

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

Oprah's Book Club Webcast Transcript

Oprah: Welcome book clubbers to our worldwide book club discussion. Finally we get to talk about this book I love so much. We're coming to you live from our studios in Chicago, Harpo, and we're uniting readers from all over the globe. This is really so exciting. Including London, Australia, South Africa and beyond for what has to be really, I think, the biggest book club meeting ever. Tonight, we're talking to author David Wroblewski about one of the best books I've read in a long, long time, our book club selection, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. Now, when I read this novel, I knew it was something truly special and I wanted to, you know, meet the man who wrote it. So much so that, you know, I didn't wait for a book club selection. I just called him up. Wasn't that fun?

David: Yes, it was.

Oprah: Welcome, David. Welcome.

David: I'm very happy to be here. Thanks.

Oprah: Thank you so much. And so I hadn't chosen then—when I called you, right? I hadn't chosen it yet.

David: No. No.

Oprah: No. I just wanted to talk about all the characters.

David: Yes.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Yeah. And we just barely got started, so...

Oprah: And so tell us throughout our Web—first of all, throughout our webcast tonight we're going to be taking questions from all of you viewers—well, not all of you. We can't get everybody on. But our phone lines are open and the number to call is right there on your screen.

It's 866-677-2496 or OPRAH-XM. 866-OPRAH-XM. You can also e-mail us on the right of your screen, and we'll read your question or call you at home. But before we get started, I want to have just a short refresher. Now, I'm assuming that if you're online with us right now, you have read the book,

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because I'm getting ready to do a refresher of this brilliant novel and the refresher is going to tell you everything that happens in the book. So if you're one of those people like my friend Gayle, this is the time to put your fingers in your ears if you don't want to know what the outcome is going to be. Or if you're like Dean, our stage manager, who's not quite finished the book yet, here's the time to put your fingers in your ears, Dean. *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. Take a look.

Oprah (taped): Set near the northern Wisconsin woods, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* is an epic novel about a family who breeds an exceptionally intuitive and highly intelligent type of dog. Sawtelle dogs, as they are known, are highly sought after. The Sawtelles' only child, Edgar, is born mute and communicates through sign. His loyal companion, Almondine, a beautiful Sawtelle dog, is always by his side. When his father's troubled brother, Claude, moves back to the family farm, it sets into motion a chain of events that shatters their idyllic world. Edgar's father suddenly drops dead, causing the family business to teeter on the brink of collapse. Claude offers to take charge and, in the process, seduces Edgar's mother, Trudy. In one of many nods to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the story takes a supernatural turn when Edgar's father comes to him as a ghost and reveals that he was poisoned. Edgar flees into the Wisconsin wilderness, leaving his mother and beloved Almondine behind. The story now begins its tragic conclusion. Almondine dies searching for Edgar, who eventually returns home to confront his uncle. It is then Edgar and Claude meet their fate as the barn goes up in flames. Sensing death and destruction, the Sawtelle dogs break free to find their own destiny in the deep dark of night.

Oprah: Wow. So you say the idea for this book came to you in one afternoon?

David: Yeah, absolutely. I—I always describe it as an idea package, because it really combined two or three different elements. I was interested in writing a story about dogs because I hadn't read a story about dogs in a long time.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: This was in the mid-1990s.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: I was interested in drawing on classical sources and in particular, *Hamlet*, because I was—I've always been interested in that story. And I—I wanted it to involve something about language. I'm interested in language and how we use it or fail to use it. How we can misuse it. And so the idea of muteness was part of that idea package right from the start.

Oprah: All in one idea in one afternoon.

David: All in one idea in one afternoon it sort of arrived for me. And in particular, the way it arrived, I had been thinking about how to write a book about dogs, and since this is my first novel, that was completely daunting to me. And one of the things that was very helpful—

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Oprah: So what else had you written?

David: I'd written short stories. I had been taking—for about five years I had been writing short stories, participating in workshops and so on. But I had concluded that the short story wasn't my forum. And I knew I wanted to try a novel. That is the art form that I've always loved the most. And so I wanted to try it, but I was daunted.

Oprah: You always loved it because you loved reading them, right?

David: Absolutely.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: But I responded, I think, as many people who are interested in writing do, I responded to the writing of the book as much as I responded to the story in the book itself.

Oprah: Really.

David: I would read a book and say, you know, I loved that story and—but my imagination would always go immediately to "I wonder how they wrote it. I wonder how that worked."

Oprah: Yeah.

David: And I'm very interested in the creative process in general.

Oprah: I was going to say the process.

David: And other areas.

Oprah: I remember when I called you the first time, you were saying that you had had your jaws wired at some point and that brought about this whole idea of muteness.

David: Well, my jaws weren't wired. I had actually had very, very minor oral surgery, but it involved a stitch in a place that made it hard for me to talk.

Oprah: Okay.

David: And so—

Oprah: I guess in my imagination, I pictured you like this. (Indicating.)

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David: Well, it was—it was hard enough to talk or it was hard enough to pronounce words that—explaining why I couldn't pronounce words was problematic so I just said, "I'm going to take—I'm just going to take a few days instead of not going anywhere I'll just do all the things I normally do, but I won't talk." And it was a very interesting experience because what I discovered was I began to observe—be a better observer of the world around me because I wasn't spending time talking. I was spending more time watching. And I made at the time—

Oprah: So you made a decision that "I'm not going to talk.": Right.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Because you could have talked when you were talking like this. (Indicating.)

David: Exactly.

Oprah: So you said, "I'm not going to talk for a few days."

David: Right.

Oprah: And out of that, Edgar was born?

David: In part. His muteness was born.

Oprah: Was born.

David: Because I—I made a mental note at that moment that it's always interesting to have a character who is more observant than they would normally be. Most of us transact our lives and we're not paying attention to details because we know them so well.

Oprah: That's right.

David: So having a character who is especially good at observing is—is a real gift to a writer. And generally that's done by having the character be a stranger in a new place who comes in and sees it freshly for the first time or has a lot of questions or whatever. In this case, it struck me that you could have a character who was naturally observant because of their—because they—they didn't spend their time talking.

Oprah: I thought that was so powerful when you shared it with me the first time and even hearing it here now that how more powerful you become as an observer when you're not talking.

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David: Yeah. And the other thing, part of that experience that day when I had the original idea was things sort of clicked together in a different way, which is the idea that dogs, in my life with dogs, what I've noticed is that they're extraordinarily good observers. They watch us. And I thought in writing about dogs it would be good to have a human character who could observe dogs as well as they can observe us.

Oprah: So did you have dogs growing up?

David: I did. My—my folks lived on a small farm in central Wisconsin, which is exactly the prototype for the Sawtelle farm but located further south in the state. And for about five years, they raised dogs. Various kinds of dogs. From about the time I was until I was 5 until I was 10. We'd had dogs as pets before then, and we had dogs as pets after then, but during that period, they were actually trying to raise dogs. It was something my mother had always been interested in. And so I grew up sort of during that sweet spot in childhood between 5 and 10 years doing odd jobs around the kennel, socializing the pups and so on. So they're a part of my life.

Oprah: Recently David took us to the area of northern Wisconsin that he had in his mind's eye when he wrote *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*.

David (taped): I think the place where you grow up has tendrils in your mind and in your imagination and in your psyche that for good or for bad, they're here forever. The farm in the book is based on the farm that I grew up on transported out of central Wisconsin about a hundred miles north and set down here in the Chequamegon. When I look at farms like this, I have all the mixed feelings that I have about growing up poor in the country. It's a mixture of living close to the land and also living very close to disaster, really. It's hard to live here. It's not easy. You work for it. You earn it every day, or you lose it. I have been interested in dogs my whole life. From about the time I was 5 years old until I was 10 years old, my parents had a—had a dog kennel. There were dogs everywhere. Puppies everywhere. And that was my job to work with the pups. I loved it. In some ways, the best experience that a kid could have. I didn't grow up thinking I was going to be a writer. My only attempt at writing in high school was one short story that I wrote for a contest, and my motivation was simply to get a day off from school. To my tremendous surprise, I won and I set it aside and forgot about it and then 10 or 12 years later I came back to it and said, "I'd like to do that again. I'd like to see what I can do." Once the events get rolling in the story, Edgar is torn between staying and confronting the problems on the farm and leaving. There's a temptation for him, I think, to just head out into the woods and never come back. And so when I look out on this landscape, it pretty much embodies what I was thinking of. And so I've—I've come back to this spot many times. You can't imagine how hard it would be to find somebody if they—if they didn't want to be found here. When it came to writing Edgar's story, I wanted to take advantage of this setting that I knew, but I also feel like what I tried to do, at least, was take that land and remove all the people that I knew and install all new people. And that was part of the real fun of writing the story for me was I knew the land, but I didn't know the people, and I had to—I had to learn about them in the writing.

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Oprah: Beautiful. Just like I pictured it in my mind's eye too.

David: Yes. That was great.

Oprah: How long did it take you to write it?

David: Over 10—in terms of calendar time, it was somewhere between 10 and 15 years, and I say between 10 and 15 years because that—the day that that idea package arrived, I didn't act on it right away. It occupied my mind. I made various attempts to get started. But it took me a couple of years and a few false starts to really get rolling on it.

Oprah: So how were you supporting yourself in between?

David: I've been a software developer since 1981, which is work that I love doing. It's very creative, and for me it occupies my imagination every bit as much as writing or any other creative thing that I've done.

Oprah: Wow.

David: So I love doing that.

Oprah: So we have Vontresa from Albany, Georgia, on the line, David. Hello, Vontresa.

Vontresa: Hi, it's Vontresa.

Oprah: Vontresa. Okay, thank you.

Vontresa: Hi, everybody. I just wanted to congratulate Mr. Wroblewski on his success, and I also wanted to know how he came up with the concept of the actual book and the imaginary breed of the Sawtelle dogs.

Oprah: The imaginary breed, yeah.

David: Hi. Hi, Vontresa.

Vontresa: Hi.

David: I—the imaginary breed is—was not—it took me a while to understand how to write this story, and I made a few false starts, and one of the false starts that I made was to choose a specific breed of dog for the Sawtelle dogs.

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Oprah: Right there. Yeah.

David: And what I discovered when I would workshop that material or show it to other people is they would—they would react to the breed of the dog rather than, in my mind, the dogs were—were all dogs. They were every dogs.

Oprah: Yes.

David: And so I—eventually I decided that I would try an experiment which was to take as much information out of the story about the dogs as possible and leave them underdescribed, and what I noticed was that people—

Oprah: Use their own imagination.

David: Filled in the details from their own experience, and that was immediately apparent that that was the right way to go. But it was an example of what I've experienced in writing many times over which is you try things and then you have to stand back and see if they work. Sort of listen to the work in progress and then sort of evaluate and go with what works and not impose an idea on it ahead of time, so...

Oprah: Thanks. Thanks, Vontresa.

David: Thank you.

Vontresa: Thank you.

Oprah: So "Fort" in that—Forte, the wild dog in the book, was he based on a real dog?

David: Yes. I actually call him "For-tay."

Oprah: You call him "For-tay"?

David: Yes.

Oprah: I call him—I thought he was Forte since I have a friend named Forte but I thought, "Well, he couldn't be Forte."

David: He is Forte.

Oprah: He is Forte.

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David: He is based on two different dogs. His name is drawn on a dog that we had when we were breeding dogs back when I was a kid. A very big dog, hence the name Forte. But his character is based on a different dog, a wild or half wild dog that I adopted when I was probably 11 or 12 years old who I called Prince. And Prince had been abandoned near our house. As in the story, people used to abandon their dogs. When they didn't want dogs, they would abandon them near our place because they knew we raised dogs. And so we found Prince running through the fields, he wouldn't come in. I spent a fair amount of time just coaxing him in, and we only ever got him sort of half domesticated, really. He wouldn't come into the house. He would not ever allow a collar or a leash to be put on him. But he was intensely loyal and very protective of the yard, and he took it on as his personal responsibility to round up every skunk within a mile and somehow corner it near our back door. So I spent a lot of—a lot of time washing him out after things like that, so...

Oprah: And does tomato juice work for skunks? I always heard—

David: I don't know. I wish I had even heard that at the time because we just shampooed Prince, and it didn't work very well, I must say.

Oprah: So Forte is based upon Prince.

David: Yes.

Oprah: Okay. Jocelyn from Boston, Massachusetts, Skyping us from her family room. Hi, Jocelyn.

Jocelyn: Hi, Oprah.

Oprah: I heard you read every book club selection. Is that true?

Jocelyn: I have read every book club selection, so this is huge that I'm getting to be on through Skype and everything. This is crazy.

Oprah: Wow, this is crazy wild fun. Okay.

Jocelyn: Crazy wild fun. And, Oprah, I actually read this book on a Kindle.

Oprah: No.

Jocelyn: Yes.

Oprah: Was it—

Jocelyn: So I—I really have followed your book selection guidance and everything.

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Oprah: That's good. Do you like the Kindle? Because some people love it as I do, and other people—how are you peopling about it?

Jocelyn: You know, I really, really liked it. I found that I read the book much quicker than I would read a normal book.

Oprah: Absolutely.

Jocelyn: Because, you know, it's—I can't tell how many pages I have until the end. You know, there's a little thing across the bottom, but it's very nice to get completely lost in the book without paying attention to—

Oprah: How much further you have to go, yeah.

Jocelyn: Exactly, yeah. So I loved it. I really loved it. And I loved the book.

Oprah: Was this your first Kindle read? Was this your first Kindle read?

Jocelyn: This was my first Kindle read. I got the Kindle actually for Christmas, and this was the first book I bought on it, and I read it in about—about a week and a half.

Oprah: Wow.

Jocelyn: And it's, you know, a huge book, so—

Oprah: Yes, I do.

Jocelyn: Yeah, so I—and I loved it. I absolutely loved it. And, yes, I have read every single book club selection.

Oprah: And don't you just love this one more than—

Jocelyn: I—I loved it. I loved it. And my question actually for David is the character of Trudy was such a strong woman, and I was wondering if you had a lot of strong female influences in your life that really helped you connect to that personality and if that was—if she was based on anyone in particular in your life.

Oprah: Was she strong? Was she strong?

David: That's a really good—I think she's—I think she's both strong and very

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flawed.

Oprah: I was going to say, she was very flawed. Very vulnerable. I considered that the big weakness that she couldn't see through Claude. That she couldn't—that she would do that, that she, you know, that her love for Edgar wasn't strong enough to overcome her, you know, desires or whatever.

David: Yeah. But I also think that particularly in fiction, which heightens things anyway, people have who have great strength also have great weaknesses.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: That balance those strengths. And I think of struggle as a very strong character but blinded—but blinded by her—by her weaknesses at the same time.

Oprah: Yes. Yeah. Yeah.

David: So she's not—she's not modeled on any one particular person. I have known a lot of strong women in my life and people I've enjoyed working with and so on. My mother was a very traditional housewife and mother. She worked in a house most of the time, although she worked outside the house, so she's not modeled on my mother in any way. I just felt like I was too close to those people, and that's why I say I sort of evacuated our land and put all new people in.

Oprah: Yeah. Even to the point of the name of Edgar.

David: Right.

Oprah: You just—you liked that name and it was a name—

David: I liked that name, yes. I knew that when I started the book because I wanted to draw on *Hamlet*. I wanted a name for the main character that had two syllables and in some way sounded like Hamlet. Had a soft beginning, started with a vowel or a soft consonant and was two syllables and so on. So there's Edgar, Edwin or Oscar, words like that. I happened to like Edgar because I didn't know anybody named Edgar, so I didn't have any preconceived notions about it.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Part of what—honestly what influenced my choice of Trudy, or my characterization of Trudy, is Gertrude in *Hamlet*. She's a mysterious character in that story. She has also great strength and yet she makes decisions about how to behave that are hard to explain. So those were all parts of the mix.

Oprah: Well, Jocelyn, thank you so much.

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Jocelyn: Oh, you're welcome.

David: Thank you.

Oprah: I know you'll be reading because the thing about the Kindle is you end up reading more books than you thought you could even at one time. I used to be a one of a—one-at-a-time kind of reader, and I find that I do two or three at a time now.

Jocelyn: It makes it too easy to buy books now, man. I keep buying those books.

Oprah: I know, it's fantastic. Thank you so much for your support all these years.

Jocelyn: Thank you, Oprah.

Oprah: You must have quite a little library now.

Jocelyn: Yes, I do.

Oprah: That's great.

Jocelyn: Yes, I do. I've been buying a lot. So if you need any book recommendations, Oprah, call me.

Oprah: I will, yeah, because it's hard to find one after this one. It really is. For a while it was hard to read anything after *Edgar Sawtelle*. And where did the name Sawtelle come from?

David: I don't know. I know I heard it on the radio when I was driving home from work one day, but I don't know in what context. So many people have asked me. I've been told that it's a more unusual name than Wroblewski, believe it or not. Which is hard to believe, isn't it?

Oprah: Yeah.

David: So it may be—it may be that I heard a reference to the Sawtelle district in Los Angeles. There's a blue grass musician named Charles Sawtelle. And perhaps I heard a reference to him. I don't know what was on the radio at all. All I know is I had been—I had been wondering, "What am I going to—what are these people's names?" I knew their first names, but I didn't know their last name, and it was about a 15-minute commute home and I heard it in the car shortly after I got on the road, and by the time I parked in the driveway, it was Sawtelle. It was Edgar Sawtelle. And I've never—it never—never seemed like it could be anything else after that.

Oprah: So let's talk about the parallels between *Edgar Sawtelle* and *Hamlet*. You were talking about how—

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David: Yeah.

Oprah: —how Trudy modeled after Gertrude. You decided before you began writing the book that that's what you were going to do?

David: Yes. Yes.

Oprah: Really.

David: However, I should qualify that because the original idea was to draw on the story of *Hamlet*. Not the—not the play, necessarily, but the story. And the story goes back longer than the play. The story of *Hamlet* is actually—when the play was written, it was—it was drawing on a legend that was older than Shakespeare's time than *Hamlet* is in our time. So it's a very, very old legend. It's quite different, in many ways, than *Hamlet*, the old legend. So I wanted a—I wanted to draw on it very loosely and I also wanted to draw not just on *Hamlet* but on Shakespearean tragedy. Other plays like *Romeo & Juliet*. Like *Othello*. Like *Lear* and so on. In various ways. And I thought of them taken together as a sort of palette that I could draw from.

Oprah: So did you think that first and then this conception—this conceptual idea came to you that afternoon? What came first?

David: They came pretty much together.

Oprah: Did the package come—did the package come?

David: It was part of the package. There was the dogs, drawing on the story of *Hamlet*, it was muteness and it was five-act structure was the final part of that.

Oprah: Wow.

David: The idea that a story, a complex story, could be broken down the way a stage play is broken down into acts. Which—which is not a particularly insightful thing. It was a big deal for me in that moment as someone who is sort of approaching this project.

Oprah: Because that gave you a beginning, that gave you a foundation, that gave you something from which to begin the process.

David: Right. I understood structure because of that.

Oprah: Yeah.

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David: Or at least enough to begin. Although, most of the details of this story I did not—I had no clue about when I began. I knew what the feeling of the general arc of the story was.

Oprah: And what was that?

David: I had a feeling about where I was going to go. I understood that it was a tragic arc. I understood that in the—in the center, toward the end of the story, Edgar would leave the farm but that most of the—most of the story would—would take place on the farm and the farm would act as a kind of stage.

Oprah: Wow.

David: With sort of, even in my mind then I was thinking in terms of stage lighting and so on.

Oprah: Don't you all just love this process? I mean, I'm like you. I love—again, every author's process is different.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: And so then would you write every day?

David: I tried. I tried. Although I don't have—I'm not one of those writers who has almost sort of military discipline about it and do a thousand words a day and so on. I tend to go in bursts, and particularly first draft. For me, first draft is very different than subsequent drafts, and this book has gone through something on the order of drafts. So the first draft is when the material is going to come out, it's going to come out whatever time of day that is. When I was working full time, it was mainly in the evenings for some reason.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: Later drafts, as I was revising, I tended to do those more in the morning or in the afternoon.

Oprah: Now do the characters, are you, you know, sitting methodically writing passages for them? Or do the characters sort of visit you or live with you? I mean I've talked to other authors who, you know, it works both ways.

David: Yeah. For me, I feel like I'm having a conversation with the book itself. But not with any particular character. One of the things that I learned from the world of software is that when you get something partially made, it begins to give you a lot of information back about what it can be or can't be. What it's going to be good at. What, if you want it to be something that it's not being good at, how hard you're going to have to work to unwind it and start over and send it off in a new direction. And

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that experience with software also translated for me into writing. A half-written book begins to push back in very interesting ways.

Oprah: Begins to push back.

David: Yeah, it pushes back.

Oprah: Do the characters after a while then start to tell their own story?

David: The—I wouldn't—I don't think of it as individual characters.

Oprah: Okay.

David: For instance, you know sometimes you hear writers say, "This character came in from out of nowhere and took over."

Oprah: Yes.

David: Never my experience.

Oprah: Never your experience.

David: My experience was that at certain points the story demanded that certain kinds of action took place.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: That certain scenes were long enough or not long enough but it wasn't based on the characters' personality, per se. With a couple of exceptions. Henry is the exception. We'll talk about that.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: But most of the time, it was the book as a whole—my experience was it was the book as a whole saying, "You know, this section is perhaps too comedic." Because my tendency is to—is to—to gesture toward comedy. Not tragedy when I'm writing. And so I would have to rein that in a lot and take some of that material out.

Oprah: Wow. Karen from Vermont. Hi, Karen. You're on the phone. Hi.

Karen: Hi, Oprah.

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Oprah: Hi.

Karen: Hi, David.

David: Hi, Karen.

Karen: My question has to do with Almondine, and I'm just interested in the way that you personified her in the story.

Oprah: Woo.

Karen: Almondine seemed to be one of the most intelligent and enlightened characters in the story, and I was wondering if that was intentional on your part.

Oprah: And was Almondine based on any dog you ever had or knew?

David: She's not. Okay. So, Almondine was a character, and this is an example of a surprise for me. Almondine was a character that didn't have her own perspective in the story until the first draft was about half done.

Oprah: Really.

David: And the first draft of this book was written in first person from Edgar's point of view. And I got about to the middle of the book and I realized—I didn't understand what was going on, but all of a sudden I was realizing I couldn't go forward and I actually stopped writing on the book for about a year. And what was actually happening was I was discovering that I couldn't go forward purely in Edgar's point of view. And the first time I discovered that was I sat down one day and I wrote the first Almondine chapter, and it was this anomalous experience. Here I had this book where Edgar is talking about "me" and "I" and all these things that have happened and he's thinking back on, and all of a sudden there's this chapter from Almondine's point of view, and it happened—that was written in a day or two, and the chapter that is in the final form of the book is virtually unchanged from that first draft, which is true of very little of the rest of the book. The rest of the book has been edited a lot over and over.

Oprah: The Almondine chapter—

David: All of Almondine's chapters are almost exactly the way they were in first draft. She's not based on any dog. She's an amalgamation of every dog I've ever known. And so I can't—I couldn't pick a single dog and say she comes from them. But I did want her to have a very distinctly different way of experiencing the world. I wanted the language for her to be more poetic. I wanted her to not operate in terms of sort of rational—what we call rational thought. Be very much more based in her senses.

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And—and to think of time differently because she—she thinks of—for instance, in that first chapter, trying to find the thing that was going to happen.

Oprah: Yes.

David: And so she's experiencing—

Oprah: At the bottom of page 34, everybody, "While Almondine pondered this, a sound reached her ears—a whispery rasp, barely audible, even to her. At first she couldn't make sense of it. The moment she'd walked into the room, she'd heard the breaths coming from the blanket. The ones that nearly matched his mother's breathing. And so it took her a moment to understand that in this new sound she was hearing distress to realize that this near silence was the sound of him wailing. She waited for the sound to stop, but it went on and on as quiet as the rustle of the new leaves on the apple trees. That was what the concern had been about, she realized. The baby had no voice. It couldn't make a sound."

David: Mm-hmm.

Oprah: Oh my God.

David: Mm-hmm.

Oprah: And then at the top of 35, this is one of my favorite lines in the book, "Almondine began to pant. She shifted her weight from one hip to the other and as she looked on and saw his mother continue to sleep, she finally understood the thing that was going to happen was that her time for training was over and now at last she had a job to do."

David: Yeah. Yeah.

Oprah: How did that come to you, David?

David: Um, I don't know how to answer that question because I—I don't remember specifically writing that line. But I do remember thinking when I wrote it that, "I like the idea that

our dogs, our animals, can have a revelatory moment."

Oprah: Wow.

David: Can realize that they have a purpose in their lives. And so one of the reasons why I think I didn't touch these chapters very much was because through whatever luck or grace you get out of writing, a passage like that happens to you. Oh, that—I didn't even know I meant that until I wrote it and then I said, "Okay, that—that was right. I'm not going to change that or mess with it."

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Oprah: Wow. So, Karen?

Karen: Yeah.

Oprah: Did you get your question answered?

Karen: I did. That was wonderful. Thank you so much.

Oprah: Thank you, Karen.

David: Thanks, Karen.

Karen: You're welcome.

Oprah: So we have a book club Skyping in from Appleton, Wisconsin, not too far from the setting of the book. So what's your question? Wow, there's a whole club there.

All: Hi.

Oprah: Hi.

David: Hi, folks.

Oprah: Appleton, Wisconsin. Hello.

All: Woo.

Oprah: Everybody with their *Edgar Sawtelle* book. So what's the question? Who's the—

All: And our Kindles.

Oprah: And your Kindles. Great.

Appleton Book Club Member: Hi, David.

David: Hi.

Appleton Book Club Member: I was just wondering about the lack of other relationships for Edgar in the story. It seems like he would want to share his home and his dogs and all the wonderful things that are going on with his friends.

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David: That's a great question. Part of—part of what I was interested in doing with Edgar was isolating him for a number of reasons. I was interested in the idea of haunting, which is one of the themes of the book.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: And—and he's—and I wanted for—for the purposes of the story for him to not have to spend much time off the farm. I wanted that—that farm, that barn, that yard, that house to be like a stage set. To which he was confined in a sort of pressure cooker.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: Until the moment when he leaves. So that dictated a number of choices about how much of his outside life, his school life and so on, were actually present in the story itself.

Oprah: Right.

David: And there were many scenes where he's on the bus or he's in school, and so on that I cut as I—as I understood that in order to keep the dramatic tension in place, I needed to—I needed to restrict what we saw of his life to home. But I also think that that's—that's where all the important things happen to him. So it wasn't important to show his life in school or—or really anywhere else.

Oprah: Yeah. And also not being able to speak that, would be a part of the reason why he would be isolated.

David: Right.

Oprah: And just imagine, ladies, if he could, then he would be able to share all of these feelings of discontent or whatever was going on at home, there would be the friend and the friends and the school and all of that engaged in it.

David: Right.

Oprah: So I see why you set it up that way.

David: He needed—the people that he needed to be closest to were the dogs and his family.

Oprah: Right.

David: So there was really no space in the story for the rest of it.

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Oprah: Right. And if he had a friend, that would have taken energy away from the dogs.

David: Right. Exactly.

Oprah: Any other questions? That's a good question, though. Really good question. Anybody else in the book club?

Appleton Book Club Member 2: Yeah, I wondered why at the beginning of the story it seems so important for Edgar to find out how his parents met, and then at the end, Edgar, and ultimately the reader, does not find out how his parents met. And I wondered why, David, you constructed it that way.

Oprah: That's a good question. I like that too.

David: There's a—I think that's a—first of all, I think that's an excellent question. And it's something that I spent a lot of time thinking about. In the very beginning of this book, Edgar has a couple of problems that he has to solve. One of them is why Schultz left the farm.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: It's the very first problem he has to solve. But along with that is this other problem of how did his parents meet. It's a sort of mystery he has to solve. And I intended for him never to know the real answer to that because I think of those two problems as sort of practice problems for Edgar. He's going to have a bigger problem later in the book, and the bigger problem is, what actually happened between Gar and Claude? And he's never going to have evidence that is irrefutable about that. So he's only going to be able to solve those problems through his imagination. So he—in the first chapter, he solves that—that problem about Schultz. And just—just by visualizing Schultz over and over again, he decides that Schultz left because he was lonely. With regard to his—how his parents met, he reaches a point in the story where his mother offers to tell him, if you remember.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: When the fires are burning out in the field to soften the ground for his father's grave. And she says, "If you really want to know, I'll tell you." And he decides he doesn't want to know because to know that would eliminate all of these other ways that they met and it would reduce it to just one way. And for him, it was more important that all those different ways existed and he felt like his life would be more complete with all those different alternatives in place than if he just picked one.

Oprah: Wow. You did think about it a lot. Yes.

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David: Yes. But this is an example of one of the story elements that didn't get finalized until very late in the writing process. And my editor and I talked a lot about this very point. Should we give a final answer to this or not? And—and part of it was, I don't know myself. I don't know how they met. And just working within the confines of the book, you know, there's a framework. And you need to know answers to certain questions, and I felt like if I knew the answer, Edgar would have to know the answer. So I very studiously tried not to know that answer. To not try and solve that problem during the writing of this book.

Oprah: So Appleton Wisconsin Reading Club, did you all have a lot of talks amongst yourselves about this book?

All: Oh, yes. So many.

Oprah: So many. Yeah. And we're going to be talking—

All: So many.

Oprah:—of course later on about the ending and why that ending.

All: Yes.

Oprah: Yes.

All: Lots of questions about the ending.

Oprah: Yes. All right. But thank you for joining us, everybody.

All: Thank you.

David: Thank you, Wisconsin.

Oprah: Did you all coordinate your colors?

All: Yes.

Oprah: You must have. You must have. That could not have happened by accident. Really. You look great. Thank you. Thank you so much. We talked to Ann Leary on the show last Friday and learned

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from her husband, actor and writer Denis Leary, that she loved *Edgar Sawtelle* and she joins us tonight from New York City. Hi, Ann.

Ann: Hi, Oprah.

Oprah: Is that Daphne?

Ann: I can't hear you.

Oprah: Is that Daphne? Is that dog Daphne?

Ann: This is Daphne. I'm sorry, she's not posing very well.

Oprah: That's okay, she's sleepy.

Ann: Immodest.

Oprah: That's okay.

Ann: David, congratulations. I really loved your book. I'm an author myself and I have to say the first thing I loved about your book was its title, and I know how hard it is to name a book. But when I first heard the title of your book, I understood immediately that it was going to be a legend of some type. I was really glad you said that earlier in the show. It really is—is quite a legend about Edgar.

David: Yeah.

Ann: And my question is, I was really—I also liked your device of giving a little history about Edgar's grandfather and his breeding program and the way you used correspondence with the—a Mr. Brooks from the—I can't remember the name of the German Shepherd breeding.

David: The Fortunate Fields project, yeah.

Oprah: The Fortunate Fields projects.

Ann: Yeah, so anyway, I was very interested in the correspondence between the two men about their ideas of kind of selecting—selective breeding and trying to perfect a breed, and I also noticed that it was set—these letters were set in like 1944. I think the last one was 1944. So I was interested in was there any deliberate attempt to draw a correlation between what was going on in—and I know they were talking about breeding German Shepherds. So I didn't know if there was some deliberate attempt to compare what was going on in Nazi Germany with kind of trying to develop the superior race.

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David: Oh, interesting question. And I have to say that Daphne is the—is the most relaxed person on camera ever.

Ann: I'm sorry, Almondine would never pose like this.

Oprah: I know.

David: She's very relaxed.

Oprah: Oh, gosh.

David: So the answer to your question is no, actually. There was no intent on my part to draw any connection to Nazi Germany or any of that. In fact, I tried as hard as I could over the course of the story to sort of wall off the outside world in every way.

Oprah: So 1944, you weren't trying to make a superior dog.

David: No. No. But it was drawing on the Fortunate Fields program, which was established in Switzerland back in the—like in 1925 and was the first attempt to breed—to scientifically breed dogs for behavior. To breed working dogs. And there's this very famous old book, it used to be out of print, it's now back in print, called *Working Dogs* by Humphrey and Warner, and Brooks is this fictional third author to that book. But I did read that book and drew on that experience to sort of integrate into the discussion of the breeding program, so...

Oprah: Did you have another question? Because the other day you said you had so many questions.

Ann: Oh, I have so many questions. Well, I was quite—I was most impressed with your understanding of dog behavior. A lot of books I read, I'm a dog nut and I think I know—I love to read about dog training and behavior and theories and I was really impressed that—because often people write books about dogs and I don't get a sense they really understand dogs, and I was really impressed with your understanding of the way a dog's mind works. I felt early on when you wrote from Almondine's point of view that you must have read quite a bit of Jack London growing up because that reminded me a little bit of—of his work. And I just—I felt like I—I felt like I knew you. I got the sense you were an only child when I read this because, again, the triangulation between the parents and him not knowing about their background and him feeling a little isolated, not part of the—are you an only child?

David: I'm not. I'm the youngest of three. I have an older sister, Bobbi, and an older brother, Daniel.

Ann: Okay.

Oprah: Ann, thanks. Give our best to Denis.

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Ann: I will.

Oprah: Tell him that was wild fun. Thank you so much. And Daphne, my God, what can we say?

David: Daphne's a star.

Oprah: Daphne, I mean, arms wide open, legs wide open. There she is. Gosh, you're going to love that photo later. Skyping in from Canton, Michigan, is the Book Ends Book Club. Hi, ladies.

All: Hi.

Oprah: Hi there. What's your question for David?

Book Ends Book Club Member: Okay. My first question, or my question is, what prompted Trudy to start a relationship with Claude?

David: That's one of the central mysteries of the book, isn't it?

Oprah: Because don't we all think she should have known better?

All: Yes.

Oprah: Yes, my goodness. Good gosh.

David: Well, this is something that I—I delayed trying to reveal in the book for as long as possible because I wanted in the center of the book when it's actually happening during the courtship chapter and so on, I wanted—I wanted it to seem as inexplicable for readers as it should seem for Edgar. In fact, that was one of the guiding principles about the first half or two-thirds of the book was that I didn't want the readers to know more than Edgar. I wanted everyone to be in the same position. What is going on with Trudy? Why—what is going on with Claude? Do we really trust him? Do we not? He's a little bit charismatic, he's a little interesting, but are our suspicions right or not? And not have any evidence. So it isn't until tend of the book that Trudy talks about this in one of her—I think of them as soliloquy chapters. One of the chapters where she's thinking back on things. And at least for me, and I think everybody gets to interpret this myself, I should say that, or themselves, I should say that I don't feel like the author has the final word always on things like this.

Oprah: Okay, but—

David: But at least for me, it—she is looking pretty desperately for a way to recapture Gar. And her—again, I mentioned earlier about haunting.

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Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: I think that Trudy is haunted by Gar in not literally the way Edgar is, but she's haunted by her memory of Gar. And when she looks at Claude, she sees a little bit of Gar. It's a way to access Gar. It's a way to know Gar in a way that she never knew Gar before because Claude knew Gar and so she can ask him questions and so on. And so it's a—it's a bad bargain, but it's a bargain that she's making. "I can have a little more of Gar if I'll have a little bit of Claude."

Oprah: Oh, good question. Good question, lady. Anybody else with another question?

Book Ends Book Club Member 2: I have one.

Oprah: Okay.

Book Ends Book Club Member 2: Did Trudy, did she believe that Claude was guilty in the deaths of both Gar and Edgar in the end? Or did she really believe that Claude died trying to save Edgar?

David: Okay. So now you're asking about what she believes at the very end of the book, right?

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

Book Ends Book Club Member 2: Yes.

David: I think that—and, again, this is open to interpretation and meant to be, but I think that what's—at the very end of the book, Trudy has essentially been sort of wiped clean emotionally. And it's not clear to me what she knows entirely. What is clear to me is that she has been—circumstances have forced her to look back and see the mistakes that she's made and how it's led up to that moment. So I believe that she understands—she understands about Gar and Claude—and I believe that she understands about Edgar. But the book doesn't commit. If you understand the distinction I'm trying to make. And I—I think it's entirely possible that she may not understand that yet. But I—you know, Trudy's—

Oprah: My feeling was that she didn't understand. My feeling was that she was still—she was opening up to see, "Wow, what have I been missing? What are all the clues that I've missed?"

David: Yes.

Oprah: But I didn't feel in the end that she really still got it. I think in the end of the book, my interpretation, was that she thinks that Claude went in to save Edgar in the end.

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David: And I think that's a reasonable interpretation. This is one of those points where I wanted—again, I wanted readers to be able to supply some level of interpretation and not just nail it down finally one way or another.

Oprah: So I'm sure you all disagreed in the club, right? In the book club?

All: Yes.

Oprah: Did you all know how Almondine died? Thanks, everybody. Did you all—let me just ask this group, the Book Enders. You all know—I read it and I was reading with my friend, Kate Forte, and she—you know, I finished the book and the next day when she finished the book she was, like, weeping, sobbing, sobbing, you know, about how Almondine had died. I didn't get how Almondine had died. How do you all think Almondine died?

All: I didn't get it either.

Book Ends Book Club Member 3: Natural causes maybe?

Oprah: No. No, no, no, no, no. There's a distinct moment when Almondine—okay, so listen—listen to this. "She stepped onto the sharp red gravel of the road. She was very nearly not there at all, so deeply was she inside her own mind. There was a time in her when he had fallen from an apple tree, a tree she'd just stepped away from." I'm on page 463, everybody. One, two, three paragraphs down. "He'd landed with a thump on his back. A time in the winter when he'd piled the snow on her face until the world had gone white and she dug for his mittened hand. Inside her were countless mornings watching his eyes flutter open as he woke. Above all, she recalled the language the two of them had invented. A language in which everything important could be said. She did not know how to ask the traveler what she needed to ask, nor what form its reply might take. But it was upon her now angry and rushed and it wouldn't be long before she knew the answer. A bloom of dust, like a thunder cloud, chased it down the hill. She stood broad side in the gravel and turned her head and asked her question. Asked if it had seen her boy. Her essence. Her soul. But if the traveler understood, it showed no sign."

Oprah: You still don't know. She got hit by the car.

All: Oh.

Oprah: She was hit by the car.

David: Yeah, it's a truck. It's a gravel truck, actually.

Oprah: It's a gravel truck coming down the road. And, see, I thought that she was looking up and she saw the dust on the road.

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David: Yeah.

Oprah: But Kate said, no—and we argued the next day. She was definitely hit by the—she was definitely hit.

David: Yeah. And when you called that first time we talked.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: You talked about this.

Oprah: Yes. I wanted to know, was she hit by the truck?

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: I could tell you all had been having a debate about this.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: And this is one of those—

Oprah: She was hit by the truck.

David: She was. Absolutely. Absolutely. Although after you pointed that out, I—it never occurred to me that there was any other interpretation of that chapter until we talked and then I realized, and I think I said this on the phone, I realized that I had written it because—because this chapter is so hard.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: I felt like it had to be addressed rather impressionistically.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: And so I—it—in my mind, it was absolutely clear what happened. But I wanted the language to be impressionistic. And I didn't realize that I had left open for interpretation exactly—

Oprah: How she died.

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David: —exactly what happened there. And then I realized after we talked that Trudy thinks about Almondine having died but she doesn't say—she doesn't make reference to the situation.

Oprah: Right.

David: So—

Oprah: So, yeah, you don't really know Almondine is dead until he comes back and she says—

David: Yeah. But there's a couple—can I comment on that passage for a couple minutes?

Oprah: You can do anything you want.

David: One of the things that's important in that—in that passage is that it's about language.

Oprah: It is.

David: About how she's searching to try and answer a question and she doesn't have the words to get the question answered. So when I think of that passage, and what was on my mind when I was writing, was not the mechanics of what was happening in that scene, probably I should have paid more attention to that, but the idea that she was missing Edgar not just because he was her boy but he was a participant in this language that they had constructed.

Oprah: Also I felt—even just now when I read it the first time, oh, my heart ached. There's an aching and a longing in this need for the language.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: There's a—you can feel her heart aching and longing.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Couldn't you, ladies, feel that?

All: Sure. Absolutely.

Oprah: Absolutely. Great to talk to you. Thank you for Skyping in with us tonight.

All: Thank you.

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Oprah: Thank you so much. Okay. Our next reader is Cheryl from The Woodlands in Texas. She's Skyping us from her home library. Hi. Hi, Cheryl. Your question?

Cheryl: Hi, David. How are you both doing today?

Oprah: We're great. Love your library.

Cheryl: Thank you. I tried to straighten out the books yesterday so it still looks a little helter-skelter, I've afraid. Listen, David, there, were many, many, many things that I loved about your novel. One of the more compelling things I thought was the foreshadowing throughout the story. And it really was a hook that lulled you in and—or lured you in and kept you reading, in addition to the imagery and everything else you added to the story. But I was really intrigued by what I thought was the use of this sort of magical realism technique that I've seen other modern writers employ, and I was wondering if—if you were trying to use that technique that you had seen in other writers' writing and if so, who. And I'm specifically kind of focusing in on the prophesy of Ida Paine throughout all this and indirectly through the little girl at the diner. You know, she's almost like an Oracle of Delphi.

David: You got it.

Cheryl: And she doesn't seem to know the actual end result of what she's prophesying, but she knows something's up. And all of that seems very mystical to me. So I was wondering also as you're planting these seeds of prophesy, like it's only the wind. Or find the bottle. If you don't find the bottle, get out. Did you know at that point in time what the ending was going to be or what the end of the prophesy was? And then if I could sneak in a conjunctive question here.

Oprah: Okay.

Cheryl: The—the little girl in the diner who I think was Ida Paine's granddaughter.

Oprah: Granddaughter. Yes.

Cheryl: She said something that was really interesting to me about Edgar's muteness. She said that her grandmother had told her that Edgar was mute because he had a secret that God didn't want him to tell.

Oprah: Yeah.

Cheryl: And so I guess the end of my very compound question here is, what was the secret that Edgar wasn't to tell?

David: Okay. You may have to help me reconstruct the entire—let's talk for a second about foreshadowing.

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Oprah: Okay, foreshadowing.

David: There's two different kinds of foreshadowing that take place in this book. One is intended to be invisible. And the other is—is Ida Paine who's supposed to be in the foreground and very, very obviously foreshadowing some things. I think of the structure of a novel as a braid. It's a braid of various things. Plot points. But also images or words or ideas that will be on the surface of the story for a little while and then submerge and then come up and be on the surface of the story again in some slightly altered form. Let me give you an example. In the first chapter, there's a—there's a sort of very brief throwaway scene where Edgar's grandfather has adopted this pup named Gus and they go sit by a lake and he fishes and feeds the—feeds the pub fish that he's caught that he's roasted over a fire. It happens for a paragraph or something like that and then disappears.

Cheryl: Yeah.

David: Later in the book in Part 4, that's practically what Edgar spends all his time doing. Now I wouldn't call that foreshadowing. But it is. I mean, it functions like foreshadowing. It's an image that echoes later in the book and very, very much of the book works this way if you take it apart technically. Ida Paine is the only—only element of this story that is intended to function like foreshadowing. And I wanted—she's not—you mentioned the Oracle at Delphi, which I think is a bull's eye in one way. I think of Ida Paine as coming from—remember I talked about that palette.

Oprah: Yes.

David: Coming from *Macbeth* and the witches in *Macbeth*. Who have the same sort of function. They say, "Macbeth, you know, you're going to be king." They don't tell him how or why and they say, "And no one's going to be able to kill you until these woods come to this hill and so on." And so I was, in my mind during that prophecy, I was thinking mainly of the witches in *Macbeth*. But of course they're part of a larger tradition of oracles in storytelling and I think they're all connected.

Oprah: And what is the secret that Edgar holds?

David: You know, I think that that secret is the—is that he—he knows or will know—I'm trying to remember what happens in the story now. He doesn't know yet that—about what happened with Gar and Claude.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: So—but it's meant to be a puzzle at that point. It's puzzling for Edgar and I—it's meant to—that's one of those elements that's sort of meant to submerge and be below the surface for the rest of the story.

Oprah: Isn't this quite a story?

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Cheryl: Oh, it's wonderful.

Oprah: Wonderful story, yeah.

Cheryl: It's—to me it's just such a compelling read. The imagery was just off the charts. I read this for the first time last summer. I think it was shortly after it was released. And we were on vacation in Belize, so I devoted all day every day reading it. And then my book club, and they're going to kill me because they're not all arrayed behind me. I didn't know that was an option. We're meeting this Thursday to discuss this book and also *Hamlet*, and I threw in—and I'm beginning to wonder why now, but I threw in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* because I thought they were all somehow related. But it's a wonderful, rich read, and I loved it.

Oprah: Thank you so much, Cheryl.

Cheryl: Thank you.

Oprah: Okay. We have Lori from Ontario, Canada, on the phone. Lori, your question for David?

Lori: Hi, Oprah. David, my question as I was reading through, the pain that Edgar would have in his chest. I know when he was trying to get the operator to understand that he needed help, he was pounding on that chest. But then he continued to have this horrendous pain, this really heartbreaking pain, and I wanted to know what was that about? Was that just the heartache of his life or was it—you know, was it his father coming to him? Or what were you after there?

David: Okay. First of all, hi. Thanks for calling.

Lori: Hi.

David: He's feeling a pain in his chest, and it's not revealed until after it's first mentioned, that in his sleep, while he's sleeping, he's still beating his chest. And so what's happening is, and he's in this very strange state at that point in the story of sort of denial and suspecting that something's not right, but not knowing how to assemble it coherently. What's happening is I think in his sleep, and sorts of in the edges of his mind, he knows something's not right.

Oprah: Something's off.

David: And he keeps reliving in his dreams, or in his sleep, at least, that moment when he's on the phone. And so in his sleep, he's striking his chest, and he doesn't even know he's doing it in the way that we can all sort of look around, things that are incredibly obvious, he's managed not to notice that he has a big bruise on his chest until that moment in the story when Trudy says, "What is going on? Take off your shirt. What's going on with that big bruise on your chest?" And so when—in the story

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when he first notices that he wakes up and he just feels this ache that's sort of radiating out from the middle of his chest, he doesn't connect it to that.

Lori: Well, thank you. Thank you.

Oprah: Thanks, Lori.

Lori: I loved the book. Just loved it.

David: Thank you.

Oprah: Thank you. Thank you, Lori. Richard Skyping us from London, where I believe it's the middle of the night. Hi, Richard. Thanks for staying up with us.

Richard: Hello there. Oh, my pleasure. It's an honor to take part.

Oprah: And your question?

Richard: I wanted to ask David, but first of all, thank you for spending that 10 to 15 years it took you to come to grips with getting this novel finished because it's been a pleasure to read.

David: Thank you.

Richard: I noticed in the—in the blurb, the author's blurb at the back of the book that you had done an MFA in creative writing, and it's something that I've been in two minds about doing myself, so I just wanted to get your thoughts on first off what prompted you to undertake like a really structured and almost theoretical, very detailed study of the craft of fiction in that way, and in what ways did it help you?

David: Well, this is a great question, and we could probably talk for the rest of the night on this one thing. I'll tell you that I tried everything I could not to enter an MFA program, so I went to lots of other sources. I read a lot of other books on writing. I read, for instance, the *Paris Review* interviews with writers, which are this wonderful, wonderful archive of long and fascinating interviews. But there was a particular question I could not answer for myself. Once I started working on a novel, these things that I had been reading my entire life, and which felt like the most natural art form in the world, once I started to try and make one for myself, I couldn't understand how they could—a story that long, 200, 300, 500 pages, how could it hold together and be a single experience? I mean, it—it's almost like I—I stopped believing that a story that long could be coherent.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

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David: And so I started looking for—I thought there must be some technique or craft point that ties everything together. And I was looking—I was obviously looking in the wrong places. And it didn't stop me from writing. But what it—but I ended up with islands of text. So, eventually, I reached a point where I need to—I happen to believe pretty strongly in apprenticeship learning. Find somebody who's really good at what they're doing and watch them do it. And so the MFA program that I was—that I ultimately entered is a very one-on-one kind of program, and it allowed me to say to these people one after another, "How do you—you know, how do you solve this problem? Do you even see it as a problem? What do you do about it?" And I got different answers from all of them. But eventually the answer that I came up with for myself was that this braid structure that I talked about is the very thing that holds a novel together and there's not some—I used to call it middle—middle level, middle layer. That there's not some middle layer. There's all the details of individual scenes there's the—there's the overall arch of the story. But everything is twined together, and you can't point at any one thing and say, "Well, this is sort of a framework that makes this—makes this whole center section hold together or anything like that.

Oprah: Richard, thank you so much. Thank you, Richard.

Richard: Thank you.

Oprah: Thanks for staying up.

David: Thank you.

Oprah: We've got a couple of e-mails here. Renee Davis has a question about when your book is made into a movie, who do you see playing Gar, Trudy and Edgar.

David: (Laughter.)

Oprah: And what kind of dog should play Almondine? What kind of dogs should play the Sawtelle dogs. That's going to be a—

David: Really great question.

Oprah: Yes.

David: I have no idea. I have no idea. I think I—these are people that I have—I have—that are absolutely distinct individuals to me. So part of the exercise for me as the author is to let go of them a little bit and let somebody else inhabit those characters in film in this particular completely different medium. And actually the—the human characters are much easier for me than the Sawtelle dogs.

Oprah: I know.

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David: Specifically because I think of the Sawtelle dogs as whatever you—whatever you, the reader, creates.

Oprah: And so now there's going to be a dog.

David: There's going to be a picture—

Oprah: Of a dog.

David: —of a particular dog there so that's going to be very tricky. So I don't know. And Almondine, I'm as fascinated as anyone could possibly be to see how Almondine gets cast.

Oprah: Well, Daphne may be a good one.

David: She had the spirit right.

Oprah: She had the spirit right.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Really. Yeah, I look forward to making the—working creatively with Tom Hanks' company, Playtone, and my company and Universal to figure all that out.

David: Yes.

Oprah: It's going to be a wonderful process. Okay, here is June from Dudley, Massachusetts. Did you give Edgar the power to see ghosts to compensate for his inability to speak?

David: Interesting question. I—not directly. But I—I think of them as connected. As I said earlier, I think of things that can set you apart, that can isolate you. One of them is speechlessness.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: It makes you—it makes you a loner. It also makes you an observer, like I said. But also the whole idea of haunting has to do with being isolated. Because when you're haunted, you've been—nobody's haunted in a crowd. They're haunted all by themselves, right?

Oprah: Yeah. And the book leaves you feeling that. Haunted.

David: Yeah. So the ideas are related, but not—not in the writing was I trying to connect them directly.

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Oprah: Mm-hmm. Okay. That got answered. All right. Are you surprised at all by the success, by the reception of the book? By the reception. And I'm not saying that, you know, to hear anything about the book club selection. Because, as I said when I announced the book, I am literally jumping on the bandwagon of all the other acclaim, critical and personal that you've received for this book.

David: Yeah. Yeah.

Oprah: Were you surprised? You know, you worked so long on it. I know no author sets out to, you know, say, "Gee, I'm going to have this critically acclaimed book. You're just writing the story."

David: Right.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: No, I was surprised. And particularly since this was a story that I had been living with, you know, sort of in—in my office. I think of it like I had it in a cage in my office.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: And I had this very—when we talked on the telephone—or actually when you announced the book.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: I said that it was a very private and very personal project for me because I had developed over all these years this lifestyle where these were people I knew. And they were all mine. Almondine was all mine. Edgar was all mine. And so I had no idea whether that would translate for other people or not. And it wasn't—it really wasn't foremost in my mind when I was writing. What was important to me was getting the book written. I—I'm aware that most first novels don't even get published.

Oprah: Right.

David: And that they are—they're the training ground that you create for yourself. So for me, a big part of this, probably the most exciting moment in the writing of this book, or the publishing of this book, was just finding out it was going to be published at all. And if 500 people or 5,000 people read it, that would have been fine with me. Just the idea that it—that it was going to get a chance to get out of that cage and have a public life was very exciting.

Oprah: Wow. That is so moving.

David: Yeah.

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Oprah: I think what's so interesting, too, is what you were saying earlier about Almondine. Because as I've expressed to our viewers and also to you when I first called, that the chapters about—the chapters that Almondine wrote are almost—they feel holy. They feel sacred to me.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: And now to hear that those were the ones that were the least, you know, touched by you or the editor after writing, and to also understand, I had an aha! moment here, that the fact that Almondine didn't have a language to express, that somehow the languaging or the words had to be chosen so carefully so, you know, specifically and deeply to express her feelings.

David: Yes.

Oprah: That's part of the reason why there feels like there's such grace in those chapters.

David: Yeah. Yeah. And I—you know, I sort of feel about them the same way. Like they were a gift. I feel that way about Almondine. She was just a gift that I got. And I didn't deserve her or earn her. Just a sort of act of grace from wherever writing comes from that this character dropped into my life. I absolutely feel that way.

Oprah: Well, we polled our readers, we did a poll on Oprah.com. We asked our book club members what they most wanted to know, we asked you all, about *Edgar Sawtelle*. And I think the number one question that our readers have is, of course, why wasn't there a happy ending?

David: Mm-hmm.

Oprah: Why wasn't there a happy ending? Did you know how it was going to end when you started?

David: I did—well, I didn't know the details of how it was going to end. I knew that—I had a sort of—sort of vague emotional response toward the ending, and I knew it was going to be—I knew it was a tragedy, so I knew it was an exercise in tragedy in some sense. Not that I knew what that meant at the time. But I understood the general story arc.

Oprah: Right.

David: So—

Oprah: Yeah, you explained that in the beginning. So you knew—

David: Yeah.

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Oprah: —that it was going to be a tragic ending. You just didn't know the details of that.

David: Yeah. And I think this is a question that comes up a lot. I have not had a lot of chance to talk about it. Because when I talk at book stores and so on—

Oprah: You don't want to tell the ending.

David: Generally—well, someone will ask a question, and then the rest of the crowd—there's this sort of rumble that goes through the crowd and people say, "Don't talk about the ending."

Oprah: Right.

David: So I want to—I'd like—if I could, I'd like to read a quote from Franz Kafka that I think is very meaningful in this regard.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: And it has to do with why we read sad stories or why we engage in tragedy at all.

Oprah: Okay.

David: He wrote—this is from a letter that he wrote to a friend of his, Max Brod. He says, "I think we ought to read only the kinds of books that wound and stab us: If the book we are reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, then what are we reading it for? We need books that affect us like a disaster. That grieve us deeply. Like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves."

Oprah: Wow.

David: "Like being banished into the forests far from everyone. Like a suicide. A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside us."

Oprah: Wow. I'm writing that down.

David: That's a—that's a passage that I ran across while I was in the middle of writing Edgar's story. And it explained to me a lot about why it was—it was worth telling a sad story, basically.

Oprah: Boy, I love that quote. "A book must be the ax for the frozen sea inside of us."

David: Isn't that wonderful?

Oprah: Yes.

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David: Part of—

Oprah: That's what I felt at the end, and I know so many of you did in the end of this story in the barn, the tragedy in the barn, we all felt like we got a blow to our heads.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Yeah. I think of it slightly—I would word things slightly differently than he did.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: You know, I—when I think about the function of tragedy, I think of it as helping us see things more clearly. And the way I think about that is, I think in our ordinary everyday life we go around with a kind of armor on. It's very necessary to get the work that we do every day done to live our lives. But that armor also is a kind of veil and we can't see clearly through it. And what—what tragedy does, or what we want out of our stories is somehow to see things more clearly.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: And what tragedy and comedy do, the only two things we—the two ways we know to do this is to get readers or people in an audience to sort of drop that armor for a little while, and in that moment when that armor is dropped and they can see things clearly, there is a chance to show them something that's meaningful and that they will see it more deeply or more clearly somehow than they would ordinarily. And it doesn't last very long and that armor, and that shield goes back up. And then we're back in our sort of ordinary way of experiencing the world. And I think that's what tragedy is. That's why this sort of paradox of tragedy is who wants to know—read a sad story? And yet we feel a little bit grateful. When it works, we feel a little bit grateful that we have.

Oprah: Yeah. And haunted. And a little haunted.

David: Yes.

Oprah: We just got a great e-mail from Canada that says—this is from Myra from Regina, Saskatchewan. She says, "I thought the ending was perfectly clear. Edgar left life because he was ready. He was incomplete without Almondine, his father and his former life. What I want to know is what happened to his mother? I see her as being suicidal."

David: Well, first of all, I agree with the first part of this.

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Oprah: That he left because he was ready.

David: Yeah. Part of—part of I think for me, at least, what's satisfying about the ending is Edgar is reunited with Almondine.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: In a tragic way, but that's still—it feels to me like they are two halves of the same character. And to leave them apart at the end of the story would be—would make it not a story at all. So they had to come—come together. And they could only come together in that way. So to me there's something right about it, even though it's hard.

Oprah: Yeah. Yeah. Beautiful.

David: Trudy, however, I think—I don't know. I—I don't think that she would be suicidal. However, I do think that for her to go forward, she has to basically start from scratch.

Oprah: Right.

David: She has to rebuild her life. She has nothing.

Oprah: She has to have a deep reckoning with herself.

David: Absolutely. Yes.

Oprah: Well, thank you, Myra from Regina. That's really good. Really.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: The next most popular question from our book club members is what happens to the Sawtelle dogs? Yes.

David: Yeah. Now this is my very favorite question to ask readers. The whole story is constructed so that at the end of the story, the Sawtelle dogs reach a moment where they can make a choice.

Oprah: Yes.

David: In that last sentence—

Oprah: They get to choose.

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David: The most important word entirely is the word "choice."

Oprah: Yeah.

David: The fulfillment of Edgar's grandfather's vision. It's the thing that in that—you know I talked about that moment—

Oprah: That's right.

David: —when that tragedy lets you see something clearly? That chapter, that final chapter, is, in my view, that's the moment I want you to see as clearly as possible. And I want the—I want the dogs, at the end of that story, to be absolutely poised and capable of making either choice. But I don't want the story to commit. It's one of those things, like what the dogs are exactly like, that I want readers to bring to the story.

Oprah: Yes. Because a lot of people want to know, did they go back to Henry's house? Did they—they went wherever you think they went.

David: Right.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Look back at the story. If you—they have the power to choose. What would they choose? Knowing what they know now, what would they choose? And that is the question that is posed to the reader.

Oprah: "She looked behind her one last time, into the forest and along the way they'd come; and when she was sure all of them were together now, and no others would appear, she turned and made her choice and began to cross."

David: Right. But what that choice is, is not said.

Oprah: Yeah. Powerful. Powerful. And the third most popular question is, okay that, was the question? Why did Claude really—why did Claude really kill Gar?

David: I'm not sure I understand this question. I saw the—I saw the poll when it was sent out.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: I'm not sure I totally understand the intent behind the question.

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Oprah: Yeah, me too. That's why I just said that.

David: I think that—I mentioned this earlier. Edgar's got a problem to solve. Once he understands that—that Claude may or may probably have killed Gar, he's got a problem to solve. And answering that question is the problem. He never gets evidence. And he can never know because the only person who really knows is Claude, and he's not going to tell anybody, right?

Oprah: Right.

David: So, again, I felt like as a—as a writer, if I were to know that in great detail, I—it would have to be in the book. And so I wanted to work within the framework that Edgar was working in. That he doesn't quite know. He has evidence, evidence of guilt, things that are meaningful to him, but not necessarily reasons. And so I can't supply the answer to that question.

Oprah: I saw another question, too, from somebody who wanted to know whether or not when Claude, in the beginning of the prologue, purchases the poison, is he purchasing it for Gar? Is he purchasing it because he's the kind of guy who just may need some poison? You know, at some point in life you just may need a couple of drops, yeah, when people get in your way.

David: And I can tell you my take on that.

Oprah: Okay.

David: I think it's one of those things that can be interpreted a couple of different ways. But my take is that's the moment in Claude's life when he has not yet given up hope of being a full person, a sound, good person. And he's—what he's encountered at this point is the ability to have death, which is the little debate that he and the old herbalist have about it's not good to have the power of death but not the power of life. But I don't believe that he—I believe he's—he has a sort of darkness in him that draws him toward that. But he doesn't know why, and he doesn't have a specific purpose for it. Certainly not the purpose to go many years later—

Oprah: And kill his brother.

David: —and kill his brother. But I think that in terms of his character psychology, it's something he's drawn toward. He might not know why. But like you said, one of those people—

Oprah: "I may need some."

David: —feels like it would be a fascinating thing to have hold of.

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Oprah: So after you finish this book and you know that you have written that last sentence and you've sent it off to your publisher—

David: Uh-huh.

Oprah: —and it's about to come out of its cage, do you, you know, rest? Do you not write for a long time? What is the—what is the process after the process?

David: The process after the process is to take a new project on. That's the way it always works in anything once you finish some creative thing. You have to recover from it. And you take some time off, but you also begin thinking about what the next creative work is.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: And so for me, I'm thinking about a new book right now. And I've begun writing on it. But it's been a very busy few months.

Oprah: Mm-hmm.

David: And so I haven't made as much progress as I'd like to.

Oprah: Is there a sequel to this?

David: There are three books.

Oprah: There are three books.

David: And I think of them as a triptych. As three portraits that can hang side by side. And without explicit plot lines that connect them strongly, they will tell a story taken together that is bigger than the story of any one of the books.

Oprah: So does that mean we'll see or hear Trudy again?

David: Possibly.

Oprah: Possibly?

David: Possibly. The next—the main character in the next book is John Sawtelle.

Oprah: John Sawtelle.

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David: Yes. Edgar's grandfather, yes.

Oprah: Wow. Wow.

David: And I feel about him the way I felt about Edgar when I was first starting this book. He's a character that fascinates me.

Oprah: Really.

David: And I want to learn everything there is to know about him. So I'm very much looking forward to getting started.

Oprah: Okay. So you haven't gotten started. You have sort of an outline—

David: The way I've described it is right now I've built the workshop in which—

Oprah: You have the capsule?

David: Yeah. Yeah. I have the—I'm building the workshop in which that book will be written, but I'm—but I haven't—I haven't got a first draft. I'm—I have piece parts around, and I'm assembling them and filling them in and so on.

Oprah: All right. Well, it's a process.

David: It's a process. Absolutely.

Oprah: Debbie from North Carolina. Hi, Debbie. You're on the phone. Hi.

Debbie: Hi, Oprah. Hi, David. A fabulous book. Gosh, I just get teary-eyed sitting here discussing it.

David: Thank you.

Debbie: One thing I wanted to talk about which I don't think anyone has talked about yet was the significance of the storm when Edgar was with Henry and the three dogs.

Oprah: We didn't talk about Henry.

David: Yeah, we haven't talked about Henry.

Oprah: Go ahead, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, Debbie, go ahead.

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Debbie: That's okay. I was wondering about the significance of the storm when Henry and Edgar and the three dogs were together. I think I may have missed it. I know it was a significant turning point, but I guess I didn't fully understand it.

David: Great question.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Well, at one level the storm is the fulfillment of what Ida Paine predicted. She said, "It's just wind. Don't let it—don't let it turn you around." But, of course, Edgar does.

Oprah: He did.

David: I think that Edgar sees in the storm some significance. He's seeing essentially played out in weather a conflict between several funnel clouds. And he's also—but more importantly, he sees Essay stand her ground or try to stand her ground in the face of something that could destroy her. And I think he—I think he thinks at that moment the thing that I've experienced watching my own dogs at certain times that they're better than me. You know? They're purer than me. They—they have strong ideas about what's right and wrong and that—those ideas are everything to them. And it is the—that is the thing that turns Edgar around, finally, because otherwise I think he would continue going to Starchild Colony. So—so to me that is the significance of the storm. I mean, now we have to go back to the braid idea for a second. The very first line of this book says, "After the dark, the rain began to fall again." And that rain comes up and storms come up again and again and again in this story. So I also felt like it was appropriate that the thing that would make Edgar turn back is a storm, rain in some form, since rain is, in some way, tied up with the thing that has exploded his life in the first place and made him run away.

Oprah: You got that, Debbie?

Debbie: I do. Thank you very much.

Oprah: Let's talk about Henry.

David: Yes.

Oprah: Is he a composite of many people you know or—

David: Um, Henry—I said there are certain characters—I don't—I didn't have the experience of characters taking over—

Oprah: Yes.

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David: —with a couple of exceptions.

Oprah: Henry.

David: Henry was absolutely one of them.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: When I wrote Part 4—

Oprah: He sure is ordinary.

David: I'm really fond of Henry. When I wrote Part 4 knew only that he—that Edgar was going to step over that creek, go into the woods, learn something about the world, and at the end of Part 4, he was going to step back over the creek, having placed the dogs somehow and learn whatever he was going to learn. But I didn't know Henry was there.

Oprah: You knew the dogs were going to stay with Henry?

David: I knew the dogs—I knew that part of what Edgar's job was in the world was to place those dogs.

Oprah: To place those dogs.

David: To answer for himself, "What is the value of the Sawtelle dogs and where do they belong?" So, ultimately, I think of Henry as a good man, you know, Edgar gets to go out and meet a good—a really fine human being. Ironically, that person feels kind of existentially cursed. He doesn't—he thinks that he's ordinary. And Edgar and I, obviously, don't think he's ordinarily.

Oprah: Not ordinary at all.

David: He can't see it yet. He can't see it yet.

Oprah: Where did you come up with that ordinary line?

David: That comes from being a Midwesterner.

Oprah: Really.

David: I think growing up in the Midwest—

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Oprah: When he opens the door and sees him for the first time and there's that—again, the foreshadowing. Yeah, this sure isn't ordinary.

David: Yeah. And I think that, you know, one of the experiences of growing up in the Midwest is that you—you feel about it—it's a—it's a wonderful place. I love where I grew up. But it took me some time to look back on it and see it as a very distinct place. The people don't have strong, unusual accents. They're not known for a particular character quality, I don't think. And so when I was young, I couldn't wait to leave for a lot of reasons.

Oprah: Because you thought you were ordinary?

David: Because I thought—I thought this place is no real place, you know.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Other places, they have a coast or they—you know.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: They have, you know, this unusual history. It's not the South with its sort of long legacy. So—

Oprah: It's Wisconsin.

David: It's Wisconsin.

Oprah: Yeah.

David: Everybody's reasonable, and they see the middle of the road and so on. So it wasn't until I had sort of grown up and moved away and I was in my 30s and I looked back and I looked at that place and I said, "Wait a second." These people—this place has real character and these people have real character, but it's subtle and it's interesting, and I was very proud, suddenly, of coming from that place. And I wanted Henry—once I met Henry, he became for me this sort of embodiment of all the people that I knew where I came from.

Oprah: Mm-hmm. Good. Solid.

David: Good. Solid. Charming. Self-effacing, etc. So...

Oprah: Well, we're almost out of time. I want to thank all of you for joining us here in the book club. And those of you who read and read a long time ago and kept saying, "When are we going to have David on?" David, thank you so much.

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David: Oh, it was my pleasure. Thank you.

Oprah: For being here. If you want to watch this book discussion again or tell a friend who missed it, our webcast will be available on demand tomorrow for free here at Oprah.com. You'll also be able to download the podcast tomorrow at Oprah.com and on iTunes. Tonight's conversation continues right after this webcast. If you are an *Oprah & Friends* subscriber, you can tune in to XM 156 and Sirius 195 for our live radio show. David's going to be there, so keep your calls coming. Same number, 866-OPRAH-XM. 866-677-2496. Thank you so much, really.

David: Thank you.

Oprah: I think it's been wonderful for all of us to be able to really just have a little bit insight into what the process—and those of us who loved it, you know, really loved it, now have even a deeper appreciation for the process that created *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*.

David: Thank you. Thanks.

Oprah: Thank you. Thanks, everybody. Here's to books. Hey, here's to books. Here's to books.

David: Yeah.

Oprah: Yeah. Here's to books.

David: Thank you.

Oprah: Bye, everybody. Good night.