my views. It exposed me to a lot of things in terms of neocolonialism and things like that, and it helped expand my political perspectives, yeah.

DB: I think that for a lot of people who write books, you realize that every time you do it, it's like a PhD in something.

DA: 100 percent, yeah. That's exactly...

DB: You immerse yourself in something you didn't know about, learn about it deeply and intensively.

DA: Definitely, yeah. I mean, I think you do have to pick something that interests you, because even like, getting published or potentially even making money or something from a book is not enough motivation to put in that level of work for a book. So it's gotta be that you really want to explore a subject and kind of engage in a discussion of a subject, I think helps sustain. Definitely for myself, I think that helped sustain me through the writing.

DB: So you did that, and then you wrote a second book.

DA: Yeah, it's about a tennis coach, a tennis pro, a young tennis pro, who has a relationship with a divorced woman who's quite a bit older than him, who's got kids and a family, and then she leaves him for an older man, and then he tries to win her back through kind of, maybe not the most appropriate way, let's put it that way, and it's sort of, it's a funny, romantic, but I think it's still gonna have a mystery, a murder, but it

won't be a thriller. I think it could really be a cool, interesting, kind of different thing by the time it's done.

DB: So the first book had to do something with Africa, which kind of touches upon where you come from, kind of, though it's not the Congo.

DA: Yeah, right.

DB: The second book deals with tennis, and you're still very involved in tennis. So why don't you talk, maybe you can just describe the book. Talk about *Undercard*.

DA: Oh sure, yes. Yes, so *Undercard*, it's set in Las Vegas over 24 hours, and follows four estranged childhood friends. They're in their early 30's, and all their lives are converging and conflicting, and it revolves around this boxing superfight, and the one character, Antoine Beckov, is fighting in the undercard to this superfight that's like a Mayweather/Pacquiao type of superfight, although they're fictional ... anyway, it's got a ton of stuff.

DB: Well, it does. It's worth mentioning all the stuff that it has. So it has...there's boxing in it. There's the police.

DA: Yeah. So it does deal with the issue of police violence towards people of color, and that's obviously been a very prominent issue over the past few years.

DB: Because one of the friends, Keegan, became a cop, and he had shot an unarmed black youth and killed him.

DA: Yes, that's correct, Keenan Quinn, and he's just been acquitted. So when the book opens, he's just been acquitted for shooting an unarmed, innocent black teenager, and there's quite a lot of anger towards him for that, and there's a march planned. So the book starts noon Saturday, ends noon Sunday, and then every chapter correlates with...so chapter one ends at 1 PM, chapter two ends, it takes place by 2 PM, and so the time is front and center, so you've got that sense of time and urgency throughout. So it opens noon Saturday, and then the fight is Saturday night, and then there's this protest and march planned Sunday morning against this acquittal, against this not-guilty verdict.

DB: So the characters, we should just kind of run them down quickly: Tyrone...

DA: Tyrone, yeah, Tyrone Shaw.

DB: Tyrone Shaw. So he served with the Marines in Iraq?

DA: Yes, Iraq and Afghanistan...

DB: And Afghanistan.

DA: He was a captain in the Marines, and he's just gotten out, and he's just returned to Vegas the previous day, and he didn't follow social media just because he didn't want to be distracted, so he comes back, he doesn't know what happened to his three best friends growing up, and suddenly he's back in town, there's a big barbecue to welcome him home, and everyone's like, "Oh, you hear about your friends from back in the day," and his one friend is now the subject of this protest, his other friend is fighting in the fight of the decade. His other friend Naomi Wilkes, who's the fourth character, she's the estranged wife of Keenan, and she's had a serious relationship with Tyrone, and she broke up with him when he joined the Marines, and she's now married to Keenan, but all the things Keenan is going through is putting a strain on that relationship. So Tyrone comes back, and the three people who were very central in his life when he was younger are now very prominent once again, and how he handles the situation is key.

DB: Right. So, and she, Naomi, had been a professional basketball player...

DA: That's right.

DB: So we get a little sense of women's professional basketball.

DA: Yes, yes. She was in the WNBA...

DB: The WNBA...

DA: And she's retired three years prior, and she's now a basketball coach. So all of them are in real states of transition. It's partially just trying to capture that stage in your life when you're going from a young adult to really an established adult, and that transition period, and really, where are you gonna direct your life at this point? You're no longer a kid, or in your 20's. It's pretty extreme, the circumstances, (*laughs*) but I think it captures that kind of feeling.

DB: Right. Because they're also, they're in their early 30's...

DA: Yeah. They're all 32, yeah.

DB: 32. And so for them, they're starting to realize that whatever dreams and ambitions they had, either they're going to realize them or they're not.

DA: Yeah.

DB: And for a lot of them, maybe with the exception of Antoine, who's fighting in this fight, they're kind of at a point in their lives where they're coming to terms with the fact that things didn't quite work out the way they thought they would. Is that fair to say?

DA: Yes. Yes, I would say definitely. For someone like Keenan, 100 percent, yeah, things haven't worked out.

DB: But that's only because, he ended up shooting someone, but I guess Keenan always wanted to be a cop?

DA: Uh, yeah, so one of the things...

DB: Though he was a good tennis player too.

DA: Yeah, that's right. I really wanted, each character, I wanted their parents' lives to influence their lives, and I wanted each of them to be an athlete in a different sport, and each of them, except for Naomi, to have a sort of combat experience, some experience in violence and stuff, so we've got...Antoine was a criminal in a gang and went to prison, and then since he came out has become this top boxer, and then Keenan being a cop, and then he was a tennis player. I don't go into it, it just references that he played tennis, but I have a whole...I know his whole tennis career, it didn't go nearly to the level he wanted, and then Tyrone was...well, they all played tons of sports, and they all met through boxing. Tyrone was track and field, primarily, and did the decathlon, and just missed out on the U.S. Olympic trials, and when he didn't make it, that's when he decided to join the Marines, and Naomi was basketball.

DB: So why did you want them all to have a background in athletics?

DA: Well, partially...it's kind of interesting. Part of the idea for *Undercard* and the way I shaped it was lessons I'd learned from my first two attempts selling things, and I feel like

it's almost the culmination of those two stories, inequality was the larger issue that I wanted to deal with from different angles in this, which I kind of got from my first book, but also with my first book, so much of the response was, "Are you from the Congo? Were you in the Marines?" That's why I kind of went the other way with my second book, of having the guy as a tennis coach. When you're starting out writing, you often hear, "Write something where only you could write this book". So I thought, with me having a strong background in sports, to make that a key component to a dynamic thriller would help...I would have some kind of validity as the author. So that's one of the reasons. I felt like each character, their sport, I wanted to kind of shape them. I find women's basketball, there's a real fun sort of swagger to it, and I really thought about that a lot when I was shaping Naomi's character. And I love tennis, but there's a real kind of petulance and self-pity (*laughter*) that is very deep in the culture of tennis and the tennis community that is often quite prevalent, so I thought that fit with Keenan, someone who really feels a lot of self-pity. And then the boxing for Antoine, having that chip on your shoulder, and also the decathlon I thought of as a multidiscipline sport, and Tyrone is such a solid, responsible, diligent, hard-working character, so it kind of suited him too.

I always loved the idea, and it's been done a little bit in movies and stuff, but I never felt it'd been done to its full potential. You have a sports event, but the real action is taking place behind the scenes, and I guess *Ocean's Eleven* has that a little, but I never felt it was integrated enough between the sport and the action, and I'd always thought about that, I think I've pulled it off with *Undercard*. That was one of the inspirations of blending a high-octane thriller with sports.

DB: Yeah. The structure of the book very much reflects what you're talking about, because the fight, often in a story like this, it all builds up to the fight and then what happens, does he win or lose the fight, that's basically the end of the book. Whereas here, the result of that fight happens kind of around the midway point, and you realize that for him, the fight is not just the fight. The fight is almost secondary to what he's trying to accomplish.

DA: Yes. Yeah, the fight is more a means...

DB: A means to an end.

DA: A means to an end. I was really interested in the idea of a character who has no business being a professional athlete, doesn't have all the resources in place to achieve that, but has a goal, and that goal requires them to become a pro athlete, and it's just the type of character who's like, "If I have a goal, I'm gonna achieve that goal, and I'm gonna find a way to achieve that goal no matter what." So that was a big thing with Antoine's character, that helped shape his character and direction.

DB: Yeah. So maybe now is a good time to read a little bit from the book, if you don't mind.

DA: Sure, yeah.

DB: And I think it actually touches on the fight, and this idea of what motivates Antoine.

DA: Yes. So this is a scene in the fight, three rounds in. It's like the one-minute break between rounds, three rounds in.

He blinks his eyes, hoping that will clear them. Simone pours water over his head while Alejandro rubs petroleum jelly over his face. The actions revive him a little. He can also feel oxygen returning to his lungs and spreading into his shoulders, but it is too soon. The haze in the eyes, the burning in the chest, the lactic acid in the limbs. The pace is so much quicker than every other fight he's had. Attacking, defending, everything. Antoine needs something else, something to separate himself. Otherwise, his opponent is too strong, his technique too solid. Body blows don't do much against layer after layer of wrought-iron flesh, and that's when the shots get through. "Is there enough time to tenderize it?" he wonders. Gotta try, regardless of outcome. An investment that has to be made. "Better take the fucker's head too," he thinks. "Use the head to set up the body. He felt that uppercut. Didn't know I could pop like that."

This is Antoine's boxing obsession: increasing his power. Between every fight he has raised its level, tried to squeeze out every jewel of strength he possesses. He can hit harder than ever, a true power puncher to complement his defensive prowess. But even with his power additions, it is not enough, he knows. His enemy is too good. Gotta take his legs out, keep him moving, never let him rest. The body, the head, the legs, break them down. Forget the score, just break the pendejo down. He frowns, foreseeing the rest of the fight. Still not enough. Gotta do it early, he thinks. The secret juice. Gotta drink it

now. Can't wait until the sixth round. Antoine's routine is to wait until the mid-point of the fight before he calls up the memory of his father's murder—or, more specifically, the memory of his failure to protect his father from murder. The memory of his cowardice. It's like being burned alive. When his opponents hit the wall, he is a demon. When they start to slow, he is faster than ever. When their will falters, he lusts for blood.

True, he hates himself for days afterward when he opens this pit of self-loathing, and the fire it ignites burns away every last bit of fuel in him, so that it's often weeks before he fully recovers. But it is separation, the Holy Grail when it comes to sports. This memory, the well of rage, is separation from his competition. "I won't sustain it, though," he thinks, as the referee calls time and Antoine pops back up to his feet. His enemy advances, gloves up, cold determination in his pale, ghostlike eyes. If you fade, you fade. Now's the time. No point waiting until you're knocked out. Antoine slips a punch, darts forward, fires a jab and a straight right, springs back and skips to the side. "Coward," Antoine thinks. "You let your father die."

DB: You know, when I thought about excerpts from the book, I often look to passages that have to do with Antoine, even though the other characters are very well drawn. There's something about him that has to do with, he's a person, who didn't have the most talent, even among his friends.

DA: Right, right.

DB: But he has this exceptional drive. There's a little section quite late in the book, he talks about betting on himself, and it goes:

Every dollar he owned, every dollar he could borrow, every dollar he was paid up front for the fight—and he negotiated less money but a larger advance—he had Carlos bet for him. He determined that either he beat Kinnitsen and got his shot at Washinski, or he failed at his life's purpose. Since he didn't plan on failing, he risked everything that he would succeed.

DA: It's funny hearing someone else read it. (*laughs*)

DB: You do a better job.

DA: No, no.

DB: But the idea behind it, I think a lot of it, when I was thinking about him and reading the book, even the title of this podcast, which is *Love and Defiance* podcast, I think it's fundamental to trying to achieve something extraordinary.

DA: Right, right.

DB: I'm interested to hear you talk about, what do you think it is that enables someone to achieve something that is exceptional or extraordinary?

DA: Right. So one of the things I've been very interested in over several years now is just the nature of how do you improve? "Deliberate practice," I don't know if you've heard that term, but this guy Anders Ericsson, this psychologist based in, he's Scandinavian but based in the States, he coined it, and "growth mindset," and all these things, just the nature of how we improve and things like that. So just with myself being a coach, trying to help other people improve, trying to improve my own tennis, my own sports, and trying to improve my writing, it's something I'm thinking about all the time, and doing a lot of trial and error, and trying to innovate on this front. I wanted to kind of, in a way have a story, but that's a complete and riveting story, but just about trying to achieve an extremely difficult goal, and how you go about doing it. The goal isn't the most savory one, that Antoine has, but it's still, the way he goes about it I think is the way anyone should go about it. There's that extreme discipline. And also I think, with his character, I wanted to capture what it's like for a person to shape their whole life around having a goal, and how it can negatively affect a person despite them being able to achieve things that they maybe never thought they could. It does have kind of a wearing affect, perhaps.

DB: Sports aside, what's the analogue between writing and this sort of...

DA: I think it's quite similar. The context obviously changes, but it's sort of the same process. It's funny, because I've revised it for the last year with my publisher, but Antoine's character was pretty much the same with the manuscript that we sold them. It's funny, me suddenly achieving this major breakthrough in my career, and it's like, I'm

going through a lot of the things that he goes through in the story, and I was sort of, at the time, I had a feel for how it would be, and I was right, I guess you could say.

DB: So what was the initial goal?

DA: Oh, for the book?

DB: Just for you, as you're talking about...

DA: Oh, with writing? Well, I guess just always to be a published author. And it's funny, I always believed that that would be the case, that I would end up in that place, even though there were times, during that first book that took ten years, there were a lot of rejections, and I couldn't even seem to get anyone to read it, let alone buy it. You feel down and negative. It always just felt like it was inevitable, it was only a matter of time. But definitely once I got an agent, and definitely with this book I was excited, and I thought there was a real shot that it could be sold, and it's been incredible, over the last year, every few months, it just vaults up my expectations for how it's gonna do. Definitely with getting some international sales, and the kind of excitement from various entities in the publishing and entertainment industries.

DB: Yeah. Well, it's a good book, it's a really good book.

DA: Thank you, David.

DB: And it's very plotty, and it takes place over 24 hours, but the specificity of character and the different characters, it's such a cast of characters beyond just the four primary characters. You managed to bring very different people to life. You go and you give us a sense of what it's like to be in a firefight in... is it Iraq or Afghanistan at that point? It's Baghdad, right?

DA: Yeah yeah, Baghdad, yeah yeah yeah. Outskirts of Baghdad, Iraq, yeah.

DB: You place us there. So it's quite an ambitious work, and I think you've pulled it off.

DA: Thank you, thank you, David, I appreciate it.

DB: From a female perspective, Vegas, some of it's funny. And understanding the workings of the Metropolitan Police in Las Vegas convincingly. So there's a lot.

DA: Right. Yeah, yeah, it was a lot of research...

DB: A lot of research.

DA: ...for a fairly fast-paced story. What you referenced is, for Tyrone's character, there are flashbacks, even though it takes place in 24 hours, to get the history of these characters, it does kind of flashback. And I read so many books about Iraq, and it's really

a few quick flashbacks. Yeah, and it was so much research just to get that, but yeah, thank you, I appreciate it.

DB: There's another line: "People make sports complicated, but ultimately it comes down to who executes better." I wonder, do you think that's true for writing as well?

DA: Oh, that's interesting. I hadn't thought of that. I don't think to the same extent, no. I think, because I thought about this, I think the biggest difference between writing or the arts and sports is that there's something else beyond the expertise, when it comes to the arts. A lot of great athletes, they might have a flair or whatever that is quite enjoyable, you can appreciate it, but it's really who runs the fastest or whatever, who performs the best. Whereas in writing, you want to attain a very high level, but as a means to bring out a story or an idea to deal with all sorts of things. So I think the nature of improving is the same, but I think that aspect is significantly different. Because sometimes when I read stuff, you can tell someone's such a good writer, but you feel it's not from such a deep place, and it's not enough, you know what I mean? Whereas I think in sports, that would be enough.

DB: So this is the question. There's innate ability, which is one, but the flip side is, there are people who seem like they have talent...

DA: Right.

DB: And yet they don't achieve what people expect them to achieve, and other people who don't appear to have had as much talent, raw talent, and they end up achieving much more than people thought they would. And so I'm kind of arguing against myself, that even with writing, maybe there's a way to do that, where somebody just puts the time in.

DA: Yes. I mean, that's exactly what I feel. Pretty much all people who are high level at something, you can trace back that at some point, there was some adult figure helping them develop that skill set.

DB: I think you'd said to me something like you thought when you were younger, you were a good writer but not that good an athlete, am I getting it right, or you thought you were...

DA: Yeah, that's right. So growing up, I always thought of myself as going to be a successful writer, and I always doubted myself as far as sports and athletics because I got into it later, and I developed physically a bit slower than most people. And then it was like, I worked so hard in sports, pushed myself so extremely hard, and every year I pushed myself harder and harder, and then it got to a point where it's like, I'm not that bad at sports, and I'm not that good at writing. In my late 20's, I had that epiphany. It was useful, the level of intensity and effort I'm putting into my sports, I need to put that into my writing, and I did. The two have really helped. It's kind of interesting, because in sports, when I play tennis, I'm thought of as old, and it's a bit absurd for me to be competing or training as hard as I do in it.

DB: How old are you now?

DA: I'm 35 now, but it was like that when I was 22. They're like, "What are you doing?"
(laughs) Since I've started playing this sport competitively, I've been light years too old.

DB: Too old.

DA: I feel like it makes no difference how old I get, I was too old at the start. But with writing, of course people have success in their 20's, but I'm still relatively young. It's funny, on the one hand you feel like everyone's judging you and thinking of you as this kind of weirdo, maybe, or something like that, and then the other side of your life, over the past year, and before they were treating me like that too in writing, but everyone's treating you like this kind of golden boy. And just to go back, Antoine kind of goes through this experience, and I think the line is, "Life had prepared him for many things, but success wasn't one of them." *(laughs)* And that's definitely how I feel. Whenever people try to help me with failure, it's like, "Failure I can handle." *(laughs)* "This is all I've known." So already, the book's not even out yet, and people treat you very differently. It's quite funny.

DB: Yeah. Well, I have good news for you: there's a lot more failure to come. Don't worry about it.

DA: (*laughs*) Thank you, David! I appreciate it.

DB: It won't be exclusively failure. That's the thing.

DA: No, no.

DB: For beginning writers, you feel like it's just failure.

DA: Yeah, yeah.

DB: It's just failure and rejection.

DA: Yeah, right.

DB: And then later it's like, "Oh..."

DA: It's some failure...

DB: And some acceptance.

DA: Some success, some failure, yeah. That's good.