

## 'After Class'

### **Ralph Ellison Walks into a Jazz Bar a Literary Chat with Marc Conner**

*Season 1, Episode 1*

**Ruth Candler:** This podcast was recorded prior to the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others, and the eruption of protests across the world that occurred as a result. Marc will address recent events in a short postscript at the end. Please stay tuned.

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**Ruth Candler:** Hi. My name is Ruth Candler, assistant director of Lifelong Learning at Washington and Lee University, and I'm your host for W&L After Class, the Lifelong Learning podcast. Every episode we'll have engaging conversations with W&L's expert faculty, bringing you again to the Colonnade even if you're hundreds of miles away, just like the conversations that happen every day after class here at W&L. You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds and continue your journey of lifelong learning. Thanks for listening.

Today, we'll be talking with Marc Conner. Marc's day job is university provost, W&L's top academic officer, and his roots are in teaching and scholarship as the Jo and James Ballengee Professor of English. In his 24 years at W&L, he has studied and taught Irish Modernism, The American Novel and African American Literature, among other areas of literature.

You may have taken one of his courses, The Bible as English Literature or perhaps The Modern American Novel, or maybe you were lucky enough to take one of his many Spring Term courses in Ireland. Countless W&L alumni, parents and friends have come to know him through his excellent teaching in the W&L Alumni College or through his warm companionship on the road through the W&L Traveller program.

When he took the job four years ago as university provost, we began to get nervous, for such appointments seem inevitably to lead to positions elsewhere. And as fate ordained, sadly, Marc will be leaving us this year to become president of Skidmore College.

Marc has published six scholarly works on the writings of Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson and James Joyce as well as a book-length study of Irish film. His most recent book, which we'll be discussing today, is The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison, which he co-edited with John Callahan.

Welcome, Marc.

**Marc Conner:** Thank you so much. Lovely to be here.

**Ruth Candler:** We are so excited to have you as our first podcast guest. So, your office, very English professor-ish.

**Marc Conner:** Thank you.

**Ruth Candler:** Have you read every book on the shelf?

**Marc Conner:** I have read parts of at least every book on the shelf. I'll say that at least.

**Ruth Candler:** That's fair. You have your coffee in front of you. I feel like every time I see you, you have that cup of coffee in your hand.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. I'm from Seattle, so a cup of coffee is like mother's milk for us.

**Ruth Candler:** So let's start with a question that might seem second nature. If you were taking Ralph Ellison to coffee in Lexington, where would you go? And if conversation about his literary work was off the table, what would you want to talk about?

**Marc Conner:** Well, I'd probably need to take Ellison to a bar. He was much more fond of a martini than he was of coffee, and he liked to also talk about his fondness for Irish whiskey, which is how he and my dear friend, John Callahan, first bonded many years ago.

I would want to talk with him about his favorite topics: America, American complexity, American history, the American novel and how it matches that American complexity. He has forgotten more about jazz music than I will ever know, so I'd love to talk with him about jazz music.

He started his career as a trumpet player and a jazz musician, and his great ambition was to be a composer both of classical symphonies and jazz symphonies. He has a professional expertise in music that is really important to his work. I have a feeling if I put a dry martini in front of him and asked him a couple of good leading questions about American jazz, the evening would take care of itself.

**Ruth Candler:** There would definitely be music playing in the background of that bar.

**Marc Conner:** Exactly.

**Ruth Candler:** So, congratulations on your publication of "The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison," which came out last year. You've taught and researched Ellison for many years. What inspired you to study Ellison, and how does Ellison tie in with your other research?

**Marc Conner:** I came to W&L partly to teach African American literature and modern American literature, and I'd worked on a number of African American authors before I came here, especially Toni Morrison. And then I started teaching Ralph Ellison. And I knew of his importance—"Invisible Man," in particular, was such a crucial book in the American canon—as I started to read more about him and started to write about his work, the complexity of his vision and the rigor of his artistry and just how well attuned he was to American complexity became so evident to me, and I increasingly began to get the realization that no other author I have ever studied has ever had such a keen understanding of how America works.

He liked to talk about America as both tragic and comic. The comic, he meant the hopeful, the uplifting, the promise in what he called those founding documents from the founding fathers. The tragic, of course, is the legacy of slavery and institutional racism and the broader legacy of American injustice.

What I find so amazing about Ellison is he's always going back and forth between the tragic and the comic. Right when he is composing a lament on American racial injustice, he's also giving us a presentation of the immense promise and uplift of America.

**Ruth Candler:** What a nice balance that is.

**Marc Conner:** Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes, indeed.

**Ruth Candler:** Correct me if I don't have this quite right. "The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison" took 10 years to write and countless hours in the Library of Congress. In preparation for writing this book, you read every single letter that Ralph Ellison wrote? And how many letters are there?

**Marc Conner:** All of that is accurate. It was about a decade-long project for John Callahan and me. We did look at every single letter in the Ellison files in the Library of Congress, and we distilled all of them down to what we thought was a very severe cut, what are the most important letters, and it left us with 1,000 pages of digital images of his letters.

From there, we made another cut, but we didn't have to cut out too much. Random House was really supportive of the project and let us do this massive, full-volume work. It's a very comprehensive selected letters. There are a few other letters in the archives. I wouldn't say they're not interesting, but they don't ... We wanted letters that shed light on Ellison's biography, his thinking and his thoughts and his aspirations, letters that told us something about his writings, and letters that told us something about American literary history. Those are kind of the three criteria that we were using. And the letters that we didn't put in are doing other things, so they're certainly of interest to Ellison scholars, but one of the things I like about the book is it's really readable. It almost reads like Ellison's own autobiography, and that's what we really wanted was to let Ellison describe Ellison in his own words, and that's what the volume aspires to.

**Ruth Candler:** Why was it so important for you to write that book?

**Marc Conner:** There had been a couple biographical studies of Ellison, only one full-length biography. Ellison is a contested figure. He had very strong opinions. Anybody with strong opinions about race, politics, literature in America, history, you're going to attract both critics and people who praise your work. I would say that the biographical studies of Ellison have leaned towards the more negative side. We wanted to have Ellison's words, his own testimony in front of the reading public.

What's been so interesting is the initial reviews have been so positive, and, of course, that's very gratifying as one of the editors to see that, but it's even more gratifying to see that it's as if people were hungry to hear Ellison describe himself and to really get at the closest you can come to actually talking to the man. That, to me, is a really good sign that there's an open-mindedness towards Ellison's ideas and views that I think is actually really healthy for America right now.

**Ruth Candler:** And maybe the need for inspiration as well.

**Marc Conner:** Oh, yes, we can use all the inspiration we can get in America right now.

**Ruth Candler:** That we can. What's the most challenging aspect of putting the book together?

**Marc Conner:** Well, I would say it was really tough to feel that one had an authoritative grasp over 60 years of letters from this brilliant man to all of these other brilliant women and men and to have a thorough understanding of that, everything from the footnotes we put in to explain to whom the letters were going, to the larger context of the letters.

This is where my being able to partner with John Callahan, who was the senior editor on the project, was such a gift to me. John was Ellison's best friend for the last 20 years of his life. He is the man that Ellison chose to be his literary executor, so he trusted his literary work to John. His understanding of Ellison is so encyclopedic and capacious.

To me, the most memorable moments of this project were the hours that John and I spent in the Library of Congress Reading Room. We'd be going through letters, and I'd say, "John, who is this person?" or "What was the context for this?" He would tell me about things that nobody else in America knows about Ralph Ellison. For me, it was just this great immersion with a very generous, knowledgeable scholar who has a unique perspective on Ralph Ellison.

**Ruth Candler:** So it's almost like you got to be friends with Ralph Ellison through Callahan.

**Marc Conner:** It was the closest one could come. I just missed meeting Ellison. I was at Princeton and he was still in New York, but then he passed away, actually the year I was coming to W&L. Hearing John evoke the man that John knows so well, and he knew Ellison's wife, Fanny, so well, to hear John talk about him, there's nothing like it. That was really a great experience for me.

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, I bet. After talking about that, what was the most unexpected part of the book? If you had to think back over the 10 years and then having it published and having it in your hands, was there anything that, 'Wow, didn't expect that'?

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. All the Ellison scholars knew about the famous letters, letters he'd written to Richard Wright or to Saul Bellow or letters about the civil rights movement. We'd been looking at those over the years in the archives. I think what I was surprised by is how many letters he wrote on very unexpected pedestrian themes.

There's a whole genre of his letters to people about how to make your own transistor radios from scratch. Ellison was a real tinker. He liked to make things, and he was a real ... we would describe him as a techie. He would build radios and he would build radios for other people, and he got into a whole kind of subculture with people like that.

The other big thing was his fascination with photography. He's in Rome in the mid-'50s, writing all these amazing letters about the civil rights movement, but he's also writing letters to camera store guys in New York, saying, "I need this kind of camera, this kind of filter. Can you get this kind of film?"

Everything he did, he did well and with expertise. It's really fun to see him diving into these other areas of interest, which maybe they shed light on the literature, maybe they don't, but they open up these vistas of his humanity like, oh, that's something he was fascinated by.

You can go to the Library of Congress and part of the archives are Ellison's own photos, and it's amazing to see what he wanted to take pictures of, for example. This is an area that future scholars are going to have a great time with. It's really interesting.

**Ruth Candler:** What were some of those pictures?

**Marc Conner:** Beautiful pictures of his wife, Fanny, and you can see a real adoration of her beauty and her character that he wanted to capture. Landscapes, when they were in Europe—the very crucial years, '55 to '57, when they were in Rome and he's working on his second novel while the civil rights movement is unfolding in America. He's writing about that from a distance and then looking at this old-world landscape of Europe and trying to think about how America comes from Europe and now here he was, an African American going back to Europe. Why he is drawn to certain landscape features in his photography is really interesting.

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, that's fascinating.

**Marc Conner:** And then a lot of pictures of the New York cityscape, which he moves to in the late '30s. Except for that trip to Europe, he really never leaves. He stays in Riverside Drive near Harlem for the entirety of his life. Never leaves.

**Ruth Candler:** Wow. You've said that Ellison's letters expose his most private thoughts, anxieties, hopes, and loves. What was most revealing about them?

**Marc Conner:** Well, the letters that I think are going to garner the most attention in that area are the letters he writes to his wife, Fanny, near the end of the two-plus years in Rome, when he had his one affair, these very intimate letters between the two of them about the affair, why he felt compelled to do it, both the terrible guilt and self-blame. But also, again, he was a very proud, stubborn person, and he doesn't exactly apologize for it. He talks with Fanny about how each of them had a role in bringing the affair about.

I won't mince words. These are tough letters to read. He continues to be a man whom I greatly admire, but that doesn't mean I admire everything about him, and these letters are painful. It has a lot to do with their inability to have children, his desire to have a son, the different recriminations between the two of them.

What is amazing is that the marriage survives and thrives. This is in '56, '57. They have another almost 40 years of really magnificent married life together as true partners and lovers. So it's a real ... As we do more biographical work on both of them—and there's a lot of work to be done on Fanny—it's going to be interesting to see how that relationship was able to sustain itself and what was behind that.

**Ruth Candler:** That's interesting that you say that, because when I'm sitting here listening to you describe that, my first inclination is, 'What did Fanny have to say?' I want to read her letters back. So to have that one-sided sort of view, just reading his letters about all that ...

**Marc Conner:** We went back and forth on that on a couple things. John had done a book in the late '90s called "Trading Twelves," and it was the correspondence between Ellison and his very good friend Albert Murray, another African American novelist and musician, and they published both, Murray's letters and Ellison's letters, so it was a back and forth. Amazing book, very revealing.

One could do the same with the Ellison, Richard Wright letters to show both. We had talked about including letters that he wrote to other people, but except for a couple footnotes where you really had to see what had provoked Ellison's letter, we decided not to do that.

So that was one of our hopes for the book, is that this is going to be the springboard for a whole new wave of Ellison scholarship which includes very careful study of Fanny, his brother, Herbert, the Oklahoma family from which he came. There's a lot of great work that's going to be done there, that is being done there.

**Ruth Candler:** You obviously had a perception of Ellison before reading his letters, and the letters that you just described were the tough ones, were tough to read. Did reading his letters confirm this perception? Did it deepen it? Or did your perception of him change in some way?

**Marc Conner:** I've said for years that one has to be very careful hoping to admire the authors about whom one writes. James Joyce is a great example, amazing author. Do I admire him as a husband, man, and father? Not particularly. I mean, there's lots of things to admire, but, boy, there's some ...

**Ruth Candler:** Yeah.

**Marc Conner:** And he would say the same thing about himself. I have said for years that there are three exceptions to that in my own reading: J.R.R. Tolkien, Lady Gregory and Ralph Ellison. Working so much on the letters, I have to say there are things about Ellison, what I'd said earlier, things about him I don't admire. Now that being said, anybody who does intense biographical work on another person, they are human, all too human. I think the biographer gets a certain sense of humility as we see what a great man, in this case, accomplished, but also the baggage he brings with himself.

Ellison's discipline, his endurance, his work ethic, his uncompromising approach to America and to himself, these are all things that I admire greatly. And there are things about him I would want to emulate myself, which is probably the real test of how one admires one's character.

**Ruth Candler:** Sure.

**Marc Conner:** But if I were to do even more biographical work on Tolkien or Lady Gregory, I'm sure I'd find things where I'd say, "Ah, I don't like that part so much."

**Ruth Candler:** Right. It'd be great if we could just research the stuff that made us feel good.

**Marc Conner:** Pick and choose the good. Exactly. Exactly.

**Ruth Candler:** Ellison was a hugely important figure in shaping blackness in literature in the 20th century. In looking at his letters, did you see him having an impact on writers that followed him, and if so, what does that look like?

**Marc Conner:** Oh, his influence is profound. He was changing the way American writers, black, white, and all across the spectrum, were thinking of their work certainly as early as "Invisible Man" coming out in 1952. And probably, along with Toni Morrison and Saul Bellow, the most influential American novelist of the last half century.

It's interesting. His influence, it's all over the place, and it depends on the writer. I discovered in the letters that in the late '60s, Ellison wrote a jacket blurb supporting the debut novel of somebody nobody had ever heard of, and it turned out to be Cormac McCarthy, who many would say is the greatest novelist since 1970, at least.

Ralph Ellison, he turned down jacket blurb offers right and left. Everybody wanted him to write about their novels. He chose to write on this unknown writer. He saw that there was real artistry, real genius here. Ellison had an eye for great art.

He also was very willing to say to a writer, "This is not great art." When he said that, there was no, "Oh, I want to encourage you while I give you criticism." He was brutal, and he would usually say something like, "You have failed as an artist because you didn't work hard enough." He always used the word "discipline," which for him, meant this unrelenting work ethic. If somebody sent him their novel and he wrote back and didn't like it, it was tough, just like he had taken hard knocks in the '30s and '40s as he moved towards greatness. He was unrelenting in that.

**Ruth Candler:** Wow. After I saw you talk about Ellison a couple weeks ago, I started thinking about letters and letters that have moved me. My family has this small metal tulle painted box that houses letters from my family dating back to the Civil War. One of them is written by a family member, which talked about his march through Richmond in 1864, where he stopped to pick a flower in a garden. That flower, he pressed and then sent with a letter to his wife describing that moment in Richmond and what it was like to be there, to be in that garden with all of the war surrounding him.

Holding this letter and this pressed flower in my hands moved me in a way that ... I can't describe it. It brings me back to a moment in time that ... I don't know whether it's my head, my heart, or what.

Did you handle Ellison's original letters and, if so, were there any feelings of physical connection to his history and literature?

**Marc Conner:** Oh, gosh, all the time. One of the most memorable parts of that work. All the Ellison art and material, they're all in boxes and folders. It's all paper, of course. And even ... The bulk of his letters, he typed them, and he used the old carbon copy. He kept copies of all his correspondence going back to the late '30s. It's kind of interesting that he knew even before—he was unknown—that his words were going to be important in some way.

Then on a lot of his writings, he makes hand edits and then sometimes goes on to incorporate those into a later draft. There's a lot of handwritten stuff in there as well, so you see his actual handwriting. He was a great smoker of cigars, and there is an odor, there's an aroma ...

**Ruth Candler:** Wow.

**Marc Conner:** ... to the Ellison archive. You smell his cigar smoke on the paper.

**Ruth Candler:** There's a connection.

**Marc Conner:** To me, that was unbelievably moving. There was something about ... There's still a physical presence of him in the material, which I found ... I love that. That was really a delight. Those personal letters to his wife, very poignant letters to his younger brother, Herbert, some of the letters where Ellison is writing back to what he called "the old folks" in Oklahoma, the ancestors from his parents' generation and before, there you almost get a feeling of the man's spirit being evoked in the letter itself.

I know just what you mean. There's something about that physical presence of the letter that takes you back to the moment when it was written. It's not like an email or an electronic communication, which is somehow unmoored from its time.

**Ruth Candler:** A little colder or something. Yeah.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. It just has a material connection to its time. You're holding something that you know was written in 1946 or 1967 or 1974, and it takes you back into that time for a few moments.

**Ruth Candler:** What does a letter mean to you?

**Marc Conner:** I've thought about that a lot. Letters, of course, are a transmission from one person to another, but it's also a preservation, and it's kind of what we were just talking about, of the letter writer and her consciousness from that time. Then it also takes on, particularly the letters of a great person, it

takes on the context of that time. A personal letter Ellison may have wrote in 1955, when we put it in the context of what's happening with the civil rights movement, it becomes a document about its time as well.

Ellison, at times I describe him as the last of the great letter writers. The last decade of his life, he was one of the first to embrace the desktop computer, and he was writing his letters on computer in the early '90s, before most people even knew what they were. He was on the cusp of electronic mail and the transition away from the handwritten letter or even the letter as a concept.

We almost came to the end of that genre with Ellison himself. And he, like Saul Bellow, like a few other great writers of that time, they were voluminous letter writers. It was a kind of compulsion to write letters for some of these authors, almost a kind of therapy for them.

**Ruth Candler:** You'd love to be able to ask him if he still found that therapy in writing when he was typing out an email instead of handwriting a letter.

**Marc Conner:** It's a little hard to imagine, but possibly so. Yeah.

**Ruth Candler:** Are you a letter writer?

**Marc Conner:** I do write letters. I write a letter every week to my sons when they go off to college and typical ... We have three sons. With the first I wrote a letter every week all four years. With the second, I started out that way and then a letter a month. We'll see how I do with the third.

**Ruth Candler:** Individual letters or one to all three of them?

**Marc Conner:** Individual letters. Yeah. Just short, one page. I mean, I really am ... There's something different about a letter and they don't ... I don't think they quite appreciate what it means to get a letter still, although there's delightful moments where ... Noah called me. He said, "Yeah, I got it. How do you open an envelope?" He was struggling with how to tear this thing open. I mean, it's a technology that's been lost.

**Ruth Candler:** Right. I can remember teaching work-study students what side of the envelope to put the stamp on.

**Marc Conner:** Absolutely.

**Ruth Candler:** Do you save copies of those letters that you're writing to your sons?

**Marc Conner:** Mm-hmm (affirmative). I do, yep.

**Ruth Candler:** And put them in a book or ... ?

**Marc Conner:** Well, they're Word documents, so I have folders, Letters to Matthew 2015-16. That's where I have them. If my drive gets erased, I lose the letters, so I should print them at some point.

**Ruth Candler:** Writers today seem less likely to leave this kind of physical record because the way we communicate has changed, as we were just talking about. We don't write letters like we used to. I think back to when I was in college and I used to write the obligatory Sunday letter home. Then, when my own kids were in college, they were texts. They weren't even emails that you could save.

Do you think writers are more inclined to save their written words, like you are?

**Marc Conner:** It's a great question. I'm in very close correspondence with Charles Johnson, the National Book Award-winning novelist and philosopher. I've written a book about his work. We have a rich email exchange, and I save his emails partly for future scholarship. I mean, this is important things that he is saying.

But, I mean, there's thousands of them. Who's going to go through this stuff? How do you archive it? How do you catalog it? How does one make sense of it? How do you even preserve it so that somebody knows where it is? Up until about 30 years ago, an author's papers would go into a library. What happens with those emails? What happens with electronic communication? I don't know that we have a solution for how to preserve that material now.

**Ruth Candler:** Add that to your to-do list.

**Marc Conner:** Exactly.

**Ruth Candler:** Before we move on, you talked about something the other day that I thought was really cool. There was an interesting connection between Ellison and Washington and Lee. Would you tell us a little bit about that?

**Marc Conner:** We found out that Ralph Ellison, as far as anybody knows, was the first African American to speak in Lee Chapel. This is in the early 1960s. He was on a speaking tour in the South. He was going down to the University of North Carolina, where Reynolds Price, a famous author and American scholar was. Price was in contact with, I believe, one of his former students who, at the time, was a young W&L English professor named Severn Duvall.

Severn invited Ralph Ellison to come to Washington and Lee and to give a talk. He gave a talk in Lee Chapel, and it's in the Ring-tum Phi and you can access those electronic archives and read the story. It sounds like he gave a talk similar to what he was giving at a lot of places in the early '60s about the American novel and American democracy and the complexity of American politics, how these things all fit together.

There he was in the old chapel with the Lee monument behind him, and Ellison was quite aware of the tragicomic American tableau in which he found himself, a black man in front of Lee in the chapel, in this richly complex historical setting.

I'm quite proud in a complex way that W&L brought him here. That was the year after the W&L trustees disallowed the students who wanted to bring Martin Luther King to campus. This, again, is part of that American story of our challenges, our failures, our triumphs, and all of that is part of what makes this institution what it is, just like it's part of what makes America what it is.

Now Severn Duvall, he retired and a few years later, his position was filled with another young English professor, and that was me. He was a great mentor to me when I started teaching the Bible as Literature class. That had been Severn's course for decades. I remember going over to his house before the term started and he gave me a box full of files and teaching notes and materials. I still have that material. That continues to be something that I draw upon.

That's a very W&L story, senior faculty member, even in his retirement helping a young professor learn how to do this complicated, fascinating job.

**Ruth Candler:** Wow. And then full circle to your book.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. Yes, exactly. One of John Callahan's visits to Washington and Lee, we had the dinner at Southern Inn and I invited Severn to come, and it was maybe one or two years before Severn passed away. He and John got to talk together about Ellison and about that visit. And Callahan is the epitome of the generous scholar, and he really gave his time to Severn, which I really appreciated.

**Ruth Candler:** What gifts.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. It was a lovely moment.

**Ruth Candler:** A couple more questions before we transition into talking more about you and your life at W&L. To me, letters seem very private, and I wonder if I might feel exposed if my letters were published and people read them. How do you think Ellison would have reacted to this collection of his letters being published?

**Marc Conner:** I certainly struggled with that. The letters to Fanny I was describing earlier, these are intimate expressions. These are things that one would not say to the world. These are things that, if you know they're going to be important for posterity, that's one thing, but these are very complicated. Anybody who does biographical work, there are going to be these moments when you're grappling with very delicate, sensitive material.

One of the things I'm quite proud of in the book is the professionalism and the respect with which John and I handled the material. We put Ellison out there in his full complexity. There's never a time when we said, "Oh, that letter, he doesn't come off well there. Let's not publish that." Nothing. We never even entertained that sort of thought.

But we did try to put things in a full context, which is the job of the scholar, to sort of explain where this material comes from and what motivates it and how it fits. But now, you then hand that to the scholarly community of the present and the future and you let people grapple with those words and interpret them as they will.

**Ruth Candler:** Some of our listeners will have come across Ellison while in school, but will not have read anything by him in years. Where might they want to dip back into his work and why?

**Marc Conner:** Three places. Read "Invisible Man." If you've read it before, reread it. If you read it last week, start rereading it again. It's one of the greatest American novels ever written. His short stories called "Flying Home and Other Stories," these were published posthumously. Half of them had been published in the '40s in Ellison's lifetime. Half of them he wrote and never published. We didn't even know about most of them until John and Fanny found them under Ellison's dining room table after Ralph had died.

**Ruth Candler:** That's crazy.

**Marc Conner:** John pulled them out, realized what they were, brought them out in book form with a beautiful introductory essay that remains the best biographical writing on Ellison anybody has done. These are great stories, mainly about African American boyhood in the 1940s. They're just remarkable.

Then a book called Juneteenth, which John brought out. Again, it's published posthumously in 1998. There's basically three big chunks to the unfinished second novel. Juneteenth is the middle chunk and it is the most finished, the part he worked on the most, and it's what I've called the deep heart's core of the second novel, to use Gates' phrase.

John edited it lightly. He had a very light touch with it. It was mainly done, so it has a completeness to it that is very rewarding and much of it is, I have said and written, the finest writing by any American writer. It's really a remarkable book.

**Ruth Candler:** Great suggestions. Thank you.

**Marc Conner:** And then read the Ellison letters, of course.

**Ruth Candler:** Right. I thought that was going to be the first one you started with. You joined the faculty at Washington and Lee in 1996. How have you seen the school change over that period?

**Marc Conner:** It is remarkable. Two things. It is remarkable how much Washington and Lee has changed in the quarter century that I have been here, and it is laudable and impressive, in my view, what has not changed. I think this is of great importance. I think the test of an institution, like a nation—how well does it preserve that which must not change and then how much can it change itself precisely to preserve those things that it doesn't want to change?

There are many examples of the changes at W&L, buildings, technology changes, generational changes. I think the diversity and complexity of the student body is the most remarkable change, in particular, the way LGBTQ culture is now thriving at Washington and Lee. Doesn't mean that it doesn't face oppression and challenge and doesn't want to grow in all sorts of ways, but compared even to five years ago, say nothing of 10 or 15, that transformation, as in the country, has been remarkable and largely led by students, which I think is quite laudable.

At the same time, the Honor System, from all I can tell, is stronger than ever. The Speaking Tradition is surviving the cell phone era.

**Ruth Candler:** Which is wonderful. Yes.

**Marc Conner:** Yes. Thanks to people like Ted DeLaney, who, if a student passes him on her phone, he will track her down until she puts the phone down and says hello.

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, I love that.

**Marc Conner:** And a number of us are sort of ... Yeah, it's great. Will Dudley has pledged, "I will not be on my phone when I'm walking on campus." He's said, "If you see me on my phone, grab me and I'll donate \$100 to your favorite charity." Isn't that amazing?

**Ruth Candler:** That's great.

**Marc Conner:** The Speaking Tradition remains. And then this is a place that is still unabashed to use the word honor without irony. And I think that is a magnificent thing, and it's something that I hope I can find elsewhere in the world when I leave here.

**Ruth Candler:** You once made a comment about how being at a liberal arts college with an emphasis on teaching allowed you to grow in ways that you wouldn't have otherwise. Can you expand on that a little bit?

**Marc Conner:** Certainly, professionally as a scholar, if I had gone to a Research I institution, I never could have moved out of a very narrow ... first three decades of the 1900s American and AF-AM literature. That might have kept me even from working on Ellison and Morrison, who are from a different era.

In particular, I never could have branched out into modern Irish literature, which I've now got my third book on Irish literature that's going to come out next year. That's been a whole scholarly direction that I've absolutely loved. Now that only emerged because in my fourth year at W&L, I decided to take students to Ireland for the Spring Term.

For me, that was the biggest life-changing part of being at W&L. This year would have been the 10th time that I'd be taking students to Ireland in 20 years. Being over there with students, looking at the historical and biographical structures like Yeats' tower and Joyce's home and so forth that they've been reading about, and putting the literature and the place right next to each other. And then just having a kind of camaraderie with students that you get in those intense learning experiences and can't have any other way, to me, that has been an incredible opportunity that the institution has offered.

And it's not dependent necessarily on the Spring Term. There's lots of ways W&L faculty and students have those opportunities, whether it's in the research lab or experiential learning or co-curricular work or the advising moments in the office, whatever it might be, but that kind of close connection with students that, in my view, feeds the scholarly work, has been the signal difference at W&L for me.

**Ruth Candler:** I like what you said once too about how you always brought your wife and children on these trips and how students saw you as not only a teacher, but as a father and a husband. I love that they're seeing the domestic side of that. I think that's very important.

You're not only a favorite of undergraduate students, but you are also a favorite with Alumni College and Traveller program participants. You made the comment once about your most exciting lifelong learning programs were not the ones that were in your subject area. You said you were both a student and a teacher in those instances.

Can you talk a little bit about this and what that means to you both from a professional standpoint and a personal standpoint?

**Marc Conner:** Oh, yeah. I mean, it's exactly that case, both the student and the teacher. Probably almost every summer for 20 years, I've lectured in Alumni College or the Lifelong Learning program. The best example of this for me was the Jane Austen program that we did, I don't know, maybe eight or 10 years ago.

And I had been teaching Austen—she's early 1800s British literature, so that's a long ways from my fields of expertise—but in my first-year writing course, which I've always taught, and the subject is coming of age, which I always joked means I can teach whatever great literature I want because everything is a coming of age, whether it's Lear on the heath at age 80 or an Austen character at age 14. We're coming of age all the time. I just got to teach great literature. That's how I kind of learned the

great 18th and 19th century writers. I would teach one or two of those every year in my first-year writing course.

Rob said, "Do you want to do a program on Jane Austen?" I said, "Oh, gosh, I'd love to." Of course, I instantly realized how little I knew about Jane Austen, so that winter, I read two of the biographies. I read her letters. I read scholarly work about her. I reread all the novels. And it was so much fun, and I think I gave pretty good lectures on Austen.

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, I have no doubt.

**Marc Conner:** And I incorporated a lot of film, recent films on Austen novels, which is a whole genre in itself. I emerged from that with this great appreciation for one of the magnificent novelists of all time, which helps me understand a Ralph Ellison or a James Joyce. Ellison's work, you wouldn't have it without a writer like Austen.

Another program we did was on the Brontes. Again, I taught "Wuthering Heights," "Jane Eyre," Emily and Charlotte Bronte. But I hadn't really done the Brontes in a serious way in my teaching, so I spent a year working on that. Gave the lectures. There's an Ellison letter where he says Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" is one of the three most important novels he had ever read.

Now if you're a scholar who doesn't know what that means, that Ellison is pointing to an eccentric and brilliant mid-19th century British woman novelist up there in the Moors in Yorkshire who is struggling in a male-dominated world to express a female voice and that "Wuthering Heights" is both this highly romantic but also tragic sensibility ... You just realize what would draw a Ralph Ellison to that kind of novel. If you don't know that about Emily Bronte, you kind of pass that over and miss understanding Ellison himself.

The programs were great fun. I got to read these great novelists in these cases, but it also was a crucial part of my own intellectual development. And that's something that I have said from the very beginning, the role of lifelong learning in faculty development is so important. There are things that I have read, things I've lectured on, other scholars I have met that have altered my scholarly trajectory for the better. And it wouldn't have happened without the Lifelong Learning programs.

**Ruth Candler:** We could list a lot of ways that you've had an impact on W&L, your involvement with Spring Term, the Africana Studies program. What stands out most to you and what are you most proud of?

**Marc Conner:** There's a lot of big initiatives that we achieved in the 24 years that I've been here, and in my role as provost, there's some specific ones, like helping to establish community-based learning, for example. The Spring Term is, of course, a major such achievement. One of the things that teaches you if you're in a leadership role is how collaborative that work is. All those things that I could list were the achievement of the faculty, the administration, the students, and I found myself in the service of those efforts, which, it was a great honor to be in that role.

What stands out to me the most as I am now preparing to leave a community that I've been immersed in for a quarter century is the people, without question. It's the students that I know, the students that I'll never forget. It's the faculty members that I so admire and have gotten to know so well, people in the community, of course.

One of the really wonderful things about being provost, and there are wonderful things about being a provost, is you work across the entire university. When I moved into that role, I moved out of just being among the faculty and now working with staff in student affairs and admissions and facilities and public safety. I tell you, my admiration and respect for the staff at W&L is of the highest caliber. When I think about the relationships that I've had and that I'll most value, many of them are with those people who give so much to this university.

**Ruth Candler:** That's funny, that was going to be my next question to you, was, we've talked a lot about your accomplishments as a faculty member. Let's move on to talking about provost and your move into the provost and what that meant to you.

**Marc Conner:** And I would just add, just because of the timing of it, I had the opportunity to work with a great W&L president in Ken Ruscio for the last couple years of his time, and then to work with a great W&L president, Will Dudley, in the first three and a half years of his tenure. That was a great advantage to me to get to learn from two really astonishing academic leaders, and that's been a huge part, I think, of my preparation for the next step in my career.

**Ruth Candler:** [Humorous tone] We're not going to talk about that quite yet.

**Marc Conner:** Fair enough.

**Ruth Candler:** What do you hope your legacy is at W&L, both as an educator and as the provost?

**Marc Conner:** Gosh, I don't think I've really thought about that. I think the legacy is the relationships. If I have a legacy at the university, it's primarily with the students that I've taught over a quarter century and many of whom I'm still in close contact with. That's a wonderful thing about this kind of work is that those lifelong relationships with students, and again the faculty and staff that I've had the opportunity to work with and get to know. As I get ready to leave W&L, without question it's the people that I will remember the most.

If there's another part of a legacy, I hope it is contributing to the whole ideal of a liberal arts education, which I continue to think actually more than ever is the most valuable form of education this country has ever created. I think it's never been more exciting to be involved in the liberal arts. I think it's never been more challenging. I think it's never been more necessary. If I've contributed to that at W&L, that would be a very satisfying thing.

**Ruth Candler:** Now that we've talked about your role as an educator and a provost, let's talk about Marc Conner the person. One of my first memories of you actually wasn't at W&L. It was about 15 years ago while I was watching Seth's karate class, and you were actually down on the floor and were one of his instructors. It was then I suspected that you probably had the patience of a saint.

Tell us how teaching in a karate studio differs than teaching in an academic setting. Or does it?

**Marc Conner:** Oh, well, it overlaps. Yeah. I mean, all teaching draws on a lot of the same principles certainly. The martial arts teaching I've gotten to do has really been special for me. I started in martial arts in college. I started in karate in '98, I think, here in Lexington. And a few years later got connected with a great teacher in Staunton named David Clements and began teaching for him, mainly the children's classes, and did that in Lexington and Amherst. Then I helped bring him here to Lexington to found the karate school here and taught for him for many years.

Now, I still teach occasionally up in Staunton for a different instructor. Master Clements taught me the importance of, or reinforced for me the importance of, enthusiasm and the importance of framing the critical part of your teaching—like, hey, you need to do this better—with something positive at the start and something positive at the end.

A young boy in class, seven, eight years old is working on his side kick, first thing you say is, "Wow, that's a great rooted leg you have for that side kick, but your kicking leg, you need to work on getting the foot position correct. I really like the focus you're bringing." You give him praise to open him up to the critique. Then they hear the critique and you don't leave them with that. You leave them with the praise as well.

That really matched the way I like to teach in the first place. I realized when I grade papers, the first thing I might say—no matter how bad the paper—is, "You're really doing something well. Here are some things to work on."

**Ruth Candler:** Nice penmanship.

**Marc Conner:** Exactly. Yes. Keep working on this. This is showing improvement. I mean, that's the envelope, is encouragement and positivity, and then within that the student is able to hear the crucial things that she or he needs to work on.

**Ruth Candler:** What a life lesson that is. I mean, as a parent just always remembering the positive as well as the instruction.

**Marc Conner:** Very challenging as a parent, yes, yes.

**Ruth Candler:** Mm-hmm (affirmative). All right, changing gears. Where's your favorite place to eat in Lexington and what do you order?

**Marc Conner:** The last couple years Napa Thai has been my favorite.

**Ruth Candler:** Hard to beat. Yes.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. And the red curry is a real favorite of mine. I always love going to the Southern Inn. I'm very predictable in that regard.

**Ruth Candler:** Fried chicken or meatloaf?

**Marc Conner:** I was just going to say. Unashamed to say the meatloaf there is phenomenal.

**Ruth Candler:** Book recommendation. What would you tell everybody they need to read?

**Marc Conner:** There's a little-known novella called "A Month in the Country" by a British writer named J.L. Carr. It comes in and out of print. When it's in print, I always order 10 copies so I can give it to people. It is one of the most moving, beautiful little novels I have ever read. Along with "The Great Gatsby" it's probably the closest thing to just a flawless little novel.

**Ruth Candler:** How'd you discover it?

**Marc Conner:** When I did my study abroad in London as an undergrad, the professor assigned that book as a book to help us understand the English countryside ...

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, that's great.

**Marc Conner:** ... and mural painting in medieval churches. The book was just transformative for me. That'd be the first one I would recommend.

**Ruth Candler:** Duly noted. I was going to ask for your movie recommendation, but what I'm going to ask you instead is to tell the "Road House" story because I think that is a scream.

**Marc Conner:** The "Road House" story. So it's 2007, I'm in Ireland with 24 students. We're on the bus traveling all over the place, and there's a student there, he's brilliant. He went on to work for the Obama campaign and Stanford Law School. Just a brilliant kid. But I overhear them in the back and they're talking about the Patrick Swayze movie "Road House." I turn around and I say, "Oh, yeah, 'Road House.' Yeah, I know that movie." And the student says, "Wait. You know the movie 'Road House'?" I said, "Yeah, it's a great movie." We talked about it, and he goes. "God, I just feel so much better about myself that you like the movie 'Road House.'"

You talked about how on the Ireland trips, they see me as not just Professor Conner, but in these other roles that all faculty have. And there's something really ... That's a wonderful example of that. At least in my case, I'm very proud that I'm not just books and scholarship and knowledge. I love sports. I love a good pub. I love movies like "Road House." And these are all great parts of life.

**Ruth Candler:** Makes you very human, doesn't it?

**Marc Conner:** Yeah. And all of those are connections with other people, students, community, whatever.

**Ruth Candler:** Now we're going to do some free association just to hear what you have to say. When I say a word, first thing that comes into your mind.

**Marc Conner:** Okay. Like, no comment?

**Ruth Candler:** You can. You can say no comment. Book.

**Marc Conner:** James Joyce.

**Ruth Candler:** Lexington.

**Marc Conner:** Barbara. That's my wife, just for listeners out there to know.

**Ruth Candler:** I was going to say—

**Marc Conner:** Not just some odd girl that came to mind!

**Ruth Candler:** I do know Barb. The next one was going to be pet, but that might not be a good one after you said Barbara.

**Marc Conner:** Well, that'd be Molly, our chocolate lab, so we're okay.

**Ruth Candler:** Okay. Embarrassing.

**Marc Conner:** Embarrassing, I can't think of anything.

**Ruth Candler:** You are so lucky because so many things come to my mind when I hear that word.

**Marc Conner:** Embarrassing.

**Ruth Candler:** Mountains.

**Marc Conner:** Mount Rainier.

**Ruth Candler:** Ah, your Seattle roots, or Washington roots.

**Marc Conner:** Yeah, it was out my window in Tacoma growing up as a kid.

**Ruth Candler:** Teacher.

**Marc Conner:** Scholar.

**Ruth Candler:** Colonnade.

**Marc Conner:** Majesty.

**Ruth Candler:** Family.

**Marc Conner:** Children.

**Ruth Candler:** Guilty pleasure.

**Marc Conner:** Ice cream.

**Ruth Candler:** Podcast.

**Marc Conner:** Great fun.

**Ruth Candler:** Oh, excellent way to start! On that note, is there anything else that you want to say before we go?

**Marc Conner:** Just in our conversation, I just realized how lovely it is to talk about the whole scope of my time at W&L, the students, the faculty, the staff, the alums, the parents, the trustees, the colleagues.

**Ruth Candler:** It is a wonderful world, isn't it?

**Marc Conner:** It is. It is, and you were very generous to give me a chance to reflect so capaciously on all that experience. So, thank you.

**Ruth Candler:** Well, thank you.

Marc, thanks for joining us again. It's been three months since we first recorded this podcast, which was our first ever. Getting to this launch has been a rewarding challenge, but the challenges we have faced as a nation demand a deeper perspective, and we feel it was important to give you the opportunity to share your thoughts.

Marc Conner: Well, of course, when we recorded this podcast originally, it was prior to the latest and in many ways most profound eruption of protest and calls for racial justice and equality in our nation that many of us have seen in our lifetimes. And it's impossible not to reflect upon that as we think about all we've discussed in the last hour, particularly about Ralph Ellison and his vision of America, and also what the liberal arts college is called to do.

It's very appropriate to offer this epilogue here at the end because Ellison's novel "The Invisible Man" ends with an epilogue. The last chapter has the Invisible Man hiding underground, and then Ellison wrote his epilogue, where the Invisible Man says, "I have a socially responsible role to play. My hibernation is over. I need to emerge, and grapple with America again."

And this I think is where we need to continue to think about what a liberal arts college education provides. It teaches us to think creatively and critically. It teaches us to grapple with hard truths. It teaches us to put in conversation the lessons of history, politics, science, religion, economics, social justice and the world around us. And especially it puts us into communities—whether it's a seminar, or a lecture course, or a civic engagement project, or just students and faculty and staff talking together about the world—it puts us into communities where we find common cause with one another. That's where hope for America is finally to be found—communities coming together in common cause in a spirit of understanding, patience, forgiveness, but also holding ourselves to the ridiculously high expectations that constitute the American promise. Ellison always pointed us back to those founding documents: the Constitution, the Declaration, the Bill of Rights. And he said, "America is challenged to be what America promises to be." That's what the liberal arts college finally tries to do, and it's one reason again that I am hopeful, stubbornly hopeful, at times absurdly hopeful, about the future of this country and of our great colleges.

**Ruth Candler:** Thank you for listening. We hope you discovered something new. To read more about today's podcast and check out other ways to continue your lifelong learning with W&L, you can head to our website, [wlu.edu/lifelong](http://wlu.edu/lifelong). You'll also find W&L's faculty reading list, "Sheltering in Place with a Few Good Books," and information on how to join our new W&L book club. We hope you'll join us again back here soon. Thanks again, and until then, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.