



# SHIFTING MENTAL GEARS: PHILIP CAPUTO (ON WRITING)

By Philip Caputo and Michael Neiberg, September 21, 2021  
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**Michael Neiberg:** Hello, and welcome to A Better Peace, the U.S. Army War College War Room podcast. I'm Michael Neiberg, Chair of War Studies and today I am delighted to be talking with Philip Caputo, a remarkably successful writer over different types of works. He's won a Pulitzer Prize. He's written memoir, he's written fiction, he's written travel books. Phillip you and I first met 21 years ago at the U.S. Air Force Academy way back when you gave a lecture to students and it's great to be able to talk to you again, so welcome.

**Philip Caputo:** Well, thanks very much, Mike. I can't believe it's 21 years.

**MN:** It has been, I just came across the photograph we took there. I was also looking at the interview that you and I did there for War Literature & the Arts with Don Anderson and some other folks that were out there, Jim Meredith. You said something 21 years ago that struck me and I wanted to start with it. I think Jim Meredith asked you the question of how you became a writer or why you became a writer and the answer you gave was that you don't choose to be a writer that's something that's chosen for you. Do you still feel that way 20 years later?

**PC:** Yes, I do, in a way more than ever. I really think that it is a vocation to use an old-fashioned word, a calling. I'm by the way going to be 80 years old in two weeks and so I've discovered as I get older that I've wanted to retire but haven't been able to, I just have to keep writing that the whole day, the whole week, the whole month, the whole year doesn't feel right unless I'm working on some project even if that project should come to nothing.

**MN:** What I wanted to start with and your comment got me thinking something else, but I'm going to go back to my first question that I had for you which is, you are remarkably successful in various kinds of writing as I just mentioned and I'm curious about how you see in your mind the relationship between writing fiction, writing journalism, writing memoir, are those to you all sides of the same coin or sides of the same object or do you find yourself switching gears as you go into these different modes of writing?

**PC:** Well, I do find them as call them three or four sides to the same coin. You do have to make certain mental adjustments in whether you're doing journalism or memoirs, which is you could call that a form of journalism or fiction. You do have to have some as I say change of mental gears. But I basically see writing as pretty much the same endeavor no matter what your genre is at that time. There's been a relationship between journalism and fiction for me in the sense that sometimes as with my longest novel and what I consider my own master work, [\*Acts of Faith\*](#), which took place in Africa, grew out of a magazine assignment that I had in Sudan and Kenya during the Sudanese Civil War and that's happened to me a couple of other times where a piece of journalism that I happened to be working on inspires a work of fiction.

**MN:** If I'm not mistaken, when we met in Colorado Springs you were just putting that book together in your head, *Acts of Faith*. This would have been around the year 2000. If I remember right, you explained it to me as you wanted to write a book about how people do bad things even when they come in with the best of intentions. So I wonder, would you just walk us through, I don't talk to that many fiction writers on this podcast, I talk mostly to non-fiction writers. How do you and your head develop from an idea to a plot, to characters to a book, how does that process work in your mind?

**PC:** I don't think I've reflected enough on how my own mind works, probably for reasons of self-preservation. I would say that I tend to think that when it comes to a work of fiction, what happens more often is that a character or a person will occur to me and the plot develops out of the perception of that character. Every now and then a work of fiction will arise out of a phrase or a sentence or even a paragraph will suddenly run through my head and I like the sound of it and that might be the introduction, my own introduction you might say into that particular work. For example, I wrote a novella that I'm actually quite pleased with, but not too many people have read it that was called [\*In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant\*](#) and that started with a sentence or the first line of the story. But most of the time, it's a person in a certain set of circumstances that inspires the work of fiction.

**MN:** So, how much of the plot do you have worked out in your head before you start writing or do you start with a small bit and write your way through to a plot or do you really have it structured and outlined? I don't sit down to write until I've got a pretty highly structured outline. Can you do that when you're writing fiction?

**PC:** I've tried that and it doesn't work for me. For example, the book we were just talking about, *Acts of Faith*, I had written something like an 80-page summary of the novel for my agent and my editor to give them an idea of what I was working on and they said, "Well, go ahead" and the novel didn't follow that whatsoever.

So, I tend to think that what happens is that the plot reveals itself, the narrative reveals itself as I write it, even though I may have to have a general idea of where I'm going and here I'm speaking of works of fiction. Works of non-fiction is different there, I've got to have a pretty clear idea of what I'm going to say and when I'm going to say it and how I'm going to say it, because it tends to be obviously more sensitive. I can't just go and erase or delete a whole set of facts the way you would a whole set of words or paragraphs in a work of fiction.

**MN:** So, do you think then you're more character driven than you are plot-driven, do you get the people in your head of who you want to be in the story and then have them live through a story?

**PC:** I'm much more character driven, not to say that I have not written fiction that has as inspiration a plot of stories where I might say in my own head, "Hey, this is a really cool idea, I'll see what can be worked out of it." But most of the time as I say, it would be a character that inspires the story.

**MN:** I had an experience that made me think of you a couple of years ago, I was in Addis Ababa and I was in this hotel courtyard just sitting there just having a glass of wine or something and this guy just came up to me. He claimed to be an old hand Ethiopia guy who had been living in this hotel he claimed for 15 years, and he was there to tell me everything about Ethiopia and it reminded me of a character, I think in [Horn of Africa](#) where your character goes to Pakistan and there's this equally crazy guy who comes up to him at a bar and just starts telling him how it is in Pakistan. So, I got the sense that these characters are coming maybe from people like that, that you meet or that come up to you and I know we'll talk a little bit about this if we have time I hope, all of your travels around the world, is that the way that you think about characters, are they based on the individuals that you meet along the way?

**PC:** Actually, the character you were just referring to is in a non-fiction piece of work called [Means of Escape](#).

**MN:** My apologies, right.

**PC:** No problem. But, by the way characters like him and characters like you ran into an Ethiopia, you will find them in many of the strange corners of the world, at least strange to us. There seems to be something in those places that produces these characters. I can't believe this guy lived in a hotel for half a century, but maybe he did, but at any rate sometimes that'll happen. For example, now going back to *Acts of Faith*, there was a character I met while doing the magazine assignment on the Sudanese civil war who was flying relief supplies into Sudan and on the side was running guns to the Sudanese rebels. And I met him and he became the character in the novel called Wesley Dare and this guy was truly a larger-than-life person and I couldn't resist him. And if there was an inspiration behind that novel, it was him and what he was doing,

running the guns to the rebels in the name of you might say doing good, but in the end, doing wrong as well.

**MN:** To be fair to this crazy guy, he had lived there 15, 15, not 50, 50. So to be fair, he only claimed 15 years. So, I do want to talk a little bit about your travel experiences *Means of Escape* for our listeners is your memoir of some of the places that you've been in. You've been in war zones, you were there when the U.S. finally pulled out of Vietnam, you were actually shot in the foot in Lebanon. It put me in mind of Mark Twain and the way that he traveled the world and the way that he thought of writing and traveling as two sides of the same coin in his mind that you had to be a traveler to be a writer and vice versa. What has that meant for you? Obviously, it's where you meet some of these very interesting human beings that you've met and you see humanity in some of its most desperate circumstances, the pictures you draw Lebanon especially were quite striking in quite haunting. What does that mean to you to be able to go to these places and see them with your own eyes?

**PC:** It's meant everything. I would disagree with I hope he'll forgive me up there in heaven, Mark Twain that you have to be a traveler to be a writer, because there's obviously lots of writers who have not gone anywhere, who have become truly great poets and novelists and essayers. But as for me, I have a restless personality and a curious personality. I wonder what's happening in these places. What do they look like? What do they smell like? What are the people like? And to gratify that curiosity and that restlessness I've wandered around the world and I'm glad I did it, because I found that I would have to say gave me the material that I wrote into both fiction and non-fiction. However, I can't say that without it, that I would have written nothing, but I rather think that I probably would have written very, very little without doing that because traveling and seeing places and sometimes literally just the act of moving from one place to another somehow stimulates my imagination.

One of my favorite things is I make a cross-country drive twice a year from Connecticut to Arizona and I find that I do my best thinking rolling down a highway. And so, the traveling and the writing to me are virtually not synonymous, but they work together as one thing.

**MN:** Well, you did something even crazier than that. You and your wife took two dogs and an Airstream from Key West Florida to the Northern tip of Alaska, which I do want to talk to you about because that was a fun book to read and something that I always said to myself I'd love to do, but never would have had the courage to do what you did in doing that. But, I want to take us very far from Key West before we come back to that trip. And I want to talk a little bit about Africa, which is a place you've written at least two books and several articles about, a place you've been to quite often and I want to ask you about that because like I said, I was in Ethiopia just before COVID hit and it was my first time there.

**MN:** And I could see where it would have drawn a writer's attention, at least where I was and you were near there of course, in Horn of Africa as well. So, could you talk a little bit about what first drew you to Africa and what that's meant to you as a writer?

**PC:** I don't know that I was actually drawn to Africa. Way back in Lord, how long ago was it? 1974 or five? I had an assignment to write about the Eritrean rebellion in Ethiopia and that was what first took me to Sudan and then across the border clandestinely into Ethiopia. And I do remember that I was captivated by that part of Africa once I got there, it's not like the Africa I think that Westerners having their minds, the elephants trucking across the Serengeti. It actually looks a bit more like Arizona, where I am now. It's more of a desert, place is actually quite a severe desert, but nevertheless and I can't really put it into words there was just something captivating about that continent. I did try to get across, get it across in *Acts of Faith* when I had a character in the novel, a woman who talks about how Africa was our birthplace as a species, that's where Homo sapien first appeared on the planet and I sometimes wonder if when we go back there, we have way back somewhere in our brains some sense of homecoming.

**MN:** I hadn't thought about it in those terms, you did set two novels there so, obviously there was something... at least two novels, right? That has drawn you back as at least a location for where you're writing and you've had African characters that are quite interesting and complex and well-developed, so there's something about it that is pulling you back intellectually?

**PC:** Well, I think as far as novels go the political and I would have to say moral complexities that people confront in Africa captivate me. And it may be that they're very similar to some of the political and moral dilemmas and situations that we run into no matter where you are, but that somehow, they're in greater relief in Africa or they're writ large that draws me back. For example, I'm writing a long short story or call it a novella. It's actually more of a short story right now that takes place in Kenya. Although it's not about the politics or moral dilemmas, but I was happy you might say to get back to Africa on the page. Other than that, I would have a very hard time figuring out why that place fascinates, that continent fascinates me or captivates me more than say does the Middle East. I spent more time in the Middle East, but take it I have zero desire to go back there.

**MN:** Well you did get shot in the foot there to be fair.

**PC:** Well that soured me on the place, but it just seems like the Middle East as was proven by some recent events was just seems to be the same thing over and over and over again in slightly different form.

**MN:** I want to read you something else that you said in that interview that we did with you two decades ago, you said, "Really happy well-adjusted people don't become writers." And so, I

wanted to build off of that and ask you what advice you give to young writers who come to you and want to become writers, do you tell that back to them that they try to write from a place that isn't happy and well adjusted, what do you tell people?

**PC:** Basically I think the same thing that I had mentioned to you that if they say I want to be a writer I want to become one I said, you probably won't and think of something else to do, because you will be driven to become a writer no matter what you do, it's not the thing where you say, I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a cardiac surgeon or whatever. And so, that's the basic advice I give even on the website, Goodreads where the people ask you to answer questions for them. That question has been put to me and I always have the same answer. Said if you want to be a writer, you probably won't be, if you have to be, you probably will be.

**MN:** That's a good way of thinking about it. I'm not sure that I wanted to be a writer, I just ended up one. And that's of course non-fiction which is different. I'm not sure that I could ever do what you've been able to do in the fiction realm. And again, one thing I admire about you is your ability to move between those various genres of writing so easily. So, as I'm looking at our clock already beginning to wind down, I want to make sure that I ask you if your process of editing and revising is different when you do fiction and non-fiction. When you go back and read your own stuff, are you looking for strengths and weaknesses in a different way in those genres?

**PC:** Very much, in fiction what I'll look for is if I've gotten too wordy, if I've perhaps created a character who act out of character for no discernible reason, you have to correct something like that. And then as far as the story goes, I would probably look at the narrative to see if there is a way to make it more interesting, more compelling than I have done it. Whereas in journalism I will check it over for the felicity of phrasing and the writing, but I mainly really try to check it to make sure my facts are right.

That was something I learned really early on when I was a cub reporter at the Chicago Tribune, I'll never forget I was writing a story about a rather tragic event, a young woman had been assaulted and raped in an underground garage in Chicago and I wrote this piece and I'll never forget the news editor came up behind me and saw me writing and I was writing this emotional prose and he ripped the page out of my typewriter and he's he said, "What happened?" And I said, well, I said so-and-so she was raped in Lower Wacker Drive and he said, "that's the lead" And he said, "Save your darlings for later."

**MN:** Which of course in fiction, you're doing something very different, you're creating darlings in a sense, aren't you?

**PC:** You are although every now and then you'll create darlings in fiction that needs to be killed.

**MN:** We're running short on time. I want to ask you two more questions if you don't mind. I want to ask you what you're writing right now since you did say you're working on something, can you share with us what it is?

**PC:** Well, I've been working on a collection of novellas or long short stories that take place in odd places of the world that have some strange experiences that are undergone by the characters. It's called *Lariam Dreams* at the moment. Lariam being the malarial medicine or anti-malarial medicine that used to be given to people when they were going to places where malaria was endemic, turns out that Lariam can cause some very strange dreams and hallucinations. So, the stories are somewhat based on that idea.

**MN:** So, more something that's intended to do good that also can do harm. There's a theme tracing back there.

**PC:** However, that's not the theme of this particular book.

**MN:** Last question I ask everybody, what are you reading right now, what books are on your nightstand?

**PC:** I'm sometimes embarrassed to answer this question because my reading tastes are so eclectic it sounds like reading lists of somebody who's deranged. One novel I'm reading now is [\*The Lying World of Adults\*](#) by the Italian writer whose become an international cause celeb Elena Ferrante and then I'm reading a military history, it was actually really a history called [\*The General and the Jaguar\*](#) about the Persian expedition that pursued Pancho Villa after the raid in Columbus New Mexico back in 1916, quite compelling history.

**MN:** I read that, that's a good book. I've also read some of Ferrante though I haven't read that one, but eclectic reading taste is a good thing for a writer I think. You get different patterns and different ways that people write and put ideas together. That's a positive.

**PC:** I think it's just like having different experiences is really good for a writer. The same thing you read somebody that maybe normally would not or that you don't write the way that person does or about the things that person does and it forces you to think sometimes in a different channel.

**MN:** We'll, Phil our time is up and I can hear birds chanting outside your window out there in Arizona. So, I don't want to take your entire morning away, but I want to thank you very much for spending some time with us. It's great to reconnect with you in the past couple of weeks to get ready for this I've gone back and read a lot of your stuff and just a reminder of what a terrific writer you are and thanks so much for spending time with us today. I appreciate it.

**PC:** Well, thank you very much Michael for having me on the podcast and thanks for all the kind words as well.

**MN:** You're very welcome. Thanks for being here.