

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I: Dark Side of The American Dream (0:15 – 21:30)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol, welcome to CONVERSATIONS and welcome back to Paul Cantor –

CANTOR: My pleasure to be here.

KRISTOL: – with whom I've conversed on a variety of subjects, from Shakespeare to other literature, to popular culture I think twice before. And now again you've written, of course, extensively on popular culture, [Gilligan Unbound](#) in 2001, I think it was. And then 2012 was that *Liberty and –*

CANTOR: [The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV.](#)

KRISTOL: Excellent book, I recommend both. And recently Shakespeare's Roman plays, [Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy](#), which people need to read that too.

But first they can listen to this Conversation. So this is about a forthcoming, based on a forthcoming book of yours, which I've had the pleasure of reading in manuscript. Extremely impressive, will be a huge bestseller. Make all of those other, you know, Jack Reacher novels and so forth fade into the sunset by comparison. But it deserves to be though, really. And actually two of the most substantial chapters, which we'll talk about, are on very popular parts of popular culture, right, *Breaking Bad* and *The Godfather*?

CANTOR: That's right.

KRISTOL: Extremely famous. So how did you come to write the book? What's the book about? And then we'll talk about *The Godfather* and *Breaking Bad*.

CANTOR: Okay, it's called *Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream*. As you know, I'm a big fan of spontaneous order and so I generally let my books evolve. This wasn't planned ahead of time, I write essays, publish them and then begin to think how they start to fit together.

And years ago I wrote an essay on W.C. Fields and the American Dream for the *Weekly Standard*, at least in its initial form. I wrote an essay for *Claremont Review of Books* on Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, on aristocracy and democracy in America. And then I was invited by the *Hedgehog Review* to

contribute to an issue on the American Dream. And I wrote on *The Walking Dead* and other apocalyptic narratives to show that the American nightmare had become the new American Dream. And I began to sense that I had a book here. That I was drifting towards this idea of when the American Dream goes wrong, or what its dark side might be. And then I realized, yeah, *Breaking Bad* – that’s what I really need.

And I planned the book with those four chapters. And then I realized, wait a minute, *The Godfather* – I mean, immigration, the American Dream, those things go together. And *The Godfather* movies are the best study ever of the problematic aspects of immigration and the American Dream. And that’s how the book came together.

So there’s a chapter on *Huckleberry Finn*, one on W.C. Fields, one on *The Godfather*, one on *Breaking Bad*, and one on *The Walking Dead* and some other post-apocalyptic narratives like *Fallen Skies* and *Revolution*.

KRISTOL: And one of the things I like about the book the most, being a fan of the American Dream and a fan of its dark side as well, in a certain sense – or a fan of the fact that there is a dark side – is, I think you argue that there’s always been a dark side. It’s not like, gee, everyone loved the American Dream unproblematically, and then in 1968 or 1998 with post-modernism everyone said, “Hey, there’s a dark side.” I mean it’s – the American Dream in that respect is itself deeper than people understand.

CANTOR: Yeah. Although it is odd, I discovered finally doing some research, the phrase ‘American Dream’ only goes back to 1931.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: A man named Scott [error—should be: John Truslow Adams] wrote a book called *The Epic of America*, and introduced the phrase into American public discourse. But even before it was a phrase, it was already in decline. It’s amazing the number of books, *The American Dream: What Happened to It?*; and *The American Dream – Why Is It Being Denied?* And so, it really has been shadowed by a dark side all along, and I wanted to explore that. And that’s why I begin with Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn*.

KRISTOL: Say a word about that.

CANTOR: Because this is interesting. First of all, just to make a point, I’m always claiming that the distinction between pop culture and so-called high culture or serious culture is artificial. Many people would say, well, Mark Twain is a classic American author – what’s he doing in the book? Well, he was the popular culture of his day. *Huckleberry Finn*, in particular, was regarded as vulgar. All the vernacular language in it, which, putting it politely, was frowned upon and now it’s an American classic. And therefore for me it’s a good place to begin because I feel all these works I discuss in one way or another are American classics.

And, quite frankly, *The Godfather* and *Breaking Bad* have already entered some kind of canon of great works of the American imagination. The other nice thing about beginning with Mark Twain is he himself lived the American Dream, then saw it blow up, then re-lived it.

It’s interesting – I should say, I firmly believe that the American Dream is a reality. This is not a book trying to debunk it. Indeed, the premise of its having a dark side is it has a bright side.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

CANTOR: And it’s funny how all my authors illustrate that: W.C. Fields, Frances Ford Coppola, Vince Gilligan – they all have lived the American Dream. I mean they came out of nowhere. Coppola of an Italian immigrant family. Gilligan from Farmville, Virginia. And they’ve become major celebrities, and made a lot of money, also lost a lot of money.

And Mark Twain is the prototype of that. He was born Samuel Clemens, and made himself into Mark Twain. And one of the great aspects of the American Dream I study in the book is impersonation, imposture, creating a new identity. That really is the great promise of America. It allows you to create a new identity. America is the fresh start nation. You come over from Europe with nothing, and then you become some kind of tycoon.

And here's Mark Twain from rural Missouri, becoming what we would now call an international superstar. He really – he's almost the first literary celebrity, and self-consciously so. He gave himself a new name, created a public persona, dressed like Colonel Sanders before there was Colonel Sanders, and is a perfect example of this sort of self-creation.

He was enormously successful as an author, as a publisher. Published Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs and made a fortune on it. Then he lost it all on a plausible scheme for a mechanical typesetter, but the thing failed. Actually, I think he even had to go into bankruptcy. So, all my authors, creators, they all themselves illustrate the American Dream, and I never want to lose sight of that.

KRISTOL: Okay.

CANTOR: Yeah. But what's interesting is that they all had their ups and downs and so they grew to understand that there is a dark side to the American Dream. And *Huck Finn* is a great illustration of that. This is the kind of book that's described as 'beloved'. You know, 'a beloved American classic, *Huckleberry Finn*.' And when they go to make a movie out of it, they get Mickey Rooney to play Huck Finn, or they get Elijah Wood. And, you know, it's in some ways a children's classic.

Now, because of the racist language, it's very controversial about teaching it in schools. In Mark Twain's defense, I should point out, he uses that racist language not to defend it, but to show what's wrong with it. It's one of the great anti-slavery books ever written. But in any case I have to acknowledge that it's controversial in that sense. But generally speaking, they make it into musicals.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: They Disney-fy it, even, and it's a very dark book when you look at it. It's a surprisingly dark book. And it's got conmen, it's got murderers, it's got lynch mobs. It's got slavery. And that always puzzled me.

And then I read an essay by the English critic, V.S. Pritchett, and he said, this is the price you pay for American freedom. And the way I formulate it, if you're going to have a fresh start nation, you're going to have to put up with a false start nation.

And so much of the book is about conmen and impersonation; Huck Finn pretends he's Tom Sawyer for much of the book. And why is that possible? Because he's with relatives who've never seen him before because they're halfway across the country.

And if you go through it, it basically shows that people in America are constantly reinventing themselves, that they can move on, city to city, stay one step ahead of the law. And so therefore this country which promises freedom, can't guarantee that freedom won't be misused.

And so in some ways the book has a lot of entrepreneurs in it. Part of the American Dream is the Entrepreneurial Dream, but a lot of those entrepreneurs are, say, patent medicine salesmen.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And the thing that got me most interested in thinking about it was, the two biggest conmen in it are called the King and the Duke and they are pretending to be European aristocrats. The King claims to be Louis XVIII (error—should be XVII), the missing Dauphin; and the Duke claims he's the Duke of Bridgewater. And because they're appealing to provincial yokels, they can get across this masquerade.

But what I found particularly interesting was that Twain understood the logic of this. The American Dream is a profoundly democratic idea. With all its nuances, one fundamental point is that in America everybody should have a chance; you know, embodied in the idea that anyone could become President. But basically the idea is that no matter what your birth is, no matter what circumstances you come from, you can be a success. And that's wonderfully democratic, and this is a democratic country. Most people are unaware for example, that the U.S. Constitution explicitly prohibits titles of nobility.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: I mean now it seems, what's that in there for? But the Founding Fathers in their nearly-infinite wisdom, you know, saw that this would be a problem if we started handing out titles of nobility. So it's explicitly prohibited in the Constitution and then that's part of a democratic America.

So what is this King and this Duke doing, hanging around the American South? And the answer is, people want those titles back; this is the paradox of democracy that Twain explores in *Huck Finn* and elsewhere. That Americans, having broken with European aristocracy, developed this longing for it.

And so much of American social life are efforts to recreate aristocracy. And you can see it today. We have – we turn to our athletes: Babe Ruth, the Sultan of Swat. Or we turn to our entertainers: Duke Ellington, Count Basie. I mean, it's there everywhere.

And in a way it's the wonderful old Jeffersonian idea of the natural aristocracy, the aristocracy of merit. In America we're still going to have exceptional people, and it's a kind of democratic equivalent of aristocracy. But Twain senses it's not that simple; and that people actually crave the titles. And I think his fear about America was that it would somehow adopt aristocracy.

And he particularly notices the way Americans are suckers for aristocratic imposters. I mean, even Huck sees through this Duke and the King. I mean it's ridiculous to think of them as aristocrats. But these people just eat it up because they want it. And you know, I live in Charlottesville, Virginia, the hub of Anglophilia in America. We still have fox hunting, some places in Charlottesville. You know, Princess Di for example, what a strange phenomenon that was. Americans are just so obsessed with Princess Di, but she was the princess we never had. And Americans still long for that veneer of European aristocracy and Twain notes it.

It's very interesting in *Huckleberry Finn*, it's anti-Shakespeare. One of the things the King and the Duke do is stage Shakespeare plays. It's one of their many con games. They claim these are plays that have been performed for the crown heads of Europe, and they're just absolutely messes of the play. But people come to them. And Shakespeare really annoyed Twain. Twain was one of the early people to claim that the man from Stratford didn't write the plays. And the reason was I think he was envious of Shakespeare's reputation, and was afraid that English literature and especially Shakespeare was crowding out American literature. He thought of American literature as an industry, a nascent industry that needed protection. Shakespeare was the most popular playwright in 19th century America, especially in the American West. And I believe *Richard III* was the most popular of the plays, and Twain really goes after that in *Huckleberry Finn*.

And his point is we should free ourselves from European culture. Walt Whitman was saying the same thing at roughly the same time. And Twain set out to be an authentic American author. So that, for example, in *Huckleberry Finn*, he writes in an American dialect. He's not Henry James. He's not trying to out-English the English in their fiction. He deliberately writes in the persona of an illiterate young boy so he could use vulgar language and contractions. And that was part of his effort to create an American literature.

By the way, it's what Noah Webster was doing in creating the American dictionary where "labor" would never be spelled with a U anymore. He was hoping that we could create an American language to free ourselves from these European antecedents.

So, Twain really sets up for me in the book the problem with the American Dream: that, you know, at its basis it's democratic in conception and yet part of it is weirdly aristocratic. And you can see it in the point that the American Dream was supposed to be for everybody, available to everybody. But you know, that's going to produce similarity and part of the American Dream is to distinguish yourself. So there is an aristocratic component of the American Dream. And that plays back and forward in popular culture and it's one of the things I examine; how complex the American Dream becomes when there's a tension between these aristocratic and democratic pulls. And that starts to generate the dark side.

KRISTOL: And I suppose there are other aspects of the dark side, obviously, as well. We can – you get this wonderful bourgeois life, but that has its own limitations. So maybe that leads us more to *The Godfather* and *Breaking Bad*?

CANTOR: Yeah. Already in Twain you can see this link between American freedom and criminality. And by the way, it's already tied to the frontier existence and the Wild West. The Mississippi was the beginning of the West in Twain's, at least, young years. And by the way, I find the Wild West throughout these works I'm dealing with.

KRISTOL: Yeah, we should have another conversation about the Western, because that's such an interesting case study: the greatest American individualist. But then at the end of it, what do you have? A boring, civilized West: schoolteacher.

CANTOR: Schoolteacher, Walter White. I do think one of the things that these works, and especially *The Godfather* and *Breaking Bad*, examine is whether the middle-class life fulfills all the longings of the human soul. I think the answer is no. And I start from the analysis that in the 1950s the notion of the American Dream seemed to devolve into a purely middle-class vision. And you saw it reflected particularly in situation comedies, the Cleaver family, the Nelson family, the Anderson family. It was very limited. It was a wonderful ideal. People should work hard, raise good families, be nice to each other. What more could you want than that?

It is interesting, looking at this, I remembered an episode of *Leave it to Beaver* that is very relevant to what we're talking about, and thanks to the miracles of DVD, I was able to locate it. It's an episode where Beaver's class is discussing World War II. And one of the kids gets up and says his father was a hero, he was almost a general; he was a sergeant. And some of the kids are bragging about what their fathers did in World War II.

And Beaver goes home and he and Wally get out the old trunk in the attic to see what his father did in the war. And Beaver is crushed because his father was a Seabee. He was an engineer. And he confronts his father, he asks him how many people did you kill in World War II and Ward has to say, "None, but I did my part; we needed engineers." As Beaver says, "You leveled dirt? That's what you did in World War II, you leveled dirt?" And the interesting thing is, I didn't know how this would play out back in 1960, they did not have Ward say, "Well, you know, I was a hero, Beav." They did not have him say "we were all heroes, we all did our part." What he says is "we couldn't all be heroes." And he says "I did what I could." And that struck me as really interesting because now I think the tendency would be to say we're all heroes, we all won the prize and so on.

I think the show was close enough to World War II to remember the distinction between genuine heroism and a kind of feel good heroism. But it does say something about the ideal held up in this world in sitcoms: namely, that it was a limited middle-class virtue. And by the way, these sitcoms were contemporary with all these Westerns that were showing the alternate ideal. If Beaver's father had been Matt Dillon or Paladin, he would have been fine.

KRISTOL: The alternate ideal was in the past, right. This is sort of the sad undertone of –

II: Immigration and The Godfather (21:30 – 52:14)

CANTOR: Yes, that's the point. If his father was Matt Dillon and he said, "How many people did you kill, dad?" He'd say, "Well, let me see." And I think it's very interesting to set up the background in pop culture here.

Now to turn to *The Godfather* – in the book I discuss *Godfather I* and *II* which I personally think are together the greatest movie of all time, therefore I was really, really happy to be writing about it finally. And there, again as I said, it's specifically developed in terms of the idea of immigration. And that's so important, the American Dream, what attracts people to America? It's the American Dream and specifically coming from Europe to the United States.

And *The Godfather* really looks at it in quite serious terms of what was involved. And it was a movement in space and a movement in time. Obviously, a movement from Sicily to the United States. And basically that meant a movement from the 19th century to the 20th century.

And I think the greatness of the films is it shows how complex that was; and there were good things and there were bad things about it. And it plays out in terms – I get fancy in the book, talk about the difference between *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* – but it really comes down to two different kinds of community.

The kind of thing that Corleone is in the films: small, tightknit community, everybody knows each other. They're bound by ties of family. And that's the bright side of it. The dark side is vendetta. That's the thing that goes along with these ties of family. Somebody kills someone in your family, you got to kill someone in their family. And Michael Corleone when he comes to Sicily he says, "Where are all the young men?" And someone just says, "Vendetta."

So you could see why people leave Corleone. For Michael, and earlier Vito in the flashback, *Godfather II*, they come to Corleone as tourists and to get back in touch with their roots. And they can appreciate it, but they encounter a lot of violence there; and commit some of it, in Vito's case. And so we get the good side and the bad side of the small community.

And the same then for the United States, which represents a nation state, a *Gesellschaft*. What is specifically characteristic of the modern state is a way of relating people who are not related. The great thing that a society, a *Gesellschaft* accomplishes, largely through a market economy, is for people to deal with each other without having family relationships. And you begin to see the tension there. On the one hand, we love family relationships. They are supposed to be all warm and fuzzy. And yet they lead to this "us" versus "them" attitude. Bonds seem thinned out in an extended society.

And that's what you see. I mean, the Corleone family – now if you just started where *Godfather I* begins, is this marvelous scene of an Italian wedding. And everybody is dancing and singing and drinking and there's Uncle Louie and whatever. It's Coppola's tribute to his own Italian immigrant family. And you see they care about it each other. And Don Corleone, we're introduced to him as someone who is solving family problems. Poor Johnny Fontane needs a part in the movie, Don Vito will get it for him. Enzo the baker needs the naturalization of the boyfriend of his daughter; he will take care of that. Bonasera, the funeral director, his daughter has been beaten up, he wants justice. And there's Don Corleone performing all of the things that a godfather is supposed to do. And that's *padrone* in Italian, so it's this old notion, Old World patronage goes back all the way to ancient Rome. And he has these clients, and he'll take care of them.

And for example he doesn't want money for it. This is an act of friendship. And when Bonasera offers him money to wipe out these young boys that disfigured his daughter, Don Vito says, "No money. And I can't kill them. They didn't kill your daughter, it has to be reciprocal. They'll feel pain."

And you see that it's really an Old World attitude and there's much that's admirable in it. However when you – and again we concentrate on the people who'll benefit from this, but there's those two guys who are going to get beat up, some legitimate actor is going to lose the part to Johnny Fontane. And of course it all depends on corruption. All the judges and congressmen that Don Corleone has in his pocket.

And you can see why it's attractive, but also why we reject that world. It's not the world of law and order. Don Corleone is telling Bonasera, you know, your mistake was to go to the law. You thought that you would get just treatment by the law, but you're an Italian American and you won't. And that's what Bonasera found out.

So in some ways what's attractive about the small tight knit community is exactly corruption. That who you are is more important than what the law states. And so in that sense these people are criminals and they've corrupted the whole justice system. And so in a way the whole of the *Godfather* films, both I and II, are contained in this opening sequence, and then we see it work out.

And it's really quite historical in the sense that Coppola ends up telling the history of 20th Century America, or at least the first half. The film, chronologically, I think it runs from about [1900] to 1956. And so, you see in the story of the Mafia what it is to move into modern American society. That is, it begins as this organization, and it has its roots really in feudalism in Sicily, and it comes to the United States and in some ways maintains those roots.

It's very interesting in the film that Vito really doesn't come to America, he comes to Little Italy. And we see that in the flashback material in *Godfather Part II*, that, for example, he's still speaking Sicilian, the heavy Sicilian dialect of Italian. He lives only among Italians. There's some people from Naples, and some people from Calabria, but they're all Italian and it's still a very tight-knit community.

He actually comes over and finds there's Don Fanucci, an old-style Sicilian boss there, and he has to struggle with that. And the struggle is to become American. And we see that when the Mafia goes national. That great boardroom scene, when to end this gang war they've been developing, they organize nationally. And it is, yeah, the principle of vendetta has come over from Italy with them, and it's destroying them. They're killing each other and they have to end that. And there's this big point made that someone's come all the way from Kansas City to this meeting. They're obviously from all the five boroughs of New York, and from New Jersey and it's the Mafia going national.

And again, this is based on some historical fact that Lucky Luciano organized the syndicate in the 1930s. And Coppola shot it in the Penn Central Boardroom at Grand Central Terminal and the exteriors are shot at the Federal Reserve Bank in Downtown Manhattan, Lower Manhattan. And it's clear that he was drawing a parallel between this and American capitalism. That his point was this is no different from a boardroom meeting of a corporation. You can flip that on him and say well, it shows that the Mafia was providing a useful service during Prohibition.

Anyway, the movement is towards the national there. And again, there are gains and losses. There will be less mob violence now. And in fact, when they start regulating themselves, they create rules: we'll go into the drug business, but I don't want drugs around any school and that sort of thing.

Yet I mean, Vito goes along with it because he has seen his oldest son Sonny die and he's worried about Michael, his younger son. But he never recovers after that meeting. He kind of goes into semi-retirement, then retirement. And there's the sense that it's no longer the world he'd lived in. And again, the fact that it was Don Vito, this aristocratic title, and there was something heroic about him. In some ways things become just routinized and regularized here. Essentially they're adopting a corporate structure.

KRISTOL: Commercialized.

CANTOR: Yeah, and the ultimate target is Las Vegas in this. This is the thing that I finally figured out in working on this. I found in each of these chapters at one point there's a Go West Young Man chapter. That you're not fully an American until you're in the West. Because the West is the ultimate land of the fresh start. If you fail on the East Coast, you go to the West and you get a fresh start. Westerners are wonderful this way. They just welcome people and you can start over here and so many Western stories are about that.

And it is, in some ways, the story of Huck Finn. It's the story of W.C. Fields' career. When things were failing on Broadway, he went out to Hollywood and his film *It's a Gift* is all about that, the Los Angeles orange grove boom.

But if somebody saw how perfect it was that Michael feels he has to take the Corleone family into Las Vegas. Now, that's based on historical fact and Moe Green is based on Bugsy Siegel. And so Coppola and Mario Puzo who wrote the novel are not making this up.

But how perfect it is that to become fully American –they can't be fully American in Little Italy. They are, in a way, still too Italian and perceived as such. And Coppola was very aware of this, so that *Godfather II* opens with a scene parallel to *I*. It's a big party, except it's not Italian anymore. And in fact, the few Italians who show up, you know, "Where's the Italian food? Where's the Italian music?" Frankie Pentangeli can't believe there's a band there and there's not a single Italian in it and they can't play a tarantella.

In every way, in *I*, the guests dance, these Italian dances. In *II*, there's this professional dance team entertaining them. And people are pointing out, you know, Frances Ford, this is so inferior to that *Godfather I* part. He says, "Yeah, that was just my point." This is what happens when they become Americanized – they lose their ethnic roots.

Most of the guests are from Kay's side, Kay Adams from New England because Michael has killed off just about every Italian they knew at this point. And you know, the *Godfather* films are about coming to America and losing your roots. And there's a good side to that, if your roots are vendetta and the blood feud. There's a bad side to it if it means losing your ethnic identity and whatever made life real for you.

Now it's Las Vegas because it was Las Vegas. But it's so perfect because Las Vegas is like America on steroids. It's the quintessence of America and its rootlessness and its homelessness and its perpetual mobility. Because there are no homes in Las Vegas. Even the Corleone compound is up on Lake Tahoe. But Las Vegas is just hotels. And we do see one hotel after another in the film and it's like you're living in a hotel now.

Corleone is completely rooted in the soil. It's been there for, it looks like, a thousand years, more – 3,000 years because it's in ruins. But Las Vegas just springs up out of nowhere. And that's the way Moe Green explains it. Hyman Roth later says – Moe Green invented Las Vegas. Nobody invented Corleone; it just grew organically. And America is this country that's invented from the ground up.

And again, Las Vegas [was the] prototype of post-World War II architecture; post-modernism starts there. Charles Jencks, the architect, wrote about this, that our architecture was coming out of Las Vegas. Of course, the film doesn't explore this--it's fascinating that so much of the architecture is reproductions of Europe – the Venetian, Paris, Caesar's Palace, the Bellagio and so on.

But what we see in Las Vegas is the freedom from everything. You know, morality, "what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." You go to Vegas to indulge your vices. And this is the old mobbed up Las Vegas, not the new family friendly Las Vegas. And so when they are trying to get Senator Geary in trouble, they set him up for having murdered a prostitute; and Tom Hagen explains to him, "Don't worry, she has no family. Nobody knows she's here. This is as if it never happened." Now what happens in Carson City in this case stays in Carson City.

And this is what I mean, the rootlessness of the people. Las Vegas is one of the great symbols of the rootlessness of America. It shouldn't be there. Somebody said, and it was Bugsy Siegel, it was Moe Green, let's have a city here. And so I found it fascinating that the story of *The Godfather*, it unfolds geographically. That it begins in Sicily and the other pole is Las Vegas.

In between there's New York, which is the meeting point where the old way of life and the new way of life intersect, and in ways that I feel are tragic. That both Vito Corleone and Michael Corleone are tragic figures. It is, in some ways, they are still attracted to the old Sicilian way of life. They're still committed to

it. But still they do things in America that they never would have done in Sicily. And yet, at least Vito, won't go all the way to the American way of life. In the film, it's portrayed in terms of the issue of the drug trade; and here both Puzo in the novel, and Coppola in the film, depart from history because it turns out that the mafia was involved in the drug trade in the 1930s.

One of the main models for Vito Corleone is a man named Joseph Profaci, the olive oil king, as he was known. That's where we get Genco Olive Oil from in the film – in the novel as well. But it turns out he was dealing in drugs in the '30s, so the model for Vito had no problem with drugs.

But the film, I think, Shakespeare doesn't follow history in his history plays. He makes changes. Vito has scruples about going into the drug trade and hesitates and that actually leads to the attempts to assassinate him. And you see him caught between his Old World ways and these new ways. This guy Solozzo, who brings forward the plan to go into the drug trade, you know, he's seen as the more modern one. Several times it's said of Vito that he's set in his Old World ways, from the Old World. And of course Michael in the next generation tries to carry on the modernization, hence the move to Las Vegas and all that. But even he doesn't succeed in that.

So you see the problematic aspects of the American Dream, and specifically for the immigrant. Because the film does show – and again, this is historically true of the Irish, of the Jews, of the Italian Americans – that they were greeted with a great deal of prejudice and they were not able to go into many legitimate fields of endeavor. And I'm not defending gangsters, but you know, you're an Italian American winemaker in Mendocino County and then comes Prohibition. And there's your whole livelihood gone. And so that some of these people moved into bootlegging, it's at least understandable.

And of course the reason the *Godfather* films draw the line over drugs is the idea of victimless crime. Vito makes this point in several speeches that people want alcohol, they want prostitution, they want gambling and no one's hurt. And he does realize that drugs are serious business, as he calls it, and he says that "the politicians who have gone along with me will not back me anymore if this is what I go into." Now this is really interesting, because it's picked up in *Breaking Bad* then with the war on drugs.

But in any case, the *Godfather* movies are not trying to defend gangsters, but they do present them sympathetically. That you can understand why they ended up doing what they did.

KRISTOL: It seems to me that, and they also, there's a point Robert Warshaw makes about the earlier gangster movies, they also, there's something glamorous, there's something exciting, there's something about making your own rules and not obeying the law. Sort of the charm of the criminal life, which has to be, of course, condemned in bourgeois America. Moral America has to, of course, condemn it. But as they watch these movies, there's also a kind of admiration, a kind of – but then you leave it at the movies, so to speak.

CANTOR: Yes. No, it is. The gangsters are romanticized, for example. And this goes all the way back to the original *Scarface* and especially the original *Scarface* with Paul Muni. The idea is they're interesting, they're different. They have a certain flair. The ethnic component makes them exotic and they're not the sort of average person you deal with. In many respects they have aspects of the entrepreneurial spirit that we admire. They take chances, they're visionary. I mean, Moe Green, he sees this opportunity to create Las Vegas.

KRISTOL: There's also like an exaggeration of the American – you make your own rules. I mean, everything, freedom, there's this freedom pushed beyond reasonable bounds.

CANTOR: That's what starts with Twain. That self-creation is one step from imposture. And the conman is the flip side of the entrepreneur. How do you tell the conman from the entrepreneur? You know, Bernie Madoff turns out to be a conman.

KRISTOL: And a criminal and a capitalist.

CANTOR: Yes. And Coppola, he was surprised at how much the audience admired the Corleones.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: No, he was. And he has said, and I think he's wrong, "I made *It* to finish it. I just wanted to show them Michael is a monster." And yes, he becomes a kind of monster. I still think he's presented sympathetically in *It*, that you can understand this man.

And there's a certain logic – I mean, it all starts when he's trying to protect his father and everything follows from the moment when he kills McCluskey and Sollozzo in that Italian restaurant. And it's not that he set out to become a monster. And Pacino gives this fantastic performance. And of course Marlon Brando's performance is legendary. And so yes, I would like to point out that I'm not defending gangsters and I'm not defending —

KRISTOL: We'll stipulate that.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah – let's stipulate that. But I can't understand why people don't understand we react aesthetically to films. That we don't simply react with moral judgement.

KRISTOL: But also psychologically, don't you think? Part of our psychology is not simply susceptible to moral – it's the charm of breaking morality –

CANTOR: Morality forces us to repress a lot of impulses. And it's good that it does. We can't go around shooting each other and just taking what we want and so on. That's something that we impress upon our children.

But on the other hand, it is a sacrifice. And here I'd say I think these films are cathartic in the sense that they allow us to experience vicariously forms of crime, so we don't have to go out and do it ourselves.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And this goes back to our old friends, Plato and Aristotle, and their debate over Greek tragedy. Because Plato talked about this before, and in many ways his reaction to Greek tragedy is a prototype of how people react to popular culture to this day. Because Greek tragedy was, in a way, the popular culture of its day.

People complain about all the sex and violence in popular culture today, in *The Godfather*, and it turns out that's what Plato complains about in Greek tragedy, which we now think of as this highfalutin high culture.

And he, when Socrates discusses tragedy in *The Republic*, it's all about mimesis, imitation. And tragedy is an imitation – it imitates these things in life. And Plato is worried, at least Socrates is, that people will imitate these figures that have been imitated. And this is the same claim: comic books cause violence, movies cause violence, television causes the violence, now video games cause violence.

Aristotle came along and said, you know, this is imitation, but it is imitation – it's not real. And so this famous notion of catharsis in his *Poetics*, that tragedy is an imitation of a certain kind of that language, which arouses pity and fear and produces a catharsis of such things.

Now, it's very debatable what that word 'catharsis' means. And like many Greek words, it covers many different things. The root of it is a word meaning pure and purify and cleansing. I don't know if I can say this on TV, but catharsis is an enema. That's one of its root meanings. And Aristotle's point was you go to the theater for an enema. You've got all these bad emotions bottled up in you. And it is pretty amazing that this imitation can arouse those emotions and often more powerfully than real life.

In real life sometimes you have to keep control of the emotions. I don't normally cry at things in real life; I cry at *King Lear* like a baby. And that's Aristotle's point, this notion of catharsis: that we could get these emotions out of our system.

And I think the popularity of gangster films and criminal films in general has a lot to do with that. That people – the vast majority of people don't watch them to say, how can I become a bootlegger?

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And in fact, generally speaking, they show it's not going to be so great to be a gangster.

KRISTOL: They still, they have at least until recently, they had to ultimately come to a bad end, the criminals. I mean it's sort of an important unstated norm of these films.

CANTOR: Yes, and it's – oh, well actually it was stated –

KRISTOL: Or stated.

CANTOR: – in the Hays Code. And it's amazing. And again, in the Howard Hughes' *Scarface*, they have to put it up on the screen. They have people complaining about gangsters in the film. There's one point where a character harangues the audience. The substitute for the audience is a reporter who comes in and says, "I'm really interested, tell me more about Scarface." And, he went, "Oh, you people, you're the ones who create these gangsters. Don't you know that they're just thugs?" And so, yeah. And you know quite frankly, things don't work out so well for the Corleones.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And God knows they don't work out so well for Walter White. So it's very – I mean, and there's a reason why. A life of crime is unlikely to work out well. You can take that home from my statements. But it's a different experience to want to watch it than to want to imitate it. And I actually think that these kinds of films serve a social function in that sense.

There's a reason why sex and violence, you know, go all the way back to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and are there throughout high culture. Italian opera for example, and right down to movies and television. These are very important human emotions. And we – I think we can help deal with them in the form of art. Giving certain formal properties to it. It gives a kind of aesthetic control over these emotions which allows the audience to deal with them.

And I think that's really what Aristotle's quarrel with Plato was. And I'll take Aristotle's side on this with the understanding that, you know, there's crazy people who could walk out of *The Godfather* and want to start a bootlegging empire, and they find out it's legal today. But in that sense, I think these films – people don't go to movies to get moral lessons. They get enough of that in their life.

KRISTOL: Right. I suppose – I don't know Plato very well, but I mean the answer might be that it's different if the founding documents, the religious, as it were, documents, or basis of the civilization ultimately show crime paying off or not. I mean you sort of – it's one thing to have this as art that sort of compensates for the law-abidingness of the regime as a whole. That might be, you know, a cathartic effect. As opposed to the critique of Homer, which is sort of that it doesn't seem to provide much of a basis, arguably, for justice.

CANTOR: Well, I could –

KRISTOL: But that would be another question, right?

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean that would sort of be the –

CANTOR: And I do think it works for Greek tragedy.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Because Greek tragedy basically shows, you can't have these Homeric heroes in the city. Homer is not about civilized existence. It's about pre-civilized existence.

KRISTOL: So the tragedy is in a way –

CANTOR: The formula for tragedy is: take a Homeric hero, stick him in the city, and it's a tragedy.

KRISTOL: So it's *Coriolanus* also, kind of, yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah. And of course the prototype is Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, which begins with Agamemnon and the world of Homer. It ends up in an Athenian courtroom and only an Athenian courtroom can resolve the dilemma. The *Oresteia* is about the trials and tribulations –

KRISTOL: And it is a tragedy, yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah.

III: Breaking Bad: A Tragedy? (52:14 – 1:35:58)

KRISTOL: So what about – so it seems to me *The Godfather* in a way that was more conventional; in the sense that the criminality comes from the old country, in a sense, and that's the old regime. And that it's overcome – it plays out in America in a sort of certain way, a tragic way maybe. And who knows what the end exactly is, after the end of *The Godfather*. But it's presumably America. You know what I mean, whereas –

CANTOR: There is *III*, but let's not talk about it.

KRISTOL: Okay. But Walter White, I mean, *Breaking Bad* is the opposite. America has been – everyone's Americanized so to speak. American bourgeois society is chugging along. And then what erupts is an attempt to go beyond. It's to break out of the –

CANTOR: Yes. The *Breaking Bad* now.

KRISTOL: So in a way it's the opposite –

CANTOR: Well, the interesting thing is, geographically it's the same formula. Because the Mexican cartel substitutes for the Mafia and the violence fundamentally comes out of Mexico. And it's again this idea of crossing borders and the Mexicans are more traditional.

KRISTOL: Okay, that's fair.

CANTOR: For example, the Americans, there's no religion in America. None of the characters go to church, ever say anything about religion. The Mexican assassins go to a shrine before they come to kill.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And it's very interesting that –

KRISTOL: But Walter himself is in a secular modernized –

CANTOR: Yes, and that's then –

KRISTOL: – middle class, bourgeois society.

CANTOR: But it is interesting that the violence is strongly associated with some kind of – let me say atavistic ethnicity. That in some sense that this violence is coming from across the border, and out of the past. And it is in many ways – cartels, Mafia, it's the same idea. That is, all these feuds are working out among the Mexican and Mexican-American drug dealers.

And by the way, it's in terms of the Wild West. It's occurring in New Mexico. People have pointed out the cinematography of the show is pure John Ford and Gilligan admits this, and everybody sees this. Those great scenes. He might as well have had Monument Valley in it. His great scenes of the New Mexico landscape, that desert world which is seen as alien and archaic. You go out to it, into it you die. There's that episode where their RV in which they cook the meth gets stranded, and they almost die because they're in the middle of the desert. And there is this sense that the background to the whole series is a timeless world of nature that could not care less about human life, and in which human life plays out with its petty little tragedies against this almost cosmic backdrop.

So there's a real depth to *Breaking Bad*, from aspects like this. And I think Gilligan draws upon the Western. For that matter, draws upon *The Godfather*. The characters are always referring to *The Godfather*, also to the – Brian De Palma's *Scarface* with Al Pacino in it. There's the link. And in fact, Stephen Bauer who plays Don Eliado the cartel chief, played Al Pacino's best friend in *Scarface*.

Anyway, the sense there is that there is this older world honor and feuds and Walter White gets sucked into that, but in a way he likes that. He's been living – ostensibly, and again I'm not endorsing meth making. And in fact the show doesn't – I mean, the show has scenes about the consequences of meth that are just – the best anti-drug commercials ever made. That family of meth-heads, the episode is called "Peekaboo." I mean, there's no better portrayal of how horrible meth is and what it can do to people.

But again, ostensibly in the series Walter White is this high school chemistry teacher. He is diagnosed with cancer and given something like a year to live. And faced with the fact that he's got nothing to leave to his family, discovers all the money that's in meth. And he thinks he can simply make enough money. I think he calculates it's something like \$700,000 dollars he has to make. And then his son has cerebral palsy and needs medical payments and he has a new daughter on the way. And he wants to be able to cover the children's education. It's so middle-class in those terms.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And the one thing I point out is, the great issue in the series is health insurance. It is so perfect for the Obama years when it ran. That the great issue in the series is if you like your doctor you can keep your doctor.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And these people find out, no. Their medical insurance doesn't cover the kind of treatment they need. And I mean the whole thing turns around in some ways the ultimate middle class concern: does my insurance cover it? Does my job come with adequate medical insurance? It's so weird that – because it went into production before Obamacare became an issue –

KRISTOL: Well, but health insurance was a concern.

CANTOR: Yeah. But it's almost uncanny how that works out. And it's kind of a perfect image for the economic problem of that time.

But as Walter gets drawn into this, he grows to like the life of a criminal. At first it seems it's very middle-class, it's instrumental: I'm only doing this for the money. But he suddenly learns that there's a pleasure in going into hand-to-hand combat with these criminals.

I mean, Walter White when it starts is a milquetoast. He takes guff from everybody – from his wife, from his son, from his students. He has a second job in a carwash and the owner of that gives him a hard time. And the poor guy has to put up with everything.

By the way, let me parenthetically say that I think it's the best portrayal of the teacher I've ever seen in popular culture because popular culture tends to idealize teachers and to present them as these perfectly noble people. Vince Gilligan always talked about Mr. Chips in connection with Walter White. And you know, Walter White is probably closer to what the average high school teacher is. He is smart, he tries hard, but his students are bored to death and they treat him with contempt. All they can ever ask is, "Is it going to be on the exam?"

And I have to tell you, I live a charmed life teaching at the University of Virginia, but even I can identify with that. People don't know what it is to be a teacher and get up in front of a bored class. And I have occasionally taught high school in the area, and it's off the scale, the degree of boredom. And it's humiliating. It is humiliating to have to get up in front of people and, in this case, where you say, you know, I kind of am doing them a favor. I'm a professor at the University of Virginia, and I come to the high school to teach them about *Hamlet*. And the waves of indifference and contempt, they hit you.

And so, I – I can identify with Walter White. And I think in fact I'm –

KRISTOL: It's certainly the takeaway from this whole conversation, actually. [Laughter]

CANTOR: Yes, but I think a lot of –

KRISTOL: I'm going to publicize that around Charlottesville, around UVA; I'll just send it to your Department Chairman, your Dean, you know.

CANTOR: That's fine. I've got tenure. [Laughter]

But in general I think so many people identify with Walter White as someone who's frustrated with his middle-class life. I mean in some ways it looks like the American Dream. He's got a good job, steady job. He has a house in the suburbs, two cars, two children, a loving wife. It ought to be the American Dream and it isn't, because it is boring and because he's unfulfilled.

The background to the story is, that he was a near-Nobel Prize winning chemist. In the first episode he's got a plaque that he contributed to crystallography research that went on to a project that did win the Nobel Prize. And you know, it's funny, the name he adopts for his criminal persona is Heisenberg. In some ways he's fantasizing that he's Nobel Prize winning Werner Heisenberg. And so I think people can identify with that.

I make the point that Walter White is a superhero. If you want to say supervillain, I can live with that. But the whole mythology of the show is the mythology of the American Superhero. He's a kind of Clark Kent Superman figure. By day he's Clark Kent – he's a mild-mannered figure, you wouldn't give him a second look, especially women wouldn't give him a second look. But by night he changes costume, puts on that porkpie hat, and is Heisenberg. He really has a secret identity. And I think the series plays into the exact same psychology of why superheroes are so popular in America.

And by the way, as I speculate on the superhero in the book not as much as I'd like to, but there's a curious way in which our superheroes are our answer – our democratic answer – to traditional superheroes. Superheroes have powers, but traditionally they're magic powers, that go along with their birth. Achilles by birth, his mother is a goddess and he has all this strength as a result of this. American superheroes – it's like they win the lottery. You're just lucky enough to be hit by that atomic radiation so

that you become Spiderman. And it's very interesting, generally speaking, our superheroes are not born with their superpowers. Even Superman, if he'd stayed on Krypton, would not have had the superpowers. They had a problem with this, and they came up with all sorts of weird theories about why he gets that. But in some ways his superpowers only result from an accident, that he's been transported to Earth. And it really struck me that this was – characters – the American Superhero is Achilles without an aristocratic birth.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and a more democratic stance.

CANTOR: Yeah, it's a much more – it's like a lottery. You've won the literate lottery and you're now Superman or you're Spiderman or you're the Incredible Hulk. And so that's again, Walter White is just this average American, and he blunders into this situation – the diagnosis of cancer comes out of the blue and so from that he set on this course. And as he finally admits, he enjoyed it.

And throughout the series he's claiming, "I did it for my wife, I did it for my kids." And finally, I think it's in the last episode, if not, it's in the second from the last, or third from the last episode. Where he says to his wife, just when she thinks he's going to trot out the old excuse, "I did it for you," he says, "I did it for myself; I felt alive."

And again I'm not justifying what he does, but you can understand the psychology of it. And it is the psychology of someone who has lived a life of thwarted potential.

Now one of the things I observe about the show that I don't think anyone else has noted, is the theme of crippled masculinity in the show. This is one of those "ahah" moments that really makes it all worthwhile to study these things. I suddenly realized how many examples of crippled men are in the show. Walter White, crippled by his cancer, he goes and takes chemotherapy, loses his hair; it's clearly an image for losing your masculinity, your sexuality. His son has cerebral palsy, is crippled, it's clear all the things he can't do. He can't play football, they can't bond in athletics. And then there's Hank, the DEA agent in the show, Drug Enforcement Agency, and he ends up crippled when he's shot in a Western-style shootout. He ends up in a wheelchair, very frustrated by it. His wife has to take care of him and he feels he's lost his manhood as a result. And then there's Hector Salamanca, one of the drug cartel members. I think he's had a stroke, but in any case he always appears in a wheelchair.

And you know this started to add up in my mind. I'm not sure if Gilligan was even aware of this, but there it is, all these images of a form of crippled masculinity. And as I thought through that, I began to realize that this is a show about how masculinity has been crippled in a world that doesn't allow legitimate or healthy outlets for it. That in some ways in this world, traditional masculinity has been criminalized, and as a result, only criminals are masculine. And, you know, the Walter White, the big question of whether he wears the pants in the family – and in fact there are many scenes when he is pant-less and he's in his underwear. And his sidekick Jesse Pinkman at one point says, you know, "I wonder who wears the pants in this family?" And there is this sense in which his wife has taken away his masculinity. She belittles him, she manipulates him, and therefore he's attracted to a life in which he can be a macho man and in which he can face these really masculine men – Tuco, these murderers, and he can stand up to them.

And what's kind of amazing to him is he discovers he can because he's a very fearful man at the beginning. People push him around all the time, including his students, which is so frustrating to him. Suddenly he finds he can go against Gus Fring, the criminal mastermind of drugs in the Southwest. And at one point he'll say things like, "say my name," meaning Heisenberg. The name Heisenberg puts fear in mind. At one point he says, "I am the man who killed Gus Fring." And that reminded me of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, a film which is about all these same issues. And how he goes from being a nobody to being heroic.

Now, he does terrible things, but of course Western heroes do terrible things – Ethan in *The Searchers* for example. And tragic heroes do terrible things. A lot of this essay, I draw upon *Macbeth* to show that someone can be a tragic hero and do terrible things. Macbeth kills women and children, kills legitimate kings. He's still the tragic hero of that play.

And I think, you know, all of this great debate about Walter White, whether he's the hero or the villain, and I say he's something else: he's a tragic hero, who is someone who does villainous things, but in some ways it flows out of what's good about him. And we see that this Walter White is actually a very brave man, deep down. And, you know, Vince Gilligan himself was appalled –like Coppola with Michael Corleone – Vince Gilligan was appalled that people liked Walter White.

KRISTOL: Well, that's what I was going to ask: Does Gilligan intend that people be sympathetic to White, or that they deplore him? And what is –

CANTOR: Well, it's so funny. Because it – yeah.

KRISTOL: And then, and what's the truth? I mean, what happens then?

CANTOR: Okay, okay. He says that his fundamental worry was how to make this character sympathetic. I mean when he went – I mean AMC was like the 27th network he went to. It was the last stop for the show and everybody was turning it down. "Oh, I got this great show, it's about a meth dealer." And it's, "oh, yeah, this is just what we need." And it was, it turns out, to have been a brilliant idea. I think the greatest show in the history of television. I love my book because I discuss the greatest movie in history, and the greatest television series in history in it.

And for example, the hiring of Bryan Cranston to play Walter White, Gilligan said, this is – the network didn't want him; the guy's last thing was *Malcolm In The Middle* where he played, by the way, a henpecked husband. And in fact as I show in the book, there are several episodes when Hal in *Malcolm in the Middle* goes Walter White on Lois his wife. It's amazing to go back to that – rare episodes and see how Cranston already had Walter White in him, or had Heisenberg in him. But Gilligan was saying, we need this guy. He can make this character sympathetic.

And he was so worried the first season and then he couldn't believe how sympathetic the character was. And actually, you know, Cranston believed in his character. He believed he was sympathetic and talks about how this guy was pushed around all the time and finally asserted himself.

KRISTOL: And for the viewers, I imagine you watched the show in real time. What did the audience think?

CANTOR: It's split. And the famous thing is there's an episode, and I think it's the second season, when Walt allows a woman to die. She's a heroin addict who got his friend Jesse re-hooked on heroin, and has been blackmailing Walter, but she's a tremendously sympathetic character to so many viewers. And Walt sees her choking in a heroin stupor, and does not save her. It's a really interesting moment. Gilligan originally wrote it that he would shoot her up to kill her. Then he wrote it that he would turn her on her back to choke. And Cranston said no, and the network said no – you'd kill the character. And so they compromised, that in an effort to wake up Jesse he would accidentally roll her on her back and she would choke from that. Really interesting how things turn on details like that. You know, you could not convict Walter White even of manslaughter in those circumstances with half a good lawyer, and people talk as if he murdered her.

What's really interesting is they clearly considered scenes in which he did murder her, and rejected it. Anyway, many people gave up on Walter White then. And then there are many other terrible things he does. Now, I stuck with him to the end, and I guess I'm a moral monster for that.

KRISTOL: But the show did well to the end, right? Like didn't lose viewers.

CANTOR: Yeah. Well, I annually take a poll of my students. Seventy percent of them were with Walter White to the end.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: Now, I may have something to do with it. But it is interesting that at most it's fifty-fifty, the split. And Gilligan was appalled at it. His girlfriend, his mother, sympathized with Walter White and he couldn't understand it. And yet he had written the character as so sympathetic and of course it has so much to do with Cranston.

For example, people say that Walter White is a sociopath. Now, I've never met a sociopath, but everyone who has say you look in their eyes and there's nothing. Sociopaths don't even know they did wrong. Well, Walter White's eyes in that sequence when Jane I think dies – I mean, he doesn't – Cranston doesn't have to say a word and he tells the whole story of what Walter White is going through. Should I save her, should I not save her? He's the – Bryan Cranston says, I thought of my own daughter, and what it would be like if she died, at that moment. And he – he's no sociopath in that scene, there's great depth of emotion in it.

So I hate to quarrel with Gilligan because he is such a great creator. You know, he worked on *The X-Files*, now he's doing *Better Call Saul*, he's going to end up with the greatest record in television history. He doesn't seem to do anything that goes bad. Unlike, say, someone like David Milch or Coppola for that matter. But I think he – I think he was afraid of what his own imagination contained.

KRISTOL: Do you think he was just saying what he thought he had to say, though?

CANTOR: You know, I don't know. I think it's a little more sincere than that because every week he had to dream up these things that Walter White does. And I have met him, and I thank him very much for the opportunity. But he's –

KRISTOL: Him, Gilligan.

CANTOR: Yeah, Vince Gilligan, not Walter White. Bryan Cranston –

KRISTOL: But you could have met Cranston, right?

CANTOR: Well he actually came to the University of Virginia. I didn't have a chance to meet him, but I did listen to him talk about the show. They're both fascinating to talk, and they're very conscious artists, and they know what they're doing.

But I really admire Gilligan. I think he gave me like twenty minutes of his time when he didn't have to. But he's so ordinary. I mean he's so mild-mannered. You look at him and say, how did this person imagine this stuff?

And they had a great writing team – a great writer's room, which it's called. They would plan out the whole season, episode by episode. Then they assign episodes to writers to write, they'd bring them back and workshop them. And it's a whole team. And their ability to think of these monstrous things to happen – You know, they have the same imagination as criminals; it's fortunate they don't act these things out. And so I think he's a little afraid of the power of his own imagination and that again I'm not alone in sympathizing with Walter White.

It's interesting, I've read – there are a number of books out on *Breaking Bad*. They all say he's a monster. I've seen very little in print that's sympathetic with him. But when you ask audiences, you know, for example, I mean the ending is – spoiler alert – but the ending is so great. It's one of the reasons I think it's the greatest series ever, is that unlike *The Sopranos* for example, it had a really good ending.

And I remember as the ending was approaching you knew Walter White was going to die. There was no way he wasn't going to die. But all I asked for was that he die with dignity and he does die with dignity. And they can – whatever they thought about him.

And again, we know some of the endings they considered. They considered having him get off scot free; they considered having his whole family killed in the process and that would have made him look terrible. But they came up with an ending where he was able to keep his wife out of jail, get \$9 million dollars to his children, wipe out the Neo-Nazis in the series. The only people he kills in the last episode are people who are unspeakably evil. And to die in a meth lab where he was happiest in life, as a character.

I mean it was a brilliant ending; it was a Shakespearean ending. Shakespeare, I think, could not have written a better ending to it.

And again, people tend to see these shows in black and white, and just good versus evil. Life is more complex than that. We don't ask Dostoevsky's characters to be simply heroes or villains. Quite frankly most people are not honest about Shakespeare's tragic heroes. They are not nice people. Hamlet's a sweet guy, but he kills his uncle, his intended father-in-law, his intended brother-in-law, indirectly he kills his mother. I mean, Shakespeare writes tragedies because he doesn't think the world has a simple moral calculus. And if you go to Shakespeare's plays expecting that, you'll either be self-deluded or disappointed. Most people are self-deluded. They feel, oh, this is Shakespeare, it's got to be moral. It's deeply moral in a sense. His plays do not erase the distinction between good and evil. Far from it, they reinforce it. But the great tragic paradox of Shakespeare is that people who are good can end up doing evil things in the wrong circumstances; and in particular, all good is not moral good.

I think the fundamental tragic fact in Shakespeare is that all forms of human excellence are not compatible. And that, for example, someone who's a great soldier, like Macbeth, and valiant, and ferocious, is maybe not going to fit so well into polite domestic society, which is the great theme of John Wayne, the John Ford movies as well, and I think is the great theme of *Breaking Bad*.

And here we come back to the dark side of the American Dream. That the problem with the American Dream is that it threatens to end in what Nietzsche calls 'the last man'. A boring, flattened out society, which is, as Nietzsche puts it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, everybody's happy; whoever is not goes voluntarily into a madhouse.

And you know there's a realm for that in popular culture – it's called situation comedy. And again it's a vast chunk of American popular culture. Celebrates the home, the family, middle-class existence. With Ward Cleaver you never knew exactly what he did, but he went to an office. And as I point out, he never was a hero, even in World War II.

And again, middle-class virtue, God bless it, we couldn't live without it. I'm middle-class down to my roots. But it isn't all of life. And it's why – you know, the *Iliad* is perennially popular because it shows us a world – Achilles is not nice.

KRISTOL: What seems impressive about American popular – you just make this point in passing in the book but I was struck by it – well more than in passing but, you know, dwell on it – but in American popular culture somehow these very popular – it's not like the dark side is the, you know, the sophisticated aesthetic critique of the simple-minded popular culture. The dark side is itself part of the popular culture.

CANTOR: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: Since *Godfather* and *Breaking Bad* are wildly popular.

CANTOR: And the Westerns.

KRISTOL: And the Westerns strike me – sometimes pull their punches more in the sense that they just –

CANTOR: Oh, yeah, but not *The Searchers* and not *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

KRISTOL: No, because the good guy is sort of a – a genuinely good guy who's had one tragic episode or something.

CANTOR: My point as always is –

KRISTOL: And he's at odds with the boringness of civilization, but he still is on – his heart's in the right place.

CANTOR: Yeah. But that's not –

KRISTOL: That's not true of –

CANTOR: That's not Uncle Ethan in *The Searchers*.

KRISTOL: Yeah. In any case, it's the same –

CANTOR: And so, you know, my point always is that popular culture is in a way a misnomer. That in all culture there are layers, and most of it is unsophisticated. And then there are these peaks, the tops of the pyramid that are things like the John Ford movies or *Breaking Bad*, *The Godfather*. And indeed –

KRISTOL: But the fact that they're so popular is striking, right?

CANTOR: No, and no it's really –

KRISTOL: That people somehow have a sense that –

CANTOR: I feel one of the great critiques, especially by Europeans of American popular culture is we're all Pollyannas, and you could talk about Hollywood endings.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's a good phrase.

CANTOR: What is at the center of American popular culture: the Hollywood ending. You know, Romeo and Juliet get married at the end. You take a story that's tragic and you give it a happy ending. And you get –

KRISTOL: I wonder where that phrase comes from now that you mention it? I guess it's –

CANTOR: Hollywood ending? I actually don't –

KRISTOL: Because yes, it conveys that of course, the great, if most typical I guess you'd say or typical of Hollywood movies – have this silly happy ending.

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Of course, the most – I'm just thinking out loud here, and you know infinitely more about these movies than I do; I don't even like *The Godfather* as much as *Casablanca* and stuff. But if you think of the most famous Hollywood movies – let's just take *Casablanca* as an obvious case – it doesn't have a Hollywood ending, right?

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: I mean, and precisely – I mean it's, whatever it has, it's a happy ending, I guess you'd say.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: But it's the tension. He doesn't, you know, Rick is the – she goes off with Laszlo.

CANTOR: But it is a very moral, patriotic ending.

KRISTOL: It is, but even there –

CANTOR: And it's perfect for 1942.

KRISTOL: But even there, I guess that would be my point, there's a sense that of the incompatibility of all good things. Rick is, in a way, a much more interesting person of course than whatshisname, the –

CANTOR: Laszlo.

KRISTOL: Laszlo, but he gets the girl, you know? And it's just somehow, justice is not quite the same as –

CANTOR: It is interesting, I'm just as you bring that up –

KRISTOL: And this is true of many Hollywood movies, though. That they don't have Hollywood endings.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah. And that's why I'd like to say that American popular culture is not really just popular culture like any – I mean in 19th century novels, you know, *Great Expectations* has two endings. It has a sad ending which Dickens preferred, and a happy ending which Bulwer-Lytton convinced him to substitute for it.

So, there are – as I started to say, there's so much European contempt you get especially from Adorno and Horkheimer and this Frankfurt School of cultural critique. That the Americans, they're children, they just love happy endings. And you know, *Mark Twain, Huckleberry Finn*, this children's book, again it's exceedingly dark. And I think Americans are more mature than Europeans give them credit for and popular culture is more complex. Yes, the majority of the stories have happy endings, and musicals are popular, and situation comedies are popular. But to give credit to our culture, so many of our great works are dark. Herman Melville. I mean *The Great Gatsby*, I wish I'd had a chapter on that book. Funny, that was not initially popular, but it eventually became popular and it gets recycled in movies. I guess *Citizen Kane* in a way has never been popular, but again a very dark story.

But Americans, again, I think are more mature and sophisticated than people give them credit for. You know, you can get numerical on this. I mean, *Breaking Bad*, I don't think its audience got more than ten million, and was more like five most of the time – which is a lot of people. Not as many are going to buy my new book, but still. [Laughter].

KRISTOL: It goes without saying, right? Or watch this Conversation?

CANTOR: Yes, yes. But still it's not *Friends* or *Seinfeld*-level. And of course it was on cable, on a cable channel in that sense. But still, that's a lot of people. In its day I don't think any of Dicken's books came close to selling five million. A hundred thousand was a lot then.

So, I do think, and you know it's a combination that people find the stories more interesting. I quote the opening line of *Anna Karenina* in the book, "All happy families resemble each other. All unhappy families are unhappy in unique ways." And you know, the simple American Dream story can get boring.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: The happy ending can get boring. And on an intellectual level, I feel in the book and it's my justification for concentrating on the dark side, is you can understand the American Dream better if you see when it fails and you reveal the tensions in it.

KRISTOL: Or its limits I guess you would say.

CANTOR: Yeah. And I mean it is the American disposition to think we can have it all, and in a way tragedy is a foreign concept. I always remember these two students in my Shakespeare class at the time of the DiCaprio, Baz Luhrmann, *Romeo and Juliet* saying, "It's a wonderful movie, but why did it have to end so unhappily?" And you know you want to say: "What part of the concept of tragedy did you not get?" And the answer is, all of the concept of tragedy.

I always operate with Hegel's definition of tragedy which is that tragedy is a conflict of two goods, two legitimate principles. They clash, they're incompatible. You're going to have guilt no matter what you do. And that's not the way of America.

The Declaration does not speak of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; it speaks of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And it's a great thing about this country, that it's offered happiness to people. But you know, let's make as many people happy as possible; but remember, there are limits to that. And there are aspects of the human soul that are unfulfilled by mere happiness, especially this kind of middle-class happiness.

And so there's something aspirational in the admiration of these shows, that people respond to the sheer power of these characters. Walter White is so unimpressive at the beginning of the show. And there's that great moment when his wife Skylar is so worried, "What's happening? And who's Gus Fring? Why are people getting killed?" She's so worried. And he says, "You're worried I'm in danger. Skylar, I am the danger. I am the one who knocks." That is, she's worried someday a door will knock and someone will kill Walt. You know, "I am the one who knocks."

And that's an incredibly Shakespearean moment. It's like Coriolanus at the end of his play is saying, it's true, that "If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there that like an eagle in a dovecote, I fluttered your Volscians, at Corioles, alone I did it."

And that's the thing about Walter White. For once he gets to – you know, "I did it. People are afraid of me." All his life he's been afraid of other people. And again, it's terrible to kill people, but it's also terrible to have people walk over you your whole life.

And so I think people can respond to that. They respond in different ways. I mean I always had a hard time recommending *Breaking Bad* because some people just hated it. Forget about whether they liked Walter White or not – it was too much violence. You know, my reaction – I'm not afraid of TV violence, it doesn't frighten me. I know no one's going to get hurt. On the *Walking Dead* they have a *Talking Dead*, a talk show after it. And every time a character gets killed in the series they bring the actor on to reassure the audience the actor's still alive.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And in fact if you hear who's going to be on the show the next week, you kind of know who's going to get killed in that episode that way. So, again, Nietzsche has a wonderful line in his notes where he says, if you ask a little boy, would you like to be more virtuous? He'll stare at you bewildered. But if you ask him, would you like to be stronger than your little friends, watch his eyes light up.

And again, that is very Nietzschean, but I think it's true to the experience here, that people still understand the difference between strong and weak. And in so much of our culture actually we respond to strength, athletics particularly. It's one of the few areas where we can still respond positively to sheer strength and power. And there's something, you know I often compare superheroes and these Homeric heroes to athletes because you can't understand them if you don't see that part of us still responds to sheer strength.

Now we can't live in a society that values only strength, something that Shakespeare shows in *Coriolanus* for example. And certainly *Breaking Bad* shows that. But it doesn't mean we don't respond to it.

I mean, it is interesting that a lot of people in analyzing *Breaking Bad* say it's a show that appealed to frustrated males in the 21st century. And that's why I meant that and I started talking about crippled masculinity in it. It portrays a world that doesn't reward masculinity. And in fact one of the other things I noticed, that I don't think anyone else has seen in it, is the prevalence of therapeutic culture in the show. Walter goes to cancer therapy. Hank's wife has to go to therapy for kleptomania. They send Walt to Gambler's Anonymous. There are all these 12-step programs in it. And Jesse, the young sidekick of Walt, he has to go to drug therapy.

And all these therapies fail. And in fact, they undermine morality more than anything Walt does. Jesse goes to a therapist and the guy tells him that he ran over and killed his daughter, but he's gotten over it, through a 12-step program. And Jesse is appalled. He never goes back to it again. Good for this therapist, and you have to move on, get over it. But the way he says it, like, "I can get you to just leave this behind."

Walt never accepts therapy. And when his son – they think he's addicted to gambling because of some story his wife has concocted to justify how much money is flowing in. His son says, "Oh, I just read on the internet that gambling is a disease, and mom shouldn't give you a hard time about it." And he says, "Everything I've done, I did. And I accept responsibility for it." And that's a kind of nobility that goes against this cheap, therapeutic, "I'm all right, you're all right," stuff.

And by the way it's very clear in the series, that therapy has replaced religion in this world. The therapy group meets in a church, but no one goes to the church for religion. And again there's that contrast between the Mexicans who still have religion, and the Americans who now have therapy. And it's a world, a therapeutic world, where what's the answer to masculinity? Anger management. Get rid of it. Not redirect it. And it's very interesting that, no question, that the most manly men in the show are the criminals.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Gus, Mike, some of the cartel members. And Walt gets to run with that crowd with disastrous results. But at least he's finally felt like a man. And he's never done that all his life. He's never felt fulfilled.

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on.

CANTOR: Well, no, let's not end without saying again, don't attempt this at home. We're not recommending meth making or murder or any of that.

KRISTOL: That would have to be the Western hero who both stands out from society, but also saves society and makes it possible to be established. But we can talk about that next time when we talk about the Western theme, which really is the archetypal, isn't it, American story in a way, right?

CANTOR: Okay. I look forward to that. I'd be delighted to pursue that.

KRISTOL: That will be fun. Paul Cantor, thank you for joining me today, once again.

CANTOR: Thanks for having me.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]