FREE FORUM with TERRENCE McNALLY - A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK

GEORGE PACKER – THE EMERGENCY – his first novel in decades

Transcript – Conversation recorded 12-03-2025

Terrence McNally:
Hello, I'm Terrence McNally. Welcome to FREE FORUM: A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK. I'll be speaking today with journalist and best-selling author, GEORGE PACKER. He's been a guest several times. We've previously talked about his National Book Award-winning THE UNWINDING, and his 2021 book, LAST BEST HOPE, in which he offers his take on four narratives that motivate and divide Americans. And today we're going to focus on his first novel in decades, THE EMERGENCY.

I don't read a lot of fiction. I used to, in maybe seventh grade, I would read a Hardy Boys or a Chip Hilton book on the corner of my desk front to back in the course of a single school day. I remember checking Thomas Pynchon's *V* out of the library my junior year in high school in 1963. It was his debut and I'd never heard of him, but it had a very cool cover.

I've probably always been a nonfiction guy, but I loved reading fiction – Orwell, Huxley, Ellison, Kesey, Heller, Arundhati Roy, Steinbeck - until I realized I hardly read it anymore. I read *The Great Gatsby* a couple of years ago. I read friends' work when they say, "What do you think of this?" And I take a novel with me most times when I travel, but I seldom break it open.

George Packer wrote a couple of novels early in his career. Not much came of it, and he turned to journalism, where he's written best-selling and award-winning nonfiction for decades. His new book, THE EMERGENCY, is an allegorical novel and I will let him tell you why he chose that form. But his thinking and his intuitions about the power and impact of fiction got me to thinking, what am I missing? I suspect more of our attention is involved in reading fiction, that we engage in a more participatory creative act with the writer and the material. Together we create a world, characters, situations, stakes.

As Packer himself notes in a recent essay, "You can flit back and forth between a nonfiction book and social media (though you'll lose a lot), but the willing suspension of disbelief does not survive frequent interruption. Works of the imagination need unbroken attention."

Granted, the best non-fiction usually also involves great storytelling, characters, compelling narratives. Though I'm a big fan of Packer's LAST BEST HOPE, which I mentioned earlier, it's a book specifically about narratives, but it doesn't have much in the way of characters and stories. Most of his work, however, exemplified in his National Book Award-winning THE UNWINDING, does just that. But for him, something was missing.

And I asked myself, “Can I carve out time…change my habits to restore fiction to my reading diet? I think it might be worth a try, and I can feel a New Year's resolution coming on.

Packer’s THE EMERGENCY takes place in an unnamed time and place. Some elements seem archaic, others current. The psychology and internal life of the main character is definitely contemporary. An empire has collapsed from boredom, as Packer puts it. In the emergency that follows, youth rebellions of urban from boredom. In the Emergency that follows, youth rebellions of urban “Burghers” and rural yeomen embrace radically different ideas of humanity. Both lose trust and assume the worst of each other.

It's a story about society, but it's told with the focus on one Burgher family and the strains the social and political upheavals take on their relationships, and for each of them, on their very sense of self.

While there are provocative parallels to our current situation - generational divides, urban versus rural, a crisis of mistrust, language and cultural excesses that divide, questions of masculinity and so on, the plot keeps up a steady drive and momentum.

George and I are going to talk about the novel and about our current situation, some of which may rhyme with the novel and some of which may not.

George Packer is a staff writer at *The Atlantic,* joining there in 2018. He'd been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* for 15 years before that. He's the author of 11 books, including THE UNWINDING, winner of the 2013 National Book Award; OUR MAN: *Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century,* winner of the 2019 *LA Times* Book Prize; LAST BEST HOPE; and his latest, his first novel in decades, THE EMERGENCY.

Welcome again, George Packer to FREE FORUM: A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK.

George Packer:
It's always good to be back with you, Terrence.

McNally:
Thank you. Let me tell listeners we're recording this conversation Wednesday, December 3rd.

I think you may recall. I like listeners to get a feel for the people behind the ideas and the work we talk about. THE EMERGENCY is a return to fiction for you, and we're going to talk certainly a lot more about that in a bit. But I want to turn now to your relationship with George Orwell, also a journalist, essayist and novelist. You edited a book of his essays, ALL ART IS PROPAGANDA: *Critical Essays*, and you wrote the forward to another, FACING UNPLEASANT FACTS: *Narrative Essays*.

And by the way, let me just tell listeners I recommend the recent documentary by Raul Peck, ORWELL: 2+2=5. Peck was nominated for an Oscar for his 2017 doc on James Baldwin, I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO. The Orwell documentary is dark and powerful, even a bit haunting.

And my question to you, George, is can you talk about what drew you to such a keen interest in Orwell, how you assess his work, what it means to you, and how it inspires or intimidates you?

Packer:
Yeah, those are two good words for it. Certainly “intimidates”, in the sense that whenever I open one of his novels or books or essays, and I do that pretty often, I'm just immediately struck by the soundness of it, the sureness of it, the clarity of it. There's just almost no bad sentences, almost no stupid thoughts. And how many of us can say that, especially with a body of work, the size of Orwell's? I In the short time he was alive, and let's remember he died at the age of 46 in 1950. He wrote - and my shelf at home groans under it - he wrote just hundreds and hundreds of essays, reviews, reports, novels, nonfiction books. And his collected works are about, I don't know, a seven-foot length of shelf.

McNally:
Remarkable.

Packer:
I first read him in high school. Like most Americans, we were assigned *1984*. This was in California in the seventies. Terrence, *1984* really didn't register for me. I wasn't living in Big Brother’s Oceania. There was no thought police. There were no torture cells in the basement of the Ministry of Love. It was sex, drugs, rock and roll. It was the Eagles, the Steve Miller Band. I mean, it was mellow. I knew it was an important book, but it didn't get under my skin because I didn't have the imagination of totalitarian terror that it inspired in generations of readers.

Something happened a few years later. I was on my way home from teaching with the Peace Corps in a village in West Africa. It had been a really hard time. I was in a state of what I now realize was quite deep depression. I just didn't have a word for it at the time. And I was passing through Barcelona by chance on my way back to the US, and I picked up a book to read on the plane at an English language bookshop.

And it was Orwell's account of his time in the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia*. And Barcelona was the right place to buy that book. And I read it on the airplane. And by the time I landed at JFK, I had begun to feel that this voice, this writing was the way for me to deal with the difficulty I was going through, and maybe to come through it.

And what do I mean by that? There was something clear-eyed and sane, and unafraid to look at hard things. There was an expression of an inner life, a self, but the

narrator never gets lost in himself. It's about what he's doing, where he is - the war, the political issues, the people around him. His eyes are open to the world. And he has what he later called “a power of facing unpleasant facts,” which gave me the title for that collection of his narrative essays That was bracing. There was something invigorating and confidence-building about it. I thought, if I can just try to write like that, maybe I'll survive this instead of having it just drown me.

And so I began very soon after, while I was working on a construction job, to write short anecdotes about what I had done and seen in West Africa. And that became my first book, *The Village of Waiting*. And it was not exactly in the Orwell voice, but it was inspired by the thought that you can write about yourself without losing yourself in your own anxiety, depression, narcissism, whatever you want to call it. That you can become the lens on the world. Because if you are thoughtful, if you are clearheaded about things, if you are paying attention, then the reader will want you as a guide. And that became sort of my mantra as a writer of both fiction and nonfiction. So that began a lifelong apprenticeship, I would say that's still going on today. I never got an MFA-degree. I didn't go back to graduate school. I went from construction to writing.

But Orwell was always the ideal voice in my head, and I don't want to even tell you how influenced I am by him because there's something almost shameful about it. I do think imitation is a good way for young writers to learn to write, to find a writer you feel close to and just absorb everything of their work, the rhythm of their sentences, their diction, their syntax, and then you make it your own. But first, you apprentice yourself to a great writer and figure out how they did it. And that's what I did with Orwell.

McNally:
Thank you for that. That was really kind of what I was hoping for. I'm not sure if you mentioned that when you were in the Peace Corps in West Africa, had you already thought you might become a writer. And so I ask you now.

Packer:
I had thought about it. What that meant to me was to be a novelist, because when I was growing up in a very bookish household, my mother was a writer. My sister is now a writer. To me, writing meant writing fiction and specifically novels. So, in a way, Orwell was a little at odds with that because his realist novels, the novels he wrote in the 1930s are not the work that people know him for - *A Clergyman's Daughter, Burmese Days, Keep the Aspidistra Flying* - and the work that do know him for in the forties, *Animal Farm* in *1984* are not the kind of novels that a young novelist thinks of writing. They are fables, they are dystopia. He wasn't the right model for a novelist, and I couldn't get out of my head, Terrence, that to be a writer meant I had to write novels.

And so after writing that book about Africa, *The Village of Waiting*, I wrote two novels and, as you said, they were not blazing success stories. And by the end of my

thirties - and that's a long time in anyone's life…This was a lot of years of laboring uphill, I would say, against my own grain. I finally decided that the novel doesn't seem to be the form that loves me. I'm going to become a journalist.

And until then, journalism had not had any interest for me because I thought of it as newspaper writing, which is something I've always wished I had done. I've always wanted to have worked for a newspaper, but again, I had a literary idea. You write long narratives. There are characters, there are scenes, there are plots, there's reversals and suspense.

It turned out that a certain kind of journalism allowed you to do all of that, and it was the kind of journalism you could do for *The New Yorker*. And I was lucky and got a job when I moved to New York in 2000 at *The New Yorker* and became a staff writer and got to write long reported narratives, but narratives that reminded me of the kind of fiction I love. So I was getting to do what came naturally. Turned out, writing from fact, that's the thing I think I was sort of born to do, but to do it under the influence of fiction. And so those years of laboring at fiction were not wasted. I think I learned how to construct narratives, how to create characters, how to tell stories - in order to do it as a journalist for 25 years.

McNally:
One other thing that you mentioned - and let me just parenthetically say my normal question on that first question is, “Tell us about your path”. Well, here I go with you directly to Orwell, and it opens up the story of your path. It's kind of wonderful, but you had said how you think you should apprentice yourself to another writer through their work. And you have said that you actually only read novels when you're writing nonfiction, and that you, in fact, do, if I could say, copy or give voice to the voice of other authors, talk about that.

Packer:
Well, it's a little more at a distance than copy. It's not quite the same as apprenticing myself to Orwell. But what I think you're getting at, and I have said that because, when I'm writing a nonfiction book, I do not want in my head the expert subject matter of my material. I don't want articles from *Foreign Affairs* magazine, even though they may be brilliant and well-written. I don't want human rights reports. What I want a are great narratives told in vivid lively concrete prose. And for that, I turn to fiction.

So, for example, with *The Unwinding*, which came out as you said in 2013, that was like four years of reporting in, you could say, some of the left behind places of the country in the ruins of the Great Recession. And I had done all this reporting and had three or four central characters, and I still didn't have a structure, a plot to put them in. I just had their stories. And my wife reminded me that at the beginning of the whole process, I had said, “I want to do something experimental like John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy.

That's a great American trilogy of novels from the thirties that people just don't read much anymore. But back then, he was up there with Fitzgerald and Hemingway, a great American writer, and I've always loved *USA* because it's both fiction about individuals who are imagined and it's sociological and historical. It tells the story of the first three decades of the 20th century in America, which is a great, great story. I began to see my reporting in terms of the structure of *USA* with the characters. I'd been around the son of a tobacco farmer in Western North Carolina, an assembly line worker in Youngstown, a Joe Biden aide in Washington, DC, a Silicon Valley mogul named Peter Thiel, and a cast of characters in the city of Tampa during the housing bust where Tampa itself was sort of the main character.

I began to find a structure for all of those to become a vehicle for telling the story of America in my adult life, around the 1980 to 2010, that three decade period. And once I had that in mind, with Dos Passos as sort of a guide, I realized how I could organize it, and even a bit what voice would allow me to do it… to tell it through the characters, to have no first-person narrator, no reporting eye. You don't know who's gathering the information, you don't know how he's gathered it. All you know is, you're moving through the lives of a handful of Americans, and through the great events of that thirty-year period, and you're moving back and forth between the stories. You don't do one story continuously, which is something Dos Pasos did.

That's how fiction can give you a kind of template to make nonfiction new, to do something really new in the old form of journalism. We feel like journalism is just one thing, but in fact, I see it as being this fantastically plastic, malleable genre that allows you to borrow techniques from other genres without ever sacrificing the fidelity to truth, which for me is sacrosanct.

McNally:
And there's something else that you've said, which is that you wrote - I think it's in the same essay that I was just referring to - but you wrote that from 9/11, events just started piling up so fast, and information started coming at us so fast. This is the era of screens emerging and all of that and the 24/7 addiction and so on… that the time for fiction might not be available to most people, and that it created a golden age of nonfiction, but that perhaps as things continue to accelerate, even that gets left behind. Can you talk about that?

Packer:
Yeah. Well, there's hard numbers on this - that Americans have been reading fewer and fewer books every year for about the past 20 years. And the real victims have been novels. The reading of novels has dropped off precipitously. And the question is, why is that? And I think the obvious answer, yes, is screens, but I think the other answer, which was true before the smartphone, as you say, in the aftermath of 9/11, the world began to press in on Americans in a way that forced us to do something we really don't do very much, which is pay attention to the outside world.

And suddenly some the best and most influential books of that decade were books about other places like Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower*, for example, about Al-Qaeda, and a host of books including mine about the Iraq War, and books about the War on Terror and about the Bush administration. Suddenly these were kind of at the center of the cultural conversation in a way that fiction was when I was a kid.

McNally:
Yup.

Packer:
… in a way that everyone read *Portnoy's Complaint* or *Rabbit Run* or *Herzog*, and talked about those novels as sort of the key markers of where the culture was. And it became nonfiction for a precious decade or so. And even plays began to come out of those nonfiction books and documentaries and movies. So it was the cultural influence of nonfiction, and not only about foreign wars, but also about American cities. You could say that *The Wire* was a kind of great fictionalization of journalism, more looking back, I would say, to the era of Dickens and the Victorians than to recent American nonfiction. But it still had that quality. And so there was just a kind of openness - that culminated with the financial crisis and the great recession - to the news of the world in the widest sense.

And then what happened? Smartphones and social media. And suddenly we were drowning in all the information in the universe in our pocket at every moment of our life. And we were also being prompted - like laboratory specimens - by algorithms that profited giant technology corporations to keep sending out messages. And those messages that we are being prompted to write were prompted to be as explosive and extreme and attention getting as possible. And for me, this was a real death blow to serious reading because serious reading requires, as you quoted me writing, a sustained concentration and an ability to shut out the world, and that the smartphone and social media are the exact opposite. So I would say that Golden Age began to end in the early teens, and today, where are we? That's a big question and maybe that will get us to why I wrote a novel.

McNally:
Yeah, no, it's interesting. A question that I had to ask was, if you had any responses to my introduction, which was about my own relationship to reading…

Packer:
All I can say is, Terrence, someone as thoughtful as you and as interested in the world, I hope you will go back to reading novels. But here's the thing. How many novels are being written today about which you feel, I must read that - the way people felt that in the middle of the 20th century or the late 20th century about the most influential novels of those decades. I don't see it happening. For example, there's no book reviewing being done anymore. Almost none. Book reviews have pretty much collapsed.
Podcasting is keeping literature alive in some ways, but it's not quite the same as

book reviewing. It doesn't have quite the same attention to the details of a work and allow you to sink with the reviewer into it. So I fear that we are in danger of becoming, you could say, a post-literate culture, with AI doing the work for us, and we becoming the transmitters of hieroglyphs in the form of short texts and emojis and TikTok videos. And that again, is the end of serious literature.

I'm not a pessimist. I'm really fighting pessimism these days. I'm determined not to become that old man because there's always a renewal of some kind, but you have to face and see clearly the threat in order to be able to renew yourself. And I think there's a threat that people just don't have the attention span for it, they're too distracted, and the work itself doesn't demand to be read in the way it used to.

McNally:
I shared with you while we were setting up this interview that there are shortcuts… Most of my guests, most of our subjects, if they're books, they're almost always nonfiction. And I said, there are shortcuts to nonfiction. I read your latest articles, I grasp the thread, you did another interview which told me what you thought was important in this book, and I can really have an intelligent conversation without reading the book back to front. And I said, there are no shortcuts in preparing to discuss a 400-page novel. And it's interesting that in that exchange, I'm basically copping to what we're talking about here.

Packer:
Yeah, well, we all have to. I cop to it. I am reading fiction all the time and I'm finding it more and more of a struggle. I read a 750-page Victorian novel, Daniel Deronda by George Eliot, and it was hard going against the current a lot of the time. And part of it, I listened to rather than read, which I do more and more with books. And that's for me, both a great way to walk my dog, but it's also a bit cheating because you do miss things, but we have to just keep the habit or return to the habit. It's so important, not just for our individual souls, but really for our society. I think democracy itself depends on our being able to read complex things and to discuss them.

McNally:
Yeah, I often say - and have been saying now for way too long - that society, human society is going to die by convenience. That the compromises that we have made with our health and with the environment and with our relationships in exchange for convenience, mobility, accessibility are… I don't hear people talk about it, but to me, it seems it's the core. When you talk about AI doing the work for us… I had not thought that reading would be replaced by a more convenient form. That was something I hadn't quite considered.

Let me tell people what they're hearing and we are then going to switch to the novel. This is Free Forum: A World That Just Might Work. I'm Terrence McNally. I'm speaking with journalist and bestselling author, George Packer. He's been a guest several times in the past, and today we're going to turn now to focus on his first novel in decades, *The Emergency*. And you can find all of Packer's *Atlantic* articles at theatlantic.com.

So the simple question is, why did you write this novel? Why did you write a novel at this moment? And let me actually quote you to prime the pump here. You say you got tired and bored of your nonfiction. You felt it had lost its power. And so in addition to why you did it, did writing the novel feel different to you?

Packer:
Yeah, I mean it was a bit of an escape from the sense of having reached a dead-end, and that dead-end, I can almost date it to sometime in 2021 when I realized that the one thing that there seemed to have been a shared consensus across all the dividing lines of our society was January 6th of that year and its meaning. What happened? Just what happened.

That consensus had disintegrated within a few months, and a whole different narrative had emerged, that it was FBI trap or Antifa, or that it just didn't matter, that these were good patriots, blah, blah, blah. And that was so shattering to me because I had thought we all both loved the country enough and had enough of a grip on reality to say, this is what happened. And it mattered. It was important.

And I think at that point, to just keep repeating the same *cri de coeur* over and over and wait for a new response was a huge loss of spirit and energy. And instead, I found myself imagining a story. And so it's like my mind freed itself from the duty of continuing to monitor and write about the present. I still did it. You can see it there in *The Atlantic*. I didn't stop.

McNally:
That's right. During the course of writing this novel, you were also writing the other stuff? Yep.

Packer:
I was. I was. I hardly took any time off, but I can say that my main excitement went into this story I began to imagine, which came out of the pandemic, Terrence, because I was driving back and forth from our home in Brooklyn in the city to a house in farm country in upstate New York, where my family had kind of taken refuge during the main six months of the pandemic. And this back and forth, going from city to country, from the urban landscape to farmland, caught my imagination. And it made me feel as if I was seeing some fable in which there's a walled city with gates that is sort of a separate community without the usual network of highways and communications, and out there is the countryside, a different reality. And that excited me, to imagine a man who has to go from the city to the countryside the way I was going.

And this was the seed of a story that I knew would not be set in America in the present because all of my impulses were to get away from America in the present. It would be set in an unnamed place at an undetermined time. And, as you said very well, it had elements of the archaic, of maybe the early 20th century, and maybe even of throwbacks to earlier centuries, but it also had a certain contemporary feeling about it.

What I wanted above all was to use this fable, this strange world I had to build, in order not to escape our own reality, but to get to the depth of it, to get to the heart of the emotions of it - without the distraction of the news and of the names that we all know, the words we all say every day. And so that story began to germinate in my mind, and I just thought, I must do it - even though I have this sort of unhappy history with fiction, even though no one's looking for this or eager to pay me for it, although Farrar, Straus, Giroux was very good about backing it. They had a nonfiction book in mind for my next book.

Well, I had to write this novel, and it was something that got me up in the morning for two, two-and-a-half years and to the desk with excitement. It was a happy experience because I was in my imagination building a new strange world and figuring out what happens in it, and who's in it, and doing it without the burden of facts, without having to keep checking to see if I was on target with my own research or my reporting.

And in fact, I shut off the internet every morning for three hours in order to be able to write it, and put my phone in another room because as we were saying, I just think with works of the imagination, you cannot break your concentration or it's not going to be any good. So I tried to develop a kind of discipline of not checking email and not surfing the web for those three hours and it eventually became almost like a therapy.

McNally:
I was going to say, and I bet you realized that that thing that you were doing to help your writing was actually making you feel better.

Packer:
Exactly. Exactly.

McNally:
One of the things, when I look at, let's say a movie or a play or books, but certainly a movie, one of the things that I pay attention to, that gets a writer and a director points in my book is, ambition… and ambition, especially as it's displayed in the number of choices they had to make.

This is why a movie like *Brazil* by Terry Gilliam sticks out for me because he made every choice. What's this world consist of? Who do we care about? What's a crime? What does it look like? His movies are very visualist. Now, that came into my head, but the kind of movie I'm thinking of… It means that a small movie like *Train Dreams*, which I highly recommend, has many less choices, but I love it for other reasons. It's kind of sublime.

But when you set out to do this book versus your other books… Like you say with *Unwinding*, you were kind of searching for a structure and a voice, but in this one you are inventing everything.

Packer:

Everything.

McNally:
We're talking a lot about the process. It's partly because I'm also a writer, but on these rides from the city to the country and back, are things beginning to take shape even before you know you're going to do it?

Packer:
Yes. Because I began to imagine, what if there was a checkpoint here?

McNally:
Mmmm…

Packer:
What if an hour outside New York City, the local villagers set up a checkpoint and wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there and who I was going to meet? What if even on the way out of the city, there was a gate, and at the gate there was a kind of gate guard who stopped me and said, "Where are you going? Why are you going out there into the countryside? Who are you meeting? When will you be back? Well, you'll need this pass. And when you come back, approach the gate with caution." What if all of that?

This was coming to me, Terrence, out of a sense of the country coming apart with the risk of violence. And so these images, which are frightening, were also in sort of the immoral way of a fiction writer, they were exciting, because they were wonderful ways of constructing a story, even if it was a tragic story.

And I also imagined, what if this man who's driving out has his child with him, because *The Emergency* really is at heart a family story, as you said. It's about a doctor, a surgeon, his wife, and their two children, and especially their teenage daughter, Selva, who is the apple of her father's eye, and has done everything he ever wanted her to do in school and as a girl. And when the empire collapses at the beginning of the novel, as you say, died of boredom and loss of faith, her world collapses with it, and she doesn't know who she is.

She looks around for an identity, and finds it in a youth movement that has risen up in the vacuum in their city called "Together." It's a philosophy of radical utopian egalitarianism, and she throws herself into it. And her father, the surgeon, feels that he's losing her because he's not comfortable with this new order. He wants a return to the way things were under the empire, which was a pretty good life for him and for his family.

I immediately began to feel this is a generational story. It's about a divide between the generations that, as a parent, you need to try to overcome, and yet you don't want to give in completely to new values that you are alarmed by, because you want your children to hang onto the things that you think they'll need and that are

valuable. And all those conflicts of a parent and child, especially in a time of turmoil, which is very much the time that young people today have been coming up in, including my own children. That's the emotional heart of the book.

And that relationship between the father and daughter who go out into the countryside on a kind of quixotic humanitarian mission and find that things out there… There are checkpoints, there are unfriendly checkpoints. There are people with weapons. There's a whole new philosophy in the countryside, which is also a youth movement, and it's a kind of reversion to something primitive and almost animalistic, and even a sort of proto fascist called “dirt thought,” and everything is bewildering to the doctor. He's a good old liberal humanist like you and me, Terrence.

McNally:
One thing I was thinking is that, one reason that he is satisfied with the empire, I'm guessing, I'm putting myself in his place, is he's doing good work. He's helping people. He may be getting financially rewarded, his family may be comfortable. He may get respect more than he would of doing something else, but he is doing good. He's not just scamming people for more money, he's doing good. And I think that's one reason that it becomes hard for him to deal with the loss.

Packer:
Yeah, because he has a moral code. He's not just a man who's feeding himself and moving through life thoughtlessly. He has a moral code. And you're right, that code is based on a kind of humanism and a desire to help other people. But you realize as you move through the story, it's also based on a certain self-satisfaction and a need for respect and for an important place in society. And all of that is taken away by the new movement when the young people kind of come to the fore and he begins to have to realize that what he had wanted was to be important and to have their respect, and he doesn't seem to have it anymore.

You mentioned all the choices, and to convey these things, which are both the generational conflict and also the conflict between the city and country, I had to eliminate a lot.

McNally:
That's right.

Packer:
…because otherwise you're distracted and you don't know where the emphasis is and what's important. So what did I eliminate? There's no telephones. There's no digital world at all.

McNally:
Wait, wait, wait. Are there no *telephones* or no *smartphones*?

Packer:
There are no telephones.

McNally:
I didn't even realize that. Let me just jump in for a second because I have a question that I was going to aim at this. So let me just point it in a little direction because this is a crucial thing.

The world of your novel, as I said, you made a massive choice to have no digital. And what I was going to just say is I'm glad you're digging into that because to me it almost changes it from fiction to fantasy, if you know what I'm saying. In other words, if different things happen to made up characters in a world that looked like ours, that's fiction. If different things happen to made up characters in a world that doesn't look like ours and doesn't have the same outlets and inputs and all, that becomes fantasy, and I think a) you made that choice, but b) it's a big choice.

Packer:
Yeah, I want to say yes, but there's no magic here. There's no wizards and ghosts and goblins. This is not Tolkien. There's not even magic realism in the modern sense.

McNally:
All true.

Packer:
The characters are completely recognizable as human beings and as familiar human beings. The world is a solid world of brick and cobblestone and dirt and trees, and animals don't start talking. So it is, in some ways, grounded in the world we know. But, by getting rid of all those things that we think of as essential to the world we know, especially digital technology…

When it comes to phones. I made a choice early on when I describe the effects of the fall of the empire, I say communications across the region went down. And that's vague enough to suggest maybe there was some telecommunication before, but it's gone because I didn't want it there as a distraction. So it's both a strange world, but it's also a world we recognize. There is no AI, but there are these sort of retro robots called “better humans”…

McNally:
Yes. And let me just cut in again. It was at that moment when you introduced these, I'm going to call them robots, that I went, “Wow, I wouldn't expect robots…” When I saw no digital - and I hadn't even noticed no phones… When I saw no digital, I thought, this is going to be primitive. But then I saw robots, and they're not primitive. I mean, we are further along in digital than we are in robots today. But what I remembered was before there were digital or robots, there were stories about robots. There were not that many stories - other than Dick Tracy's two-way wrist radio - about digital or about smartphones.

And so, I began to think, well before there were either, people conceived of robots, but here, the reason it was more of an adjustment for me as a reader is because both do exist now. So now it's a little more disorienting when I see one and not the other.

Packer:
Well, I looked at a bunch of images from the 19th century. There were pictures, paintings, even laboratory constructions of robots that were made from metal and gears and levers and wires and ratchets. They were mechanical things. They were not digital.

And in the case of the Better Human Workshop where there's this slightly mad scientist who's making these things, they're in the image of the young people of the city. Each young person goes to him to have their own *better human* made with a face that looks like theirs, with clothing that comes from them. And it's a way of, in some ways, perfecting themselves, of getting away from all the failure and unhappiness of being a young person in this world where the empire has fallen, and instead putting all of their hope into this other thing, this better human. And to me, it's not AI, but it conveys the emotion I have about AI, which is that we want somehow to hand it our humanity because our humanity is a burden, and in some ways an intolerable burden. And so that's how you can get away from the particulars, from computers, for example. They are none of those. But you're conveying something deeper than that by eliminating, by getting rid of the familiar landscape that we all live in today.

McNally:
And again, this is very much in that realm of what I was saying… of the choices that one makes when you are creating - How much is it different? How much is it similar? and so on. Now, one thing I do want to ask you about though is that, I did find Hugo Rustin's inner dialogue and his inner life to be absolutely contemporary. In other words, his inner dialogue would fit in a novel that had digital and had… You know what I mean. In other words… "Would someone who lived in that different a world have such a similar inner dialogue?" was a question that crossed my mind. Your thoughts?

Packer:
That's a really challenging question. And I think it would've been beyond my power to imagine what the inner life of someone in an unnamed time and place is like. I mean, if you're doing it 40 years in the future or 200 years in the past or on another planet, you could sort of come up with a version of that that feels alien. But I didn't want this to feel like a science fiction story.

McNally:
Right.

Packer:
I wanted it to feel like you are in a world that you completely accept, except you just don't know where it is and when it is. But it feels in that way, both strange and familiar. And the inner life is essential to that because his dilemmas, his dramas, his

relation to his daughter, to his wife, to the city, to the hospital that his essentially kicked him out for transgressions of some sort, and his relation to the yeomen out in the countryside…

These are all things that I'm drawing on my own experience to convey. And I'm just not enough of a cyber novelist to be able to create a whole new inner life for some slightly non-human character. That's where it has to be something I know directly from experience, the way I know the work that I write when it's journalism.

Terrence, if you think about *1984*, it's a world that for people in the West in 1948 or 1949 when it was published, there were a lot of strange things. There were a lot of things they'd never seen, but when they read it, they felt this could happen. And Winston Smith, the main character is every bit a recognizable creature of Orwell's time.

McNally:
That's right.

Packer:
He is a man of a conscience and a stubborn clinging to two plus two equals four, and a refusal to give into what everyone else is telling him. He has to think, well, that's a familiar kind of person. And if Winston Smith had been a bit of a robot himself, then what would the story have been?

McNally:
That's right.

Packer:
Why would we have cared?

McNally:
We wouldn't have found ourselves in it as much. No, I really understood that. I understood that it is easier for me to immerse myself in this world because I'm doing it through someone who seems to feel a lot like I do.

I noticed also you created rituals. There's the suicide ritual. There's the “we the people” ritual. There's the animalistic rituals in yeoman land. I even thought you gave a ritual dimension to your reveal of better humans. There's an interview, there's subsequent interactions, there's a melding of… Did you think of this as you were doing it, or did they just arise one after another?

Packer:
I didn't set out to create a novel of rituals, but that's a very good word for what you're describing. But when I came to certain points in the story, I kept realizing these are young people who have to build from scratch. The world they knew has disappeared, which is a strong feeling I have these days.

McNally:
Yes, yes.

Packer:
And what do you do in that case? Well, you have to come up with a kind of ceremony, a form that allows you to make sense of what's happened and what you want to do now. So, for example, We Are One, which is this gathering of all the young people of the city in the main square every day at three o'clock. And there's no leader, there's no hierarchy. This is an egalitarian movement, but they have to make decisions. How does a mass of people without a leader make decisions?

McNally:
By the way, what I was reminded of there was Occupy,

Packer:
And I was at Occupy quite a bit and wrote about it, and I did get some of that feeling from…the mic……the formlessness.

McNally:
Right…

Packer:
But what I found at Occupy, and what I tried to create in the scene in the main square, which the doctor is sort of a witness to, is decisions get made almost by the hive-mind. There's a group-think that somehow is communicated non-verbally to everyone there, and no one really wants to stand outside it, which to me is also what social media can feel like.

McNally:
Exactly. Exactly. So although there's no digital, the human appetite and the human willingness to surrender to group thought is the same.

Packer:
And that's the way you can get rid of the things that we think make our world our world, and find other ways of conveying the feeling of our world without having smartphones and platforms like Twitter, which it would immediately sort of start to shut off part of your mind because you think you already know it. In this case, you don't know it. You have to pay attention because it's new.

McNally:
And so let me just ask you something which you don't go into much, but you kind of peel back a little and say, this is what's going on out there is Dirt Thought. What is Dirt Thought to you, and how much does it have to do with what we're experiencing now with toxic masculinity, in quotes, the manosphere in quotes, Tate, things like this?

Packer:
Yeah. Well, there's an obvious origin there in those elements, in those aspects of our political cultural landscape. I read a book called *Bronze Age Mindset*. Almost unreadable, but it's by an online fascistic philosopher named Bronze Age Pervert.

McNally:
Wow.

Packer:
…who has had a real run and has a following on the Right. And the anger at cities, the anger at women and girls, the anger at euphemistic language…. All of that got into my head. And that is a description to some extent - maybe almost too kind - of the manosphere, but it's that impulsive young men… because Dirt Thought is the counterpart to Together in the city. It's the movement of young people in the countryside in the opposite direction toward domination and hierarchy and physical strength rather than moral coercion, which is the form of power used by the young people in the city.

McNally:
That's right.

Packer:
…and the young men on this farm where the doctor and his daughter sort of stumble into and get into deep, deep trouble… The young men are training for some vaguely military purpose in animal heads. They're wearing very little clothing. They're almost naked, but they have animal heads on because they've taken on sort of idol-like relations to their chosen animal, which is a kind of surrender to the irrational…

McNally:
And I sense a kind of a purity. They've cleansed themselves of all the messiness that civilization has attempted to impose on them to return to a pure primitive life force.

Packer:
That's exactly right,

McNally:
Because I'd have done well there. (laughs)

Packer:
You and I would've been natural leaders of Dirt Thought.

McNally:
No, I fear quite the opposite. By the way, let me cut in because I saw myself in Hugo Rustin. Here I am sitting at home reading your novel, preparing to record and post our conversation while ICE thugs are arresting my family's car wash people a few blocks from where I live. And the feeling of ineffectuality, of pretending to be engaged, but

keeping it so comfortable, really, really…It struck me. It reminded me of a couple of experiences I will share with you. And then I will have the one last question, which is, you may know Mark Madoff's play *When You Comin' Back, Red Rider*. I acted in a production years ago.

Packer:
I've heard of it, but I've never seen it.

McNally:
It takes place in a café in the Southwest. There's a few people there. I'm a successful professional with a classical violinist for a wife, and we happen to be traveling through the desert. The main males are myself and a Viet Vet who carries a gun and is about to go off at any moment. My character thinks he and the Viet Vet are the two alpha males there - until the vet pulls the gun. Right?

Packer:
A gun changes things.

McNally:
And then I'm a wimp. And so Rustin reminded me of that. There were also experiences, George, when I was in high school where I was beat up two different times by the people we called greasers. This is Central Florida 1963, and they're doing it cause they don't like my attitude. And looking back, I know they were right. But that was where I found myself in Hugo Rustin.

Packer:
I think that's all fair, but I want to kind of, not object, but just clarify that there is something noble about the liberal vision of humanity, about the idea that we are all fellow human creatures and that we have to show understanding and listen to each other and show compassion, which is sort of Rustin's creed. Now, for me, that is a noble creed. The question is can you live by it? And when the going gets tough, and that's the pressure that's put on him, massive pressure over the course of the novel by his daughter, by his wife, by his hospital, and finally by the yeoman out in the countryside. Can he live by it?

And the answer's not simple. He's not just a guy who folds when things get difficult, but he has to rethink his own creed and try to understand what is essential, what is the core of it. And I think, for him, the core of it is his daughter. That is where he's willing to put everything on the line in order not just to keep his bond to her intact or to repair it, but to keep her alive.

And the human connection is sort of where we all have to land if we're going to survive. This is not a political novel in the sense that it has a clear program or a platform. It's political in that it's about the way human beings in a society behave. But what it really is, is a return to something more elemental than politics, which the

only word I can come up with is basic humanity. And if we don't have that, then we're lost. And I think that's the direction that the novel takes Rustin.

McNally:
Okay. Let me go to the last question, and before I do, I'm just going to add for people one thing, which is that we described Dirt Thought in some detail. We did not describe Together in much detail, but if you were to think that Dirt Thought was his creation from the seeds of what's going on in the manosphere while Together owes a lot to woke academic culture. And just so that it's kind of those two things you end up playing with. I'm just putting it out but we don't have time to talk about them. I just wanted people not to think that it was one side and not the other.

My final question, George, is, *The Emergency* hasn't been out that long, but do you have evidence that your suspicion was true, that people can be more reached and more touched by fiction than by fact?

Packer:
I am getting a response to this book that is different from the responses to my earlier nonfiction, and it's just more personal and visceral. People are telling me it kept them up at night, that they lost sleep for two straight nights trying to finish it, that they had to tell their family to leave them alone for a few hours. It's hitting people on a deeper level than even a fairly sustained literary effort of nonfiction, because the imagination has that power of helping us to see more clearly than the facts do, and helping us to feel what it is we're feeling. It calls us to ourselves and says, “Here's where you've been all this time. You may not have known it, you were distracted, but here's where you've been.”

And so that's the most gratifying, even though I'm sorry to people who have lost sleep. But that is, for me, the beginning of renewal. Of renewal. I'm not claiming anything big. I'm just saying if we were able to give ourselves more time and attention, I do think we would come into closer contact with what matters to us and the connections we still have with one another.

McNally:
Okay, we'll leave it at that. Thank you. Thank you. And I'm glad to hear that, by the way.

So again, the new novel is THE EMERGENCY, and you can find all of Packer's Atlantic articles at theatlantic.com. For this conversation and many other interviews and articles, and to join me in pursuit of a world that just might work, go to terrencemcnally.net or aworldthatjustmightwork.com. They're the same website.

To get my weekly email announcement, telling you who's going to be on, what we're going to talk about, and links to 10 or 15 articles to flesh out the conversation, email me at temcnally at mac.com. You can also subscribe and listen to the podcast at my site, at Apple Podcasts, and at most major podcast sites.

And the archives go back hundreds. With George, you'll find Naomi Klein, Robert Reisch, Van Jones, Greg Boyle. You can follow me on Twitter at mcnallyterrence. thanks to Kiyana Williams in production, George Vasilopoulis at Progressive Voices, and most of all, you, my listeners. Please share this podcast widely. And finally, thank you, George Packer, and keep up your good work.

Packer:
Thank you, Terrence, and I appreciate everything you're doing to keep ideas in the culture.

McNally:
Very good.