

CMPL Podcast: Rob Hart March 2022

Amy 00:17

Alright, hello everybody. Welcome to Clinton-Macomb Public Library's March podcast. We're excited this month to be talking with Rob Hart about his newest book *The Paradox Hotel*. So, we of course have him with us today. My name is Amy. We also have Nicole say Hi, Nicole.

Nicole 00:35

Hi, Nicole.

Amy 00:36

And Sarah say hi, Sarah.

Sarah 00:39

Hello, everyone.

Amy 00:40

So we've all read the book. Well, I finished the book, and Nicole has finished the book. And Sarah is hoping we don't spoil the ending of the book. But I told her I couldn't make any promises about that.

Rob 00:53

We will do our best.

Amy 00:55

Exactly.

Sarah 00:57

I've made it about halfway through.

Rob 00:59

Okay, well, I hope I stick the landing.

Amy 01:03

We've told her that you have so she's...she's excited to read the rest. Um, so we didn't really plan anything too formal here. We sort of just wanted to talk more organically. And so, we're gonna start with the very generic question of why time travel? And how do you even begin to research that?

Rob 01:24

Sure, sure. I will. First, real quick, I just want to thank you so much for having me. And just a warning for all listeners, my daughter might pop up at some point and ask a question. And that's okay.

Amy 01:34

I mean, legit, mine too. So...

Rob 01:36

Yeah, go do. And on cue, there you are. I don't know. Maybe it's in your backpack. But why don't you go read for a bit? I'll get. Okay. How about the water on your bedside table? Oh, yeah. Okay, there we go. Yeah, I always, always, always loved time travel. It's such a great mechanic, because it's so weird, you can have so much fun with it. And, you know, the research element of it is interesting, because it's...it's all theoretical, it's none of its real. So, you really end up in a situation where no matter how much research you actually do, eventually, you just kind of throw your hands up, and you're like, I'm just gonna make it up. But I did read, you know, and I've always been really interested in quantum physics. You know, I've read like Stephen Hawking, you know, a couple of other authors in that field. And there were a few books I picked up in preparation of doing this, that were really interesting. And yeah, eventually just got completely overwhelmed by the concept.

Amy 02:36

That's fair. Even as I was reading the book, I actually listened to the audiobook version of it. And I was like, wait, did I miss something? Do I need to go back? And we have we jumped in time. So, it was it's, it makes it look very interesting, of course. So, it seems like when because you also wrote The Warehouse, which you were kind enough to come and talk to our book club about at one point.

Rob 03:01

Yeah.

Amy 03:02

And so when you were talking to our book club about The Warehouse, you pointed out that Gibson I think his name was tells this whole false story about when he was younger, and he took his parents out to dinner, and he you know, and when I was reading The Warehouse that was like, Gibson's redeemable quality, that he had done this, and then you had informed us that it was a lie. And I was like, no! Were there any lies that we were told from the characters in this book that we may not have picked up on?

Rob 03:35

No, I don't think so. You know, this was such a different book, because The Warehouse, it was three point of view characters, and I was sort of playing them off each other. And it was about like, different

perspectives. And Gibson in particular, was someone who was basically litigating his history and trying to justify everything he had done at that point. So, he was building his own legacy and his own myth. Whereas in this, it was solely focused on the main character, January, and...and she is an unreliable narrator in the sense that she is sort of slipping through time over the course of the story. So there, there are points where her perception is suddenly, you know, not in the current line of events in the book. So, you know, it was more just like, trying to build in this feeling of you're not always sure where she is, but without making it like completely confusing, which is something that me and my editor talked about a lot. Because initially, it was a lot more confusing, because I was just like, yeah, people will figure it out. He read it, and he was like, you need to fix a lot of this.

Sarah 04:41

He told you that people would not figure it out?

Rob 04:43

Oh, yeah. No, and he's a really, really brilliant editor. He's such a smart guy. He did like the Martian and Ready Player One and he does Blake Crouches' stuff. You know, he's so good at it. And, yeah, you know, and that's the thing that's the challenge with a book like this is you really want to sort of have, you know you want to have your cake and eat it too, you want to do like a really fun, weird, twisty story, but you also want to tell the story that a reader is gonna, you know, be interested in and be able to follow. So, it's like, it's basically like, I'm trying to entertain myself and entertain another reader simultaneously. And it's...it's a fun balancing act, because I always want like, weird, crazy.

Amy 05:22

Sure. So how long? Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Sarah 05:26

Yeah, so speaking of your, your unreliable main character, I was wondering how you came up with the concept of her and why you decided that your sole, you know, sole narrator would be a woman this time.

Rob 05:39

You know, it's weird. And this is where we get you and I've talked about this before, it's where we get into sort of, like the almost divine nature of the process. And that the...the through line of the book was like, I got this idea for a time travel hotel. And then I sort of found this comparison in space travel that where space travel is turning into like a tourism industry for the super-rich, and I'm like, oh, we invented time travel, that would totally happen. And then, you know, just like space travel is now being privatized. You know, I could see time travel being privatized, and all these pieces were kind of coming together. And, you know, it was a lot of that passive work of the process of just like, turning it over my

head. And then just one day kind of got this image of this woman walking off an elevator and she was wearing a big boho hat and she was really angry and really sad. And I was like, oh, that's my that's my narrator. You know, and, and within that, I really enjoy, you know, I've never written an entire book from a woman's point of view before. And I also kind of liked that, you know, she's sort of a she's got like, kind of like this hard boiled voice you know, she's, she's a former time enforcement agent. She's a current house detective. And I feel like those characters are always like big burly dudes. And...and I was like, you know what? No, like, I feel like it would be more interesting doing this like as the point of view from a woman. Not to say that there aren't great women PIs, you know, like Roxanne Wiry. Kristin LaBianca's books, like, immediately jumps to mind. Like she's like a gold standard. But um, yeah, it was it was partially just, she kind of appeared to me. And partially, I really enjoyed the challenge of doing it.

Amy 07:18

Who do you like better January from this book, who's the narrator that we're talking about or Zinnia from The Warehouse who was also a great female character that you wrote?

Rob 07:29

See, that's tough for me, because, you know, part of me, part of me is always gonna have a sweet spot for Zinnia because that that was the first female point of view I ever wrote. And I loved her so much. And but then there's the part of me that liked Paradox is the most recent one. So that's the one that's like most on my mind. But it was funny, I, I don't really get in the habit of rereading my stuff. Because then I just kind of just see what I would have done differently. And I get annoyed at myself. But as part of the promotional run up for a Paradox, my publisher had me go into Goodreads. And I did this thing called author notes where I went into Warehouse and left like notes on the book. So, they'll appear to people who are reading it. And...and it wasn't like doing a close read of the book, but I was kind of skimming it like because I kind of knew like where I wanted to put notes and the things I wanted to do and like rereading some is any a section sounds like oh, man, yeah, she was fun, fun character, you know.

Amy 08:26

I loved her as well.

Rob 08:28

Yeah, it was it was definitely a good time. I miss her.

Amy 08:32

That's fair.

Nicole 08:34

I feel bad saying this. I haven't actually read The Warehouse yet. So, I have to go ahead and say, without a doubt, January's the better one.

Rob 08:44

That is fair. You can only use the evidence you have.

Nicole 08:51

I just I loved her. I love that sort of just moody dumb shoes, sort of just antihero character. And there's a part I'm not going to tell you Sarah. I'm not gonna spoil this for you. But there is a part near the end, where you learn something about her that he or she learned something about? I know! And for a second, you believe that she's the bad guy. Just for a second just for a second. And it broke my heart. It really did. Because as...as moody as she is, and the way she treats other people because of her own sadness is maybe not the best way. But you still get so into her head and you just want...want her to be the hero. So, I vote for her.

Amy 09:41

It's hard Sarah because you haven't finished.

Rob 09:45

Well, I mean, we wouldn't want to give away the ending anyway, because there's lots of people out there whoever.

Amy 09:50

Absolutely true.

Rob 09:51

But yeah, you know, God, I January was so much fun to write because, you know, every book is like me working through something thing and, you know, this is a book where I was working through, you know, the difficulty of facing yourself and, and how hard it is to kind of like take a self-assessment and admit things to yourself. And, you know, I really and so January is a character who she lost someone that she loved very deeply. And that loss is really sort of metastasized. And, you know, I and I found this concept called complicated grief, where it's when your grief is so strong that you...you can't even accept that the person has gone where you expect them to walk back into the room where you know it where you really vigorously push people away, and you're just generally hard to deal with. And, you know, it was kind of a tough balancing act, because she really can be a jerk, especially in the beginning. And that's really fun to write. But it's not always fun to read. And so, you know, not only is it finding the right balance, but it's then sort of making sure the reader understands why she is the way she is.

Amy 10:56

Yeah, she has a line towards the end after a tragic event where I literally was like, oh, my gosh, she said it like she, she's she said that to them. And then I was like, for a brief second, I was like, do I still like this woman? And then I concluded that I do. But...but yeah, she's, she's a tough, tough person, for sure.

Rob 11:19

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Um, but yeah, God, I love her to death. It's funny, where, um, so the book is being developed for TV. And we just finished the pilot script is really, really brilliant writer named <unintelligible over chatter>. Thank you. So, we're now getting into conversations about like, who they might be interested in pursuing to play January, which is just the most exciting thing in the world, you know, because there are a lot of actresses who could really kill it at this role. And it would just be really fun to see that.

Amy 11:50

Do you picture when you're writing a character? Do you picture a certain person who might play them on screen? Or does that not even really enter into your thoughts?

Rob 11:59

I don't really think about it. You know, I think when I'm doing the writing process itself, like I might pull like traits and characteristics from other people, but for the most part, I want it to be, you know, to not feel tied to something. And then it turns into a fun game afterward when it's like, you know, starting to like brainstorm like, alright, like, who's...who's gonna do the voice of the robot? Like, that's an important question.

Amy 12:22

I loved the drone. Was it Ruby? It was Ruby, right? Yeah, I Ruby was one of my favorite characters.

Rob 12:32

I almost felt like I was cheating because it's like, you can never go wrong with a quippy robot assistant.

Amy 12:40

I loved her.

Nicole 12:41

What female actress? What actress is the Stephen Merchant equivalent?

Rob 12:49

Yeah. No, I will. You know, I wanted to, it's got to be a New Zealand actor. Because I made the robot have a New Zealand accent because I was like, well, what's the funniest accent? And I say this with a great deal of love and affection. It's the New Zealand accent. So yeah

Amy 13:07

I listened to this on audio book that the...the, the reader did in New Zealand accent

Rob 13:13

Really?

Amy 13:14

Yeah.

Rob 13:15

Oh, wow.

Amy 13:16

At least that's what I interpreted it to be.

Rob 13:19

I'm gonna have to I might actually have to listen to one of my audiobooks. Now I have I have such a problem with them. Because it's like, an Emily Zeller who does. She did The Warehouse. And she...she did Paradox. I was so happy she came back. She's so talented. But the thing is, is like, I have a really hard time listening to the audiobook because like, it's my words and someone else's speaking them. And it sounds different in my head. And I'm not and I know other authors who say the same thing. They can't listen to recordings of their work, because they're like, that's not my voice. This is not okay. You know, it's like, vaguely unsettling.

Amy 13:52

That's fair. I mean, imagine if, imagine if they place emphasis somewhere where you're like, no, that's not the emphasis of that line of dialogue or something. Even something like that could get annoying.

Rob 14:04

Yeah, you know, I don't know. I don't know. Cuz on one hand, like, so, my girlfriend is an actress. And she like we sat one night with the pilot script. And she did basically a cold read of it, where I read all the directions, she read the dialogue. And, and it was really cool, because some of the lines in the pilot were lifted from the book and it was cool to hear how she interpreted that, but it's like, it's something about the narrative of the book that's just like weird.

Amy 14:28

Fair enough. So, we were talking about, like random lines in the book that we found interesting and I don't want to use the term Easter egg but like, why raptors? Is it a nod to Jurassic Park? Is it because we all know what a raptor is because we all saw Jurassic Park at one point or...

Rob 14:47

I think so yeah, well, you know, you know, the thing is...is like it's got to be a small enough dinosaur that you can justify having in a hotel but like not completely destroy the hotel like a T Rex would have been too much.

Amy 14:57

Sure.

Rob 14:58

And...and yeah, you know, and I didn't even and make a Jurassic Park reference because I feel like he can't not do it at that point. But um, yeah, that that was that was such a fun conversation because when I pitched this book to my agent, I was like, okay, so I'm gonna write this book, it's gonna have robots, it's gonna have dinosaurs. It's gonna have time travel, but it's really going to be like a meditation on grief. And he was like, what are you talking about? Don't write that book. Please don't write that book. Like, no, no, no, it's fine. It's fine. I can pull it off. And and he did not believe me. So, I went and I did it. And...and he read it. And he was like, well, okay, I was wrong. But yeah, like, I just, I just got this image in my head of like, Velociraptor stalking a hotel. And I'm like, yeah, yeah, I gotta put that in the book.

Amy 15:41

I gotta imagine anyone who's listening to this right now and has not read the book. And it's like, dinosaur what, what is happening in this description?

Rob 15:50

It's a weird book. But you know, it's, it's funny, because it's like, there are fun elements that I can go around about and be like, Oh, it's robots and dinosaurs and time travel. But it's also I mean, for me, I think it's the most like, earnest thing I've ever written. And so, I'm really, really proud of a lot of things that came across in the ending. And, you know, I'm interested to revisit this book, at some point, once I have a little distance from it, you know, because like, now I'm like, so sort of deep and like talking about it and analyzing it that like, my brain is kind of like a big bowl of like, pudding right now. But there, it's gonna be fun to look at this. Or also, like, you know, if the TV show goes forward, just to like, revisit it from a sense of like, how other people are interpreting it.

Sarah 16:34

Well, so speaking of Easter eggs, I did read that the Goodreads comm...commentary that you made and you mentioned that you had named dropped Margaret Atwood in The Warehouse.

Rob 16:45

Yeah.

Sarah 16:45

And you were putting in a reference in Paradox Hotel. So, at that point, I started reading this book, looking for that reference. I assume that you naming the...the wing Atwood is your reference to Margaret, the other wing was Butler at is that for Octavia Butler?

Rob 17:01

Yes, it was. So yeah, that was, and it didn't really kind of like, it wasn't overt in the book. And I guess I think it used to be a little bit more overt but things had to move around a change a bit. But like, you know, one of the ideas in the book is that this woman invents time travel, and they still named the time port after Albert Einstein, because, you know, like, the government would absolutely do that. 100% You know, so, I figured like, the woman who designed the hotel, who worked with the woman who invented time travel would say like, you know, what, fine, we're just naming everything in the hotel after women. And so that's why it's like the Margaret Atwood wing, the Octavia Butler wing and then there was the, I cannot believe the Ava Loveless ballroom, you know, like, just like, and then she was she wasn't a writer, she was a scientist, but, you know, just this idea of like them trying to, like claim some agency after, you know, it was basically taken from them.

Sarah 17:57

Yeah, I liked all those references. So thank you.

Rob 18:01

Yeah, it was one day, one day, I'm gonna meet Margaret Atwood, and be like, I have made references to you in many of my books, that she's gonna be like, who are you?

Amy 18:12

Maybe she'll say, I know, I've read them all.

Rob 18:16

That would be really cool.

Nicole 18:17

I'm here to get my book signed. That's what she'll say.

Rob 18:20

Yeah, that's...that's so weird. Like, I remember when, um, when Stephen King tweeted about The Warehouse. That was like, my buddy texts. Like I was coming to the gym. I my buddy sent me a text. He's like, you have to get on Twitter now. And I'm like, what did I do this time? Before? And I see the tweet from Stephen King. And I'm like, wow, like, we didn't even send it to him. He just like must have picked it up in a bookstore.

Amy 18:42

That's awesome.

Rob 18:42

Like, that's trippy when, like people you admire, for like most of your writing career, start reading your stuff. And it's like, oh, I hope they like it.

Amy 18:54

So speaking of Twitter, at one point, you posted a picture of the hotel that you use as inspiration.

Rob 19:01

Yes.

Amy 19:02

And I commented that it immediately made me think of The Shining.

Rob 19:06

Yeah.

Amy 19:06

And then, and then there's a line in the book that says something like, I'm not going to get it exactly right. But there's nothing scarier than a little girl with dark hair hanging in her face or something like that. Is that a nod to The Shining?

Rob 19:19

Actually, no, that's just sort of like my constant fear of like, like Japanese horror movies, like The Ring and stuff. I'll tell you a really funny story real quick. So, I used to work in a bookstore, I was running a publishing company out of the basement, and there was like, and also in the basement, there was the

storage room for the apartment building over it. And there was this creepy stairwell living upstairs and one day I'm walking up the stairwell and there was this girl who had to be like maybe nine or 10. And she was like she was tenant to one of the families like she lived in one of the families in the building. And she must have been in the storage area. So, I'm going up the stairs. She was coming up behind me and she tripped. And I turn around and there this little girl on her on the stairs on her hands with their hair in front of her face, like kind of yelling, and I just scream like scream, scream. And then like she screams because she's like, why is this grown man screaming at me? And then I'm like, I'm screaming at a 10-year-old girl in a stairwell, I gotta go. And I just ran, and she was okay. But like, you know, it's actually it's more of a nod to that moment than anything, because I don't think I've ever been so scared my life. And I felt so bad.

Amy 20:31

That's funny.

Rob 20:31

But...but...but creepy kids are creepy.

Amy 20:35

So, the librarian in all of us have had this conversation about your book. It's one of the first meant one of the first it's one of the only real hybrids like, is it in sci fi? Is it in mystery? Like, where would you expect to find this book on a library shelf?

Rob 20:55

I don't know. I don't know. I guess like my, my whole thing now is just making your job harder. It's weird because I've like, I've gone into Barnes and Noble, like different Barnes and Nobles, different bookstores, and I found my books in sci fi in in mystery and thriller on just on the general literature shelf. Like, I don't know, the genre stuff is weird to me, because it's like, you know, I'm less interested in trying to conform to genre, like, I love the idea of like mashing up different things. And it does sort of like, I feel like it does kind of hurt me a little bit sometimes, because I've got my foot in two streams, you know, instead of like being like strictly one and easy to categorize. You know, sometimes like they can get lost in the shuffle. Because people are like, well, is it a mystery? No, not really. It's sci fi. Then the...the sci fi people are like, well, it's more of a thriller. So, it turns into like a weird back and forth.

Amy 21:50

Well, we just put you in fiction, because we can't go wrong.

Rob 21:54

Yeah.

Nicole 21:56

Which, honestly, we were talking about it and the reasoning for that, is that, where are people gonna go? You know, and if they're looking for you, they're gonna look for The Warehouse first, which is soundly in fiction. So that's where we put you. But really, at this point, it is you and Sarah Gailey.
<unintelligible>

Rob 22:15

Cool. That that is good company to be keeping.

Amy 22:20

Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, I don't want to take too much more of your time. Do we have any any other questions for him, ladies?

Nicole 22:28

I do.

Rob 22:29

Okay, cool.

Nicole 22:30

The big thing that I wanted to ask. So, January is against the idea of meddling with time for good reasons, when it's her job, as she is tasked with making sure that time does not get meddled with, but also I think on a more like metaphorical level. In order to deal with her grief, she has to be very strong about not thinking that it's possible to go back and save her loved one, you know, she has to live with that. But is that your opinion is that, like, if you could go back in time and stop climate change? Or stop the Titanic from sinking? Is that something that you would do? Or do you believe that that's immoral?

Rob 23:19

You know, see that? See? That's an interesting question. Because I think you can look at it from two sides. You know, like, if I'm looking at it from within the world of the book, then I wouldn't do it because the worlds that the book very clearly establishes, like if you go back and make big changes, like we are all in a lot of trouble. And that was a fun conflict to create with January where she's, she's like the ace time cop who can't go back and save her dead girlfriend, you know, and so she's literally she spends all of her time like 15 minutes away from a device that would let her get this person back. And it's just not gonna happen and she has to and to her, it's like, you know, if I got to play by the rules, so does everyone else I'm not giving an inch on this. You know, if you were to look at it in a broader sense, like outside of the world that I made up, like, would I go back and change things like I mean, you

know, I would think that this is a really, really interesting question. I really love this you know, on a personal level, you know, looking back at like mistakes that I've made in my past, you know, would it be nice to go back and change some of them and do them better? Like sure, you know, but I'm also pretty happy with where I am as a person so I feel like those mistakes got me to where I am and then changing that might not be great. You know, or you know, you look at it like if you had the opportunity to go back and stop the Holocaust would you stop the Holocaust? I feel like that should be an easy answer like yes that's a terrible thing. You know, but then weighing that against like what that could mean for the world like, you know, is the timeline going to try to like course correct. Is nothing going to happen is something worse going to happen? It's...it's such a weird, weird conversation, this is a conversation that you and I should have like, with like a bunch of snacks and a bottle of wine and like six hours, because

Nicole 25:09

I'm in!

Rob 25:09

Yeah, cuz that that is the best I can that like it's, it's a really, really fun discussion, you know, because it's like, it's also because you're playing in such a weird theoretical place because like, maybe you can just go back and do maybe it's like a multiverse thing. Like, you can go back and change things and explore a different branch of reality and not hurt this one. Yeah, yeah, my sci fi brain is starting to like fire on all cylinders.

Nicole 25:35

Good, we're getting a sequel. I love it.

Rob 25:37

I actually, I do have an idea for a sequel. And I've been dead set against writing sequels for like for a while now. Because like, I because I wrote a series, I wrote a five-book series, and I loved it. But, you know, it's a lot to keep track of. And after a while, it feels like you're inviting people to a Tupperware party, you know, and then I got, and then I was like, not gonna write big books that I'm just gonna make this big sandbox full of cool toys. I'm just gonna blow it up at the end and walk away and go do something else. And then, you know, partly because the TV guy, the guy who's writing the pilot was like, you know, we're going to be trying to sell this soon, it might not be a bad idea to have a second season idea in our pockets. And even that, I was like, yeah, but I don't have an idea. And it's sort of like, I don't know, if you're familiar with Doctor Who. It's the Doctor Who problem. It's like, the end of every season of Doctor Who it's like, oh, no, the timeline is gonna be destroyed. And you can only do that so many times before. It's kind of like, you know, okay, guys find something else. And then, like, maybe two months ago, I just got smacked upside the head with an idea that I was like, oh, my God, oh, my

God, not only does that work, but like, it works well. So, you know, and I sat down with a tea with Jacob, who's doing the pilot, and I ran it by him. He's like, oh, that's good. So, you know, it's like this weird space though, because like, unless the book does crazy, bonkers business, or the TV show gets made, it's probably not worth writing, because my publisher is going to be like meh, you know. So, I'm actually I'm kind of putting all my energy right now into another project, that, you know, I'm sort of developing and almost done with now just so I can get started writing it. And the sequel idea is like, kind of like cooking on the back of the stove right now. And, you know, I might go to it and or even just revisit it down the line for fun. But...but yeah, yeah. It's a fun idea.

Amy 27:33

If the TV show gets made, do you know, like, which service it would be on or which network it would be on or anything like that? Or is...

Rob 27:41

Oh no, no, nothing. So...so the way it works? So, it was it was optioned by a production company called Working Title. And so, they hired Jacob to like write direct the pilot episode. And so, he puts that together. And then, once they have the pilot, they try to attach like an actor to like someone to play January and maybe like one or two other roles. And then they go to like everybody, you know, Apple, Netflix, Hulu, HBO, the network's whatever and basically like, you know, okay, who wants to make this? So, I mean, it could end up pretty much anywhere, or it could end up literally nowhere. Because that's the thing. It's like an option, and, you know, so much stuff gets optioned and doesn't necessarily get made. But I gotta say, just like reading a script that someone wrote based on a thing that I wrote was like, pretty rad. < talking to daughter > What's that word says? That is ought, we ought to say. That means we should. Okay. Okay. Cool. All right.

Amy 28:49

All right. Do we have anything else ladies? No. Rob, thank you so much for sitting and talking with us. Again, we really appreciate it and your continued support of our library and libraries in general. It's, it's always appreciated. And for anyone who's listening, make sure you stop into Clinton-Macomb Public Library. We have lots of great reading challenges going on for both adults and kids and we look forward to seeing you. Thank you, everyone.