

## MORNING STORIES TRANSCRIPT

**Misdirections:** Author David Ebenbach tells Tony Kahn a story of a marriage, a mouse, and misdirections. David's latest book is *Between Camelots*.

**Tony Kahn:**

Hi everybody! This is Tony Kahn, the producer and director of *Morning Stories*, from WGBH in Boston. Once in a blue moon we'll get a story from the printed page, not too often, though. And it's not because we have anything against stories that have been published; it's just that very rarely do the published books come with a real live author's voice and it's the voice we want to be able to hear, too.

Well, that changed when we got a visit from David Ebenbach. He was in Boston, here, to sell his new book, a -- in fact his first book -- a collection of short stories called *Between Camelots*. Winner, it says here, of the Drew Heinz Literature Prize. What's that?

**David Ebenbach:**

Drew Heinz, of the ketchup Heinz's, you know, is this very wealthy woman who does not have to be spending her money on literature but does. It's now up to \$15,000 for a short story writer. Maybe a whole year's worth of income, you know. I've certainly done worse than that in some years.

**Tony Kahn:**

You have some good recipes for cardboard?

**David Ebenbach:**

[Laughs] It's delicious if you have the right amount of seasonings, so...

**Tony Kahn:**

Heinz, I guess, right? [laughs]

**David Ebenbach:**

Heinz ketchup, Heinz ketchup, everyone should go out and get some Heinz ketchup. The collection's called *Between Camelots* and that's, you know, in a sense where I think we do most of our living is between these high points of having maybe a huge circle of friends and everybody's close, you know, the commune idea or something, the Kibbutz.

I write about people who, whether in their families or in romantic relationships, are trying to find the connection that they need to sustain them. And it's like a search for food. It's urgent! Connections are scarcer than, well, I don't know if they're scarcer than they used to be, but they're scarcer than they ought to be.

**Tony Kahn:**

The story that I'd love to have you read – for what it doesn't say, as much as for what it does – is right at the beginning of your book; it's called: *Misdirections*.

**David Ebenbach:**

Okay. *Misdirections*.

My wife is using the mice as an excuse to let our marriage fall apart. All night they crawl around in our walls and we can hear them gnawing. "They're gnawing at the foundation of our marriage," she says. She complains I won't do anything about them or about anything else and that's the problem. Neither of us mentions the man whose sweat she smells like, these days.

But I put out humane traps, little plastic opaque boxes for them to get cornered in. Our son loads the peanut butter into the back ends. That same evening we've got our first mouse. The box rattles on the kitchen tiles. My son and I are going to go release it by the lake and he asks his mother to come. He knows and doesn't know. She wipes her hands dry and reluctantly agrees.

I can feel the mouse moving in the box as we walk down Jennifer Street because it's a strange feeling. I let my son carry it awhile. He squeals with the thrill of it, but my wife is silent. I think of something. I ask my son, "What if it finds its way back?" His eyes grow wide. "It's three blocks," my wife says, "the mouse isn't that smart." "Well, maybe." I say loudly and wink at my son. "I just hope it doesn't remember to head for Spate Street, and turn left and go to the fifth house!" That's not how you get to our house. I'm giving the mouse misdirections.

My son laughs, excited. Despite herself, so does my wife. She looks at me and then at our son. Surprising me she says, "I hope the thing doesn't tell all the other mice about our house on Spate either." Soon we're all giving loud misdirections, just like a family.

By the lake, we all stoop down and I prepare to let the mouse go. Our son has his eyes wide and mouth open, surprised and awed in advance. I look up at my wife and she's looking at me expectant, hopeful. This mouse, I think, is giving me my family back. Lowering the box to the ground I put my finger on the little door, ready. I am almost asking her with my eyes, whether we might keep the mouse. "Can we?" When she sees that question though, her face answers by sinking out of its smile. She sighs and looks away from me. I open the door. Before I've even caught sight of the mouse, it's completely gone.

**Tony Kahn:**

Beautiful story. There's not a single character in that story that I can't identify with, including the mouse. [chuckles]

**David Ebenbach:**

I often get it as a question at readings – you know, “is this you?” I want people to not assume that it has to have actually happened, to be powerful.

**Tony Kahn:**

Not, "did this happen to you?"

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

...but, “Could something like this have happened to me?”

**David Ebenbach:**

Right. A cousin-in-law of mine and his wife were sitting down to dinner in some restaurant, (they had just bought my book in a bookstore,) so while he was off in the bathroom she started to read. The first story is a page long so she can actually get a whole story read by the time he gets back, but by the time he gets back to the table she's weeping. And so my cousin-in-law sort of kicked my butt a little bit, [laughs] without provoking that...

**Tony Kahn:**

She didn't want a divorce, did she?

**David Ebenbach:**

No! Nobody smells like anybody else's sweat in that family; [Tony laughs] it's a wonderful marriage.

**Tony Kahn:**

Well then let me tell you what, what happened for me.

**David Ebenbach:**

Great!

**Tony Kahn:**

I'll, I'll...

**David Ebenbach:**

Please!

**Tony Kahn:**

The part that really got to me was the [big exhale] ways in which misdirection is unavoidable between a parent and a child.

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

You're trying to protect your child from experience and you're trying to give it the strength that comes from knowing you can handle...

**David Ebenbach:**

Mm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

...experience. You gotta let people make their own mistakes, and when the person in question is your kid, it's real hard to do and you get very mixed up. Well...

**David Ebenbach:**

Right.

**Tony Kahn:**

...my father got into a lot of trouble because of his politics...

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

...this is back in the time of the Red Scare and the Cold War. He really felt that if he didn't flee the country he might end up in prison. So, when I was six, well I was five years old actually, he – and my brother was eight – he had to flee the United States for Mexico and he came in and he told us that he was going to San Francisco.

**David Ebenbach:**

Mm!

**Tony Kahn:**

He didn't want us to worry but he didn't want us to know the truth, in case someone should come asking for him and we might inadvertently give them the information they needed to find him. Very much as in...

**David Ebenbach:**

Sure!

**Tony Kahn:**

... your story, you know, you want to tell the mouse the wrong direction to go in.

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

And you remember worrying about the, the person, trying to help them and knowing that you can't, feeling used because you were told something that wasn't true, that they didn't trust you, and so on and so forth. And yet as you get older you understand how, how sad and how tragic and how unavoidable it sometimes is – that you can't tell the truth.

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

Or the truth is more than you can handle.

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm, hmm. I love that.

**Tony Kahn:**

You know, and you've touched on something that was for me a, a deep experience at a period of history that happened long before you were even born. How does that make you feel to realize, you know, that your story, really is true on a lot of levels?

**David Ebenbach:**

Well, I mean, it's indescribable how it makes me feel. It's, it's the goal, you know.

**Tony Kahn:**

Hmm.

**David Ebenbach:**

To think that your story has effects beyond, I mean they really are just a pile of words, unless they're not just a pile of words. And to hear that they would connect to all these different things, I mean, it's great.

**Tony Kahn:**

Somebody's going to get this podcast; they're going to hear you reading this story...

**David Ebenbach:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Tony Kahn:**

With podcasts you can hear things repeatedly, which is great, makes it better than a broadcast. How can they reach you?

**David Ebenbach:**

I'm at <[davidebenbach.com](http://davidebenbach.com)>. I would love to hear from anybody.

**Tony Kahn:**

And I hope we'll get to hear from you and maybe sit down and talk with you again soon.

**David Ebenbach:**

Great. Thank you so much for having me.

**Tony Kahn:**

You're welcome. Gary Mott is with me in the studio right now and, and listening very quietly to that story. Gary, I'm wondering what it brings up for you?

**Gary Mott:**

There's so much that the listener can bring to that story.

**Tony Kahn:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

Because all the, all the cracks and crevices aren't filled in for you. I mean, you commented on the, the father-child relationship. I didn't, I didn't get that at all ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Right!

**Gary Mott:**

... because that's not ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Right.

**Gary Mott:**

... that's not my experience ...

**Tony Kahn:**

I'm so glad to hear it! [chuckles]

**Gary Mott:**

[Laughs] I thought about those that I know that are trapped ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Mmm, hmm. Mm, hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

... in unhappy relationships and how vital it is to hold onto those shared moments.

**Tony Kahn:**

That mouse that became almost an angel, a savior for them at that moment, right?

**Gary Mott:**

And that, you know, was that, could that have been a turning point?

**Tony Kahn:**

Hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

Could the man have stood up and ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

... and said, you know, I love you? And, yeah, I mean ...

**Tony Kahn:**

Right. **Gary Mott:**

... without painting with too broad a brush, here. [Tony and Gary laugh] You know, it's all about giving. The minute you think that you should be getting as much as you give – that spells trouble.

**Tony Kahn:**

His reading is wonderful ...

**Gary Mott:**

Yeah.

**Tony Kahn:**

... and I found things in it this time that I hadn't heard the first time.

**Gary Mott:**

He leaves plenty of space in between sentences to allow, allow the listener to let it sink in.

**Tony Kahn:**

That's a gift. Speaking about other people who've written with feeling, you've got, [Tony and Gary laugh] you've got some email there, yes?

**Gary Mott:**

Got a little note from Berta from Oklahoma: "Podcasts are the most fantastic new media form. I have found several great shows by recommendations on a podcast. I love stories and especially those with strangers that I can relate to or simply expand my worldview. I would like to thank you for all you do and I hope you continue to make enthralling podcasts."

**Tony Kahn:**

Well, isn't that nice?

**Gary Mott:**

"From Berta."

**Tony Kahn:**

My, my whole impression of Oklahoma has just been turned around. Frankly I haven't refreshed my opinion of Oklahoma since I was, well, let's just say since the late Sixties [laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

The late Sixties.

**Tony Kahn:**

When it tended to be inhospitable to people of my hair length.

**Gary Mott:**

Ahhhh . . . .

**Tony Kahn:**

But a lot has changed since then, obviously, including the state of my hair. So anyways, great to hear from Oklahoma, Berta.

**Gary Mott:**

An anonymous writer:

**Tony Kahn:**

Mmm, hmm.

**Gary Mott:**

[from listener]: " I recently discovered your podcast when I finally purchased an iPod. I've just now been through the backlog of your old *Morning Stories* and I'm finally caught up. There is one that has moved me to comment" (and he writes on and on about the story, [\*Mother Duck\*](#))

**Tony Kahn:**



Mmm, hmm. Mm, hmmm.

**Gary Mott:**

One of our, a Tony Kahn, voice...

**Tony Kahn:**

An early effort. [laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

An early, um...

**Tony Kahn:**

. . . but definitely worth re-hearing! [laughs]

**Gary Mott:**

...early bird. He says: "Keep up the good work. I listen to your stuff on the Number One train in New York."

**Tony Kahn:**

One other email here from Alan and Jackie in Silver Spring, Maryland. They say: "We're moved by the adoption story: "My Kids." (Which we had on just recently.) "Two of our grandchildren, by the way, were openly adopted.

"Incidentally, Alan was a WGBH Fellow in 1958-'59. At the time WGBH's logo was an ancient symbol for family. We were so enamored of this symbol, which represents a combination of a figure for Man with his arms raised toward heaven and Woman, with her feet planted in the fertile soil and two children; that we incorporated it into the design for Jackie's engagement ring and Alan's wedding band."

Well, isn't that lovely? They turned it into a family crest and in the spirit of public broadcasting I would like to point out to them that they are in violation of a trademark and they're subject to a hundred thousand dollar fine which however could be turned into a contribution to, [whispers] *Morning Stories*.

**Gary Mott:**

We're happy to send you an address. Just send us an email [Gary and Tony laughing] at <[morningstories@wgbh.org](mailto:morningstories@wgbh.org)>

**Tony Kahn:**

And another one who will thank you because then they won't have to support us alone is Ipswitch, a leader in file transfer software. Our sponsors: Ipswitch, I-P-S-W-I-T-C-H. You can check 'em out at their website.

**Gary Mott:**

Tony? It's been a great year. [Tony laughs] 2005.

**Tony Kahn:**

It has indeed and it's been a wonderful one with you, Gar, so thanks for all your help too.

**Gary Mott:**

And we'll see you next year. Happy New Year!

**Tony Kahn:**

We'll catch you then. Bye, bye.

[End of recording]

Transcribed by: Lynn Relyea