Podcast 555: The American Book of Fables with Dr. Matthew Mehan

Episode Transcript

Matthew Mehan: That quick American wit, right? That is a very important thing that doesn't grow on trees. It has to be fostered, and I think sometimes we forget it. The fable tradition was the preferred way Americans used to teach this

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: Well, Andrew, we have a guest today on our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: I love having guests on our podcast.

Julie Walker: We try not to do it too, too often because otherwise it's a completely different type of podcast. But oftentimes you say, "Julie, I met this really cool person, I want them on our podcast," and then we work to schedule them in. Well, guess what?

Andrew Pudewa: You got a really cool person.

Julie Walker: I got a really cool person, and we scheduled them in, and so today we have Dr. Mehan with us. He is a professor at Hillsdale College, and actually, I would love for the two of you to get to know each other a little better just right here in real time because, listeners, Andrew literally just met Dr. Mehan right now. And just to let you know, we are here to talk about his book that came out this year called *The American Book of Fables*.

I love the idea of having an American book of fables. And I was privileged to go to Hillsdale College this summer as part of their teacher training because, as you know, teachers in grades three through eight at these Hillsdale schools across the United States are using our curriculum. And so we were there providing some teacher training, but also just to bask in all the other speakers that were a part of the conference.

And Dr. Mehan was there, and he was sharing stories from this book, and I said, "Oh, we gotta get him on this podcast." So welcome, Dr. Mehan. So glad to have you here, Dr. Mehan

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you for joining us

Matthew Mehan: Thank you very much for having me

Julie Walker: So one of the stories that I loved that he shared right at the beginning, 'cause I'm in marketing, I'm chief marketing officer, Dr. Mehan, I don't know if you knew that, but I

am. And I loved how you called up Ford to ask them if you could use the image of this truck. So tell that story

Andrew Pudewa: Ford, yeah

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, I mean, I don't know if I had to do it legally, but I always like to assure publishers that I have maximum permissions for everything. So I called the Ford Motor Company and said, “I'd like to use your truck, this Ford F-250, for the cover of my book and for some images inside.” And they said, “Well, why do you want a Ford F-250? Oh.” I was like, “Yeah, for the 250th.”

Andrew Pudewa: Ah, perfect

Julie Walker: Isn’t that great?

Matthew Mehan: I was like, I'm waiting for my consultancy fee from Ford that I'll never get. I don't know if they did anything with it, but it was kind of a nice nod to the 250th to put on the cover.

Andrew Pudewa: So this is new. This is just out this year,

Julie Walker: Still warm. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: warm. And *The American Book of Fables*, that's interesting because most people would associate fables with Aesop or fables with something very, very old, whereas America is like, we're past fables. We're into real history. But there's something about the word fable that just draws you in, like this is going to be somehow an essence of the country, of who we are as a people, and I don't know that I've ever seen a book of American fables or an American book of fables before.

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, it was actually something that I realized was a kind of hole in the American literary tradition and a big gaping one. We haven't really had a big sort of representation of the fable tradition in 300 years. The founding generations were relying on people like L'Estrange and Caxton, and maybe if they had their French, La Fontaine. But there really hasn't been an American re-up of the tradition. And the book is sort of something old, something new, something red, white, and blue. About half of the fables are, I call them greatly adapted, , from Aesop, and I do change them quite a bit and, and add new layers to

I even kind of maybe even change the genre a little, sort of adapt it for America. And then the other half I wrote myself. And they're all, each of them are tied to regions of the country, to our animals, our folk history, our ecology, our national history, and then each of them are also tied to some sentence or even a word or a phrase from the Declaration of Independence.

So they're very much woven into both the American character, the American landscape, and animals, but also the American principles of our, of our declaration, of equality and rule of law, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, et cetera.

Andrew Pudewa: It's brilliant. I've looked at the Hillsdale curriculum for the schools in great depth over many years now, and one of the things that I think is so notable is that they kind of frame it as an American classical curriculum, an American classical education, which I think is so delightful because in this modern day, so many people kind of, Americans attacking their own country. Like we're not worthy, we're horrible, we've done bad things,

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, every country's done bad things, but what about all the good? What about all the nobility? That needs to reenter, I think, our narrative, the story we tell ourselves. I'm sure that's part of what you're trying to accomplish here

Matthew Mehan: Very much so. I've referred to the book as a kind of gratitude machine. Like it fosters gratitude of three sorts. One, gratitude, a sort of attention to the family, right? It's a family book for littles, middles, and bigs, designed to be read aloud and sort of participate in the family. But it also is constantly making reference to founding families of different regions.

The names that are particularly in each place are the families that settled that area. So there's that sort of gratitude to the family. But then there's also gratitude to the Founding Fathers and to all the settlers and the American citizens who came before us, and there's that sort of patriotic gratitude.

And then the landscape and the beautiful places. The book takes place in thirteen chapters for the thirteen colonies, a nice- another sort of Easter egg nod. But, it goes around the country with Hugh the Manatee, this big, fat marine mammal, who winds up having to find different funny ways to inventively haul his bulk around the lower 48.

But we go to national parks like Glacier National. There's a whole chapter at Yellowstone. The book takes you all over. But by looking at the beauty of this incredible country, you get a sort of nature and nature's God, another line from the Declaration, gratitude to God, too, a kind of thank you for this great gift of this nation.

So I think it is a kind of refocusing the attention. We talk about history, warts and all, but at this point, it's basically just a photo shoot of people's warts, right? It's all bad news. And so I try to sort of flip the script and really do exactly that, sort of show the sacrifice, the nobility, the beauty of the American story.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, when I was homeschooling my kids way back when, we did Beautiful Feet Books geography. Did you ever do that book?

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, we had several of the Beautiful Feet book series for our kids, and we even had a little writing lessons based on some of those books at one point.

Julie Walker: and I remember reading some of the Holling Clansy Holling books of Paddle to the Sea, and you know what? As a child, my dad read that out loud to us, and I was born

and raised in Minnesota, and so that was very near and dear to me, the Great Lakes journey. But this is kind of that book on steroids.

It's all the regions of the United States, starting in Florida, right? Don't you start in the Everglades and wander on through?

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, we sort of start, start in the lowlands and sort of the places of early exploration when the Spanish came. But also I talk about the English and the Spanish, kind of bumping into each other at the very beginning. And that's where we introduce Hugh Manatee, right? A kind of walking, talking dad joke, a walking pun on human nature, right?

But it also, he's sent on a mission by his congregation or aggregation of, , of manatees because there's a huge hurricane. And so they actually have a Congress and meet, which is a kind of funny nod to the signing of the Declaration of Independence that met during the storm of the British invasion. And so that sends him off on a mission to try to basically find friends and allies to help him rebuild and rescue after the storm. But obviously the story goes much further than that.

Andrew Pudewa: So you've got several layers of meaning and historical significance as well as humor. , much like a good movie has jokes for the adults watching it even though it's a children's movie, your book does this as well

Matthew Mehan: 100%. Brad Bird's The Incredibles is sort of my beau ideal of movie that's kind of for kids, but is also basically for adults. And the, each, each section of the book takes you through a... Like for instance, we have Chapter Four, we go to the Great Lakes and great rivers of the Middle West, right?

And Mississippi, Missouri, the Ohio , and that's the section that is teaching you about the right to life in, that's, that's so highlighted in the Declaration. Then we go to the Great Plains, and we teach you about liberty, right? And where the buffalo roam, right? This seeming, you can go anywhere, but actually there are rules, liberty and law.

Like, you actually have to follow the water and mind the wildfires and raiding parties of, of the Indians on The Plains. And then you go for the pursuit of happiness. It turns out the pursuit of happiness is difficult, and it's climbing the mountains of the Front Range in the Colorado Rockies.

But in each of those sections where you sort of you have those layered meanings of trying to understand what the Declaration teaches us, each of those has sections for littles, middles, and bigs. And there are nursery rhymes, old and new, for littles. Then there are fables, old and new, for middles.

And then for bigs, there's primary source material, both from the region and from the founding, but then there are short stories and poems that I've written. There's old poems that American settlers and American founding era writers have put together. But there's also

letters from Washington and Adams, an op-ed by Frederick Douglass about Bleeding Kansas to talk about liberty.

And those are woven together very often with stories, episodic stories in each of the big section of Hugh Manatee, which the parents can read aloud to the kids as much as they think they can or should, right? So littles, middles, and bigs, but really the whole family can enjoy the most of the book.

But it's, the older parts are meant to be sort of read aloud and a judgment call by the parent.

Julie Walker: So I'm looking at part one, and by the way, I have to laugh at this. You have some witty wise sayings at the beginning of the book, and the first quote is from John Adams, “The man who intends to become skillful in any science must be content to study such authors as have written upon it.” And then his next quote is also John Adams.

It actually says, “Also John Adams.” And then the third quote, “still John Adams.” And the fourth one, “not John Adams.” “Foster your good mother wit, without which all wise learning is but half lame.” Is that something that you wrote?

Andrew Pudewa: If it wasn't John Adams, who was it?

Julie Walker: Yeah, that's what I'm wondering

Matthew Mehan: It's taken from a line from Geoffrey Chaucer actually, about Good Mother Wit, but it's also sort of adopting a series of poets including Thomas More, Shakespeare, and Ben Franklin. It's this sort of through line of the witty, wise citizen. And wit and wisdom is always what Ben Franklin said in Poor Richard's Almanack that he wanted to fashion.

Which is why I chose fables, because the fable tradition really is about teaching you the kind of, not just morals, but, like, how morals take place in the city. Sort of, and how to identify bad people, right, and bad things, and bad ideas quickly. But also how to sort of manage to be good in complex situations, right?

A certain kind of foxiness to being good, right? Which is, which is what... This is why I had in the very beginning as well, and I know you thought it was an arresting image, but this caduceus, that image is an image of Matthew 10:16, "Behold, I send you out as sheep among wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents, innocent as the dove.” So we have to be innocent and good, and know the high things and the simplicity of God and goodness, but we also have to be witty, wise like a serpent, right? And sort of the forked tongue and the complexities of this world. And I think that's a challenge that Jesus Christ lays down in the Gospels, but our forefathers and Founding Fathers said this is, we expect this of a Republican self-governing citizenry.

They need to be witty, wise. So a lot of the humor, there's always a point to the joke in, in... Because that quote, "Without which all other learning is half lame." Meaning if you know everything, but you don't know the clever way to bring it to fruition in community, you don't

know how to bring it about well such that things come off not tragically, but happily and comically and successfully, right? That sort of "I can tell a hawk from a handsaw." "I know there's more than one way to skin a cat. I can use every part of the buffalo." That sort of, that quick American wit, right? That is a very important thing that doesn't grow on trees. It has to be fostered, and I think sometimes we forget it. The fable tradition was the preferred way Americans used to teach this.

Andrew Pudewa: Wonderful. I notice that you have the picture, some of the pictures on your wall there. Beautiful art, very, I think, engaging for children, people of all ages. How did you go about the art? I assume you collaborated a lot with an illustrator

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, John Foley is his name. He is a realist impressionist , and he was trained in the Boston School, which-- and he can trace his master-apprentice line through the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, all the way back to Raphael's workshop in Florence, the Raphael Renaissance master. So he is the real deal, and he and I have been working together for years to try to sync up my ideas with his paintbrush.

And I won an NEH grant, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, and a Heritage A250, , Innovation Prize to fund he and I both. We traveled around the country doing research and sort of finding where we wanted to paint and what we wanted to paint. And but also to fund his studio time. So there's hundreds of illustrations. I, I-- this is the 250th, , go big or go home for A250. I wanted a serious work of art for the whole family, a kind of coffee table. And this is 400 pages, and there are hundreds of pen and inks. There are 13 huge three foot by five foot watercolors that feature for each of the chapters.

There's a big one. This is one of them for chapter seven in The Canyonlands. And then there's also dozens of beautiful, intricate watercolors. So it's a major civic work, , this book is. It's like think of like, , the new World War I monument. There's like it's a major civic work, but it's rolled up inside of a literary project

Andrew Pudewa: How long did it take you from concept to completion for this project? It seems like

Julie Walker: He was 12 when he came up the idea. No, I don't

Matthew Mehan: Yeah. Concept–if you do concept, 23 years. I've been thinking about rewriting the fable tradition and working on fables and trying to write them and get better at them for, for decades. My very first book was supposed to have two parts. A, , the Mythical Mammals Alphabet, some of the pictures of which you see behind me and then, an Animalia attached as an addendum, a kind of Aesopic romp, but it was just too big, so we cut it out and I set it aside.

And only. I got much better over the years at writing fables, so I'm kind of glad. Providence has its wisdom to save you from yourself. But I put one of the old ones in, slightly revamped. Only one of the originals made it in, just as a kind of testimony to the initial plan. But once,

about five years ago when I saw the 250th coming up, I realized, "Ah." And then I realized the Declaration, and more and more it's sort of the threads. Over the last year and a half, or well, now it's the last two and a half years, I've been drafting, writing. I did a white paper on the American imagination at the time of the founding, sort of what was in their imaginarium so that it could be restored, and that's a lot of the work I'm doing in the book.And then I, I did conferences, , on fables and, and Aesop, and just really read deeply into the genre so I understood what it was doing and how to do it again.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. Is there a most favorite part or most favorite piece in this book that you just kind of squeal with ecstasy about?

Matthew Mehan: I don't know if I squeal with ecstasy at any time, but if I were to think the one that I'm most fond of, it's for adults in a way. Children love to listen to it- Yeah ... but it doesn't strike them as a fable. It's more of, like, a little short story,

Julie Walker: I'm going to guess it's on page 209. Is that right?

Matthew Mehan: The Roses and the Carpenter. It's in the middle.

Andrew Pudewa: The Roses and the Carpenter. Oh

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, it's in the very middle of the book, and it's in the section of the declaration that's talking about, “And to institute new government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness.”

And I don't know if there's time to read it, I'll leave that to you all to tell me, but it's

Julie Walker: Yes, read it. I would love to hear you read it

Matthew Mehan: Okay, it's about a page and a half, but it's not, it's not that long. , and this is its image. , I'll just, I'll hold this up for you. This is the watercolor that's featured in it, and I had it framed because it's a special one, and you'll see why.

And every word is chosen carefully, and there are Easter eggs and symbols about the history that led up to our constitution. Everything from, you'll hear Arthur's legends, right? The old British monarchy and, like, sort of the slow build towards America. But I'll just read. “The Roses and the Carpenter.”

Above the Colorado River, above the remotest part of the Grand Canyon, above Aztec Amphitheatre and Elves' Chasm, up the creek through the Royal Arch, onto the southern rim of the Grand Canyon and above Pasture Wash on Signal Hill, a carpenter built his wife a ranch house with a magnificent view of the canyon.

He built two rocking chairs on the front porch, where the happy couple would look out at the Grand Canyon and contemplate the bands of rock that ran up the canyon towers and to the far northern rim. The two of them talked and wondered together as they looked down upon the mountain tops in the canyon, Tyndall Dome and Wallace Butte.

They would even see, far off in the hazy distance, King Arthur's castle, and Guinevere's too. The carpenter loved to study this view and talk it over with his wife. 'My dear,' he said one day, 'would you ask your sister Mary to send us rooted clippings from the great Shady Lady, that rose tree in Tombstone?'"

Which by the way is the largest and oldest rose bush in America.

'I would like to plant them before the east and west walls of the ranch house, so that to our left and our right our view of the canyon could be bordered by roses.' His wife liked the idea, and soon enough the clippings arrived. The carpenter planted the clippings on either side of the ranch, and soaking up the rising and the setting sun, the roses grew up for a time up the walls of the ranch.

But soon the rose vines began to bend under their own weight and flopped down upon the ground, where the horses would trample the beautiful clusters of rosebuds. The carpenter said to the roses, 'What's the matter with you? You're free to grow with plenty of sun and water from my well.' The roses replied, 'We the roses are hearty and fair, but it is not in our nature to grow so tall and grand.'

The carpenter scratched his head at these words and walked to the barn. He soon returned with wood, nails, and his father's tools, and he set about building two great trellises, first on the east side and then on the west side of the ranch house. He and his wife then threaded the vines in and out of each trellis up to the height of a man.

The days passed, and the roses grew and grew taller and taller to the top of the trellis and even out onto the high roof of the house. The carpenter and his wife enjoyed the view from right to left, all the while smelling the fragrance of thousands of roses. Bathing in the glorious sun, the roses said to the carpenter, "We told you it was not in our nature to grow so tall."

To which the carpenter replied, "Perhaps it was in your nature to grow so tall with the help of a carpenter."

Julie Walker: Isn't that lovely? I love that. He read that at Hillsdale, so I was hoping we would have a chance to share this. I want you to share just a little bit about where your office is. We were talking about that, , before we turned on the cameras, and so tell us about where... You don't work in Hillsdale, Michigan. You are a part of the graduate school in

Matthew Mehan: In Washington, DC, right on Capitol Hill. We are right next to the Senate offices. We've sort of got a little block, a city block there with a campus with a graduate school, undergraduate programs where students come out for a semester for an internship program and classes with us in the evenings. , and then we also run fellowships for professionals to think deeply about the Republic and what to do to make it better.

And then we run the Alan P. Kirby Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship. , and so there's a lot going on in the DC campus. I get back to the home campus about four times a year. I sort of plug into the mothership, , and recharge. I'm mostly out here in the DC, although I'm on the K-12 advisory board and have helped for many years on those things, so

Julie Walker: So maybe you know what we've been up to then, huh? Probably.

Matthew Mehan: Very much so. I've been helping with, with that for a long time

Julie Walker: Yeah, it's great. It's, it's just a delight to be- have Hillsdale as someone that acknowledges this amazing thing that we're doing here at IEW, and we're just so thrilled and honored to be able to have you on our podcast and promote not only Hillsdale College and the work that you do there, but also this incredible book.

And, families, I just encourage you, get this for... Parents, get this for your children. Grandparents, get this for your grandchildren and read it out loud to them. We're big read-aloud advocates here at IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: Absolutely

Julie Walker: So I...Andrew did mention that we and he was going to leave it up to me to share, and since it's such a great, exciting thing, we actually have a new high school level writing lessons book coming out, and it's called United States in the 20th Century, and I think, this would be a great read-aloud that could go with it.

But one of the themes that we've woven through it is just this idea of taking a road trip, and we talk about Route 66, which, which I love. So I'm excited that we'll be able to make that available to our high school families and schools coming in January. So maybe these go hand in glove. So we're excited about that

Matthew Mehan: This summer we took my family and I took a road trip and I did a Western book tour. We wove it all together and we went horseback riding in Wyoming, Yellowstone, Grand Tetons. I saw the salt flats of... Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah, Arches National Park. So very much the road trip cover.

Julie Walker: I love that.

Matthew Mehan: I did that for my national tour this summer as well as a sort of get out there America and see your beautiful country.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, and if any of our listeners are ever in Washington, DC, Dr. Mehan offered to take me, and by extension you, on a tour of the DC monuments and sharing some of the architecture because you know a lot about that as well.

Matthew Mehan: Yeah, I give a tour of the monuments and what they mean for self-government, and it is amazing how well we used to know the images of the Western tradition and how they can help remind our, us how to live well, which is kind of the work I'm doing in the book as well. So it's a nice dovetail.

Andrew Pudewa: And you know, you have such a kind of mirth in your face as well. Some of our listeners may not see your delighted smiles as you're sharing this, but I think when we

have someone who just loves what they know and loves to share what they know and loves what they do, it's, it just, it, it makes all of us better and happier people.

So thank you so much for joining us

Matthew Mehan: Thank you very much for having me, both of you

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you will find our show notes and relevant links. One more thing: would you please rate and review our podcast? This helps other smart listeners like you find us. Thank you.