BROOKE
Hello, welcome to the Humanities Research Center's "Meet VCU's Authors" podcast series, I'm your host Brooke Newman, Associate Professor of History, and Associate Director of the Humanities Research Center at Virginia Commonwealth University. Today I'll be talking with Dr. David Coogan, Associate Professor of English at VCU, about his book *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail*, published by Brandylane Press in 2015. Dr. Coogan is a scholar, teacher, and community organizer with research interests in rhetorical studies, prison literature, service learning, and composition. He received his PhD in English from SUNY-Albany, and his BA from the College of Westchester. In addition to *Writing Our Way Out*, Dr. Coogan is the author of *Electronic Writing Centers: Computing the Field of Composition*, and co-editor of *The Public Work of Rhetoric: Citizen Scholars and Community Engagement*. He's also co-director of Open Minds, a college program sponsored by the Richmond City Sheriff's Office and Virginia Commonwealth University, offering dual-enrollment classes held at the Richmond City Jail. Welcome to the program Dr. Coogan.

DAVID
Thank you for having me

BROOKE
Thanks for being here. So why don't we just start off by having you tell us a bit about yourself, your area of expertise, and your background?

DAVID
I consider myself a writing teacher first and foremost, and to be a writing teacher is to be a person who cares about other people learning to think critically with their words, and to develop their language in a way that they can live a better life. I take it very seriously, it's a trust that's given, and when the trust is given amazing things can happen.

BROOKE
So what got you into writing specifically?

DAVID
I followed my muse from studying rhetoric. We have a conceit in rhetoric that if you teach people how to persuade other people, then the citizenry will be developed in a way that everybody will be more compassionate, and more reasonable, more capable, and making better decisions. And for millenia we've held this conceit, and we've rarely proven it to be true, we just keep believing it. So when I started to develop my teaching practice it was important to me to figure out a way in which I could live up to the ideals of this millenial tradition.

BROOKE
So how did you segue from the college classroom, sort of traditional confines of academia, to the Richmond City Jail, and how did the program Open Minds come about?

DAVID
I was a brand new faculty member at VCU, living in the Church Hill neighborhood, which overlooks the James River, and I was unpacking my boxes of books and preparing for

the first fall semester, when I walked into Libby Hill Park and I saw the
television news cameras, and I asked the reporters what story they were doing. And they got this conspiratorial look amongst themselves and beckoned me over closer and said "yeah we'll tell you what we're doing. There was a gang rape last night, do you want to be interviewed?" And the microphone was shoved under my nose, and they started to ask the questions. The questions were basically geared to scare me. They wanted me to talk about leaving the park, or moving, or in some way giving into my frustration that this could have happened here. In fact that was really their entire angle, like "how could something awful happen in such a beautiful place?" And what they were really saying was "why did black people come down from a poorer part of Church Hill, into a gentrified whiter part, and do this here?" And I started to read between the lines and that was the rhetoric scholar in me that was watching the press develop this story of these four teenagers who committed this crime, and I could see the consensus forming in the minds of people, and this is my first time living in the South, and it just occurred to me all in that moment that somebody needed to counter that narrative, and I just didn't know how I would do it. I just started to think about why these kids would do this kind of a crime. And I asked well, did they just wake up one morning and decide "I'm going to go out and

just hurt somebody because I would really like to do that”? And it occurred to
me that that couldn’t possibly be what they decided to do when they woke up that morning. So I asked well if I could meet people who are incarcerated right now, and I could ask them the question “why did you do what you did” and “do you really want to keep on doing that? Do you really want to live your life this way? Or do you think there’s a better way of living?” Could you write the story of how you got here so that you could change the direction of the plot? And I managed to get into the city jail about a year later, and exactly I asked that. And I was right, that most of the people I met did want to figure out how their lives had turned out this way, and that sort of confirmed for me that the media had it wrong. People don’t commit crimes in a rational way intending to hurt, but they themselves have been hurt. They’ve been hurt and hopeless for far too long, and writing gives people a way of believing in themselves again, and if it’s done in a life affirming way, whereby people write their stories and share and build together, it’s amazing what you can find. People do discover the truth.

BROOKE
So what does Open Minds offer? What kind of a program is it?

DAVID
Before I formed Open Minds I was just a professor on a Saturday morning volunteering at the jail. And it

took
me about close to a year to develop
this
method of teaching, and the writing
practice I was intent on developing
as well. About six years later--let
me see if I can count this out--no
about five years later I developed
a program to bring VCU college
students into the jail for the same
kind of writing class that I was
teaching as a volunteer. So I’m
sort of alliding over a lot of it,
but I developed a service learning
class where the class only meets at
the jail, and I had to create a new
course for that, and so on. Open
Minds came with that, and that was
a process by getting other
humanities faculty to teach their
courses in the jail as well. So we
have religious studies, we have
women’s studies, we’ve had African
American studies, and we continue
to grow.

BROOKE
So what have the students experienced by
being a part of this program?

DAVID
It’s really compelling to discover your
shared humanity in a jail. It’s
also kind of sad, that you have to
go behind all the bars and the
razor wire in this military top
down brutal kind of environment to
discover that we’re all alike.
That’s the main, I guess that’s the
main takeaway that most students
get from it, that they find in the
faces of a stranger they find
themselves, and the stranger looks
different from them. The different
age, different race, different

background and life experience, but so many people have had to struggle with
addiction, with discrimination based on their color or their orientation. So many people have had parents incarcerated or friends incarcerated, so they find common ground, and that's the beauty of the class, and of the experience for everybody.

BROOKE
And is there a benefit for the inmates having the students come into their space?

DAVID
Oh yeah, they love it. They don't want us to leave, and they look forward to us returning, and the feeling is mutual. What we all discover in that process of sharing is that you can build something from nothing. I mean we don't have anything, we're just, we bring ourselves. That's a real gift to realize that you've brought enough in just your presence.

BROOKE
So can you talk about the writing class at the Richmond City Jail that became *Writing Our Way Out*, and how this collection came together initially?

DAVID
Sure yeah. That class was influential for me in so many ways, because I really didn't know what I was doing, and I trusted in a process where my curiosity would be rewarded. My curiosity was to find out if people can change. And if I could help them as a writing teacher, that was what I meant earlier by the trust,

that to help somebody with their writing is to really get up close and
personal with their thinking, and to do that on this subject matter, when it involves trauma, or addiction, or incarceration, and so on, is really really tough because there's a lot of pain. And to hold somebody else's pain is, um, wow--I, every time it happens I feel lucky, because you don't often get that chance to help. When I first started the class with these men, I said "you know, I didn't know anything about you until I started this class, and I didn't know anything about crime, and jail" and I'm still learning, and they were gracious to teach me, and I said "I believe there's more people like me," benighted, you know? White, upper-middle class backgrounds who have never really thought about it. I said "look I live in Church Hill, the jail is three miles away from my house, and I didn't even know it was here." You can't see it from Broad Street, and I think that's by design. So the more time I spent with them opening up what I was ignorant about, and the more time they spent with me sharing their stories, the more I realized we needed to make a book that would share that story, that collective story. So *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail* became this teamball memoir experience with, you know, eleven men up and down the courts trying to score, and that's the first third of the book, is us in dialogue at the jail in this class. The middle part of the book is once they've been shipped

to prisons all
over Virginia, and we’re writing letters and
pen palling until they finish their memoir. And the last third of the book is when they are released from jail, or from prison, some straight from jail, some from prison, but they come home, and we can see, has it made a difference? Have they written their way into a better life?

BROOKE

So were you able to get them to agree to be a part of this collection pretty easily? Or were some of them concerned, or did they have hesitations?

DAVID

Oh sure yeah, it’s not for everybody. I met far more people than I actually was able to include in the book, and I had great teacher student relationships with I’d say at least half of those people that I met. My general premise coming into the class was: let me see if I can help people figure out their life through writing. Publishing a book about it was a whole separate question because some people just didn’t want to be public about anything in their life, let alone the fact that they were even in a jail, much less what they were in it for. Some people would stay in the class for three months, six months, and just they never chose to publish. Other people would only spend three weeks, and even though it was three weeks, or five weeks, they had clicked into the idea that they needed to follow through and

finish and publish. And even though I only saw them in class for about a month,
they stayed in touch, and were fiends with the letters, and just kept at it. So I always kept it open, I thought if you want to help other people with your story, you might consider publishing your story. If you want it just to be your own process for yourself, then keep it to yourself. But I didn't go into the jail to make a book, I came in to help people figure out their lives with writing.

BROOKE
How long did this process take, I mean since you--

DAVID
It was years

BROOKE
Oh I mean that's what it sounds like, cuz you have people off all over Virginia writing.

DAVID
I started in 2006, with the volunteer Saturday morning class, which ended more or less the following spring, and then the letter writing--again they didn't--it's hard to appreciate fully that you have a class of writers who are a series of co-authors, but they weren't all in the room at the same time, because it's--jail is chaotic and it's--you don't have control over the environment as a teacher, and so people would come in and out of the class at different times during that first year at the jail, and likewise when they got sent to

prison, some were only in prison for three months, some were released right
away, some were six years, so I didn't have control over that time either. So if I wanted to make a book with these particular men I had to follow them through the criminal justice system. I wasn't in charge of that. I was simultaneously insignificant, and significant: insignificant in the eyes of the system, but significant in the lives of these men, and in my own life too, cuz it really changed me.

BROOKE
That's fascinating. So in the book you mention asking inmates a series of questions, sort of initially, things like "describe the people from your childhood who really made a difference in your life," "when did you start to get in trouble?" "what is your ambition for the future?" and "how do you think you'll get there?" So what gave you the idea to shape the writing class around their personal experiences?

DAVID
Well again, my initial question after that crime in my neighborhood was "why would they do it?" And I didn't really get that purely on my own, when the rape victim was interviewed she was interviewed and asked that same question: "why would they do this? Why would they ruin their lives?" And those four boys were caught and incarcerated, and that question just haunted me, why would they do this? Why would they ruin their lives? How do our

lives become plotted in this way? And my, I guess conceit for myself was that
if you could understand the reasoning in your life, and you could almost think of it like an argument, like “if I make this claim, then this will happen, I have to give these reasons for it, and this evidence” and it’s stories are like arguments in that way, but we just never subject them to that kind of scrutiny. So to me memoir had to be the genre, as opposed to essays about the criminal justice system, or even fiction about it, or poetry. I considered all those genres, but I really wanted it to be a personal life story, and that’s why those questions that you brought in from the book, that’s why I turned to those types of questions. I organized them around four categories: the past, the problem, the punishment, and the possibilities. And within those were a lot of littler questions like the ones you asked, and I encouraged them to just write on any of those in any order, and then we would put them together into the narrative arc. So that’s what we got.

BROOKE
So do you want to read us an excerpt from the book?

DAVID
Oh sure, okay. So this is--what I’m going to read comes from chapter four of *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail*, and the chapter is called “Sorry.” And the chapter opens with a scene between me and my daughter

when she’s asking me where I’m going on Saturday morning, and she’s maybe
three or four years old, I’m forgetting exactly but she was very very young. And she knew enough to know that I was leaving and it wasn’t really normal to be leaving on a Saturday morning in the middle of the summer, and I explained to her where I’m going, and she said “are any of the men--have any of them said sorry for what they have done?” And that was my inspiration for this chapter, and this is the piece by Stanley Craddock, and it’s about his father:
“We see the For Rent sign. ‘Hey look! There’s a new Schwinn bike coming down the street!’ Though I am seventeen years old, I have the mentality of a twelve year old. Whatever you think is what you are. I know more about bikes than anything. All my buddies want a Schwinn because they are the top of the line, but the world I’m about to enter into on Grace Street is not about bikes, toys, and tag. My father knocks on the door, and I look up at him. With his eyes he smiles, reassuring me that everything is alright. Like a child, I trust what his expression tells me. His knuckles hit the wooden door again. It swings open to a big man, wearing a white t-shirt, with food stains all over it. His face needs a shave. His hair looks as though motor oil is his grease of choice. I’m not feeling this man. My father chats with Sloppy Joe for a few moments, then the man escorts us down the hall where he pulls out a ring of

keys and opens the door to a one
bedroom apartment. The walls are
painted the
color of hopelessness, the windows
are draped in sorrow. There are no
pictures of loved ones hugging the
walls, no sense of life in the air,
just the stale smell of loneliness.
I’m used to the sweet smell of my
mother’s cooking, the warmth of her
kitchen, but the floor of my new
home has no carpet to warm it on
the coldest of nights. It’s my very
first jail cell. Like a ship sunk
at sea, lost in the deepest of the
deep, so are my father’s thoughts
to me that moment he drove off,
leaving me naked in the cold world.
At the time I didn’t understand,
but I realize now that it didn’t
matter to my father what I was
thinking or feeling, because he had
already decided that morning that
two of us would start our journey
together, but only one of us would
be returning to the place we called
home. I wonder, did anyone think
about my safety? My emotional
stability? Or the long term effects
of placing a child out there
unprepared? Parts of my emotional
system lie dormant, even today,
undeveloped in that one bedroom
apartment on Grace Street. As a
young boy on Grace Street, Wrong
found me. Negative thinking came
with him. I can still recall all
the lonely days I spent there, in
that room. Even today as I write to
you my friend, I’m still living
there in my mind. I just call it my
prison cell.”

BROOKE
That’s a really powerful story.

DAVID
Yeah, Stan's good.

BROOKE
So for Stan, and other prisoners that you've worked with, what is it about storytelling specifically--you know describing challenges that they've faced, turning points in their life for example--what is it about that that's so redemptive? Why is it that writing your story heals?

DAVID
Hmmm. I think that there's three or four different reasons. The one that is really important to me, the most important one to me, is that it builds community. In a writing workshop like this, when he first read that piece aloud to five or six or ten other men in a room with me, that's a moment for any writer, to share a part of your life is to become vulnerable. And for a lot of men who become incarcerated, vulnerability is the enemy, you never open up, you don't show your real feelings. And if you multiply that times decades, because some of the men have been incarcerated so many times, and they've been stifling their real emotions for so long, and then you get someone like me in the room saying like "tell me more," "really why?" or "what did it look like or feel like?" somebody is listening really intently, and wants you to grow into the experience, they're not judging, they're not pushing it away, they're not forcing you to do anything you don't wanna do, they just want to listen. For people who

have not been listened to for so many years, to have that opportunity to tell your story is really groundbreaking. Now like I said earlier it's not for everybody, and some people don't wanna trust
it, and I'm fine with that, I don't expect everyone to do it. So it builds community, it allows the person who hasn't had a chance to speak to really have someone to listen to them, and the third thing that's really important is the critical distance. When you see a story like that out on the page, and you get to analyze what happened, you're starting to put things together, and for him, in that piece he started to analyze "well why did my father leave me there?" and "did anybody think about my emotional stability?" and you know there were other parts of why he was abandoned that we didn't get into, but when you read the book you can understand that he hadn't really analyzed that until he started writing it, and I think that's true with most of the men. And I think it's probably true with most of us in life. We don't--we're too busy living to be analyzing, and until we start writing, where's our opportunity to start judging what we've done in our life?

BROOKE
Writing sounds very therapeutic, the way you describe it.

DAVID
It is, and I've been told by many people that this is better than therapy. I'm always amused by that, because I

never make any claims to knowing
anything about therapy. I mean I
know a little bit, but I didn't
start teaching memoir in order to
be a therapist. I can share with
you one experience I had though
that is
somewhat amusing to me. When this
came up directly in the class, a
new person had come in, and was
going to see if he wanted to do the
class, and he was asking questions:
"well, will this help me?" and I
said "you know, if you try, you try
your best, it may help you figure
things out." and he said "is it
going to cure me?" and I said "what
do you mean?" and he said "well
will you be able to tell me what's
wrong with me?"

[BROOKE LAUGHS]

DAVID
and I said "it's not like that, this is an
artistic process, you're gonna come
out with it.." and while I
explaining it, I looked over to the
side of the room, there was another
guy, big tall guy, tattoos up and
down his arm, and he was flipping
aimlessly through the DSM, the
Diagnostic Statistical Manual for
psychological disorders, and I said
"Norm would you mind holding that
book up?" and he held the book up,
you know? real tall so everybody
could see it in the room, and I
asked the man who asked the
question about being cured, I said
"can you see that book?" and he
said "yeah." I said "do you know
what it is?" and I explained what
it was, and I said "the difference
between me and a therapist, is that

I don’t know what’s in that book.”

BROOKE
[LAUGHS]
That’s a great answer

DAVID
I said “so you’re gonna go through this class, you may discover things about yourself, you may enjoy it, you may be mad, and that’s cool, whatever you think you may say ‘screw it, this is not for me,’ and I don’t mind any of that.” And he interrupted me and said “that makes me trust you even more” he goes “cuz I’ve been around those therapists my whole life and they’re always telling me what’s wrong with me, slotting me” and I said “so, that’s not what this is” and he stayed in the class.

BROOKE
Right because that is a book all about diagnosing someone, and in some ways pigeonholing them and saying “this is your problem”

DAVID
Mhmm. Right I mean I may have an inkling, I mean after having done this kind of teaching now for over ten years, I’m starting to kind of look around and wonder who might be hyper vigilant, and who might be on the spectrum, and who’s just simply shy. I casually think through those things, but I never stop to think “oh this is a person writing through a trauma who is clearly sublimated, you know, most of their feelings for their mother” you know I don’t think like that. If there’s a character in the story that’s a

mother, then I'm going to ask questions about that, but if they don't write about it I don't think it.

BROOKE

Right, you're thinking much more like a writing teacher, not like a psychiatrist.

DAVID

And that goes for every issue, even on the bigger structural issues. There's a scene in the book where I'm telling people to write about a person that they used to be, but no longer are, or a world they used to know, and they said "break it down for me" and I said "well, okay I don't know, do you think about your color?" and most of the men in the room are African American, I said "does that infuse the way you think about your identity?" You know and most of them said "not really, no" cuz they're dealing with other issues now, you know their addiction, or just being incarcerated. One guy said "I think about it all the time, and I have been, but I'm over it now, but I can write stories about how racism truly affected me all the time." And then the other guy started arguing with him, and they were both trying to debate each other as to if race was, or was not important, and how you should think about your life, and I told them "it can be both, it can be either/or, and I'm not interested in solving it as an issue, but I'm interested in you adapting it as, you know, your space for invention," you know, and that

helped. Again it's not really my job to tell them what I think about racism in the criminal justice system. I can tell them, but I can't write their story of how they experienced race. And that goes for gender, sexuality, anything to do with family life. I really do follow what the writer is doing.

BROOKE
So since you've been working in the prison system, and with various

BROOKE
incarcerated men, it sounds like for the last decade--

DAVID
I have worked with women too, yeah

BROOKE
With women too? Oh that's interesting. How has that influenced your scholarship, and also your teaching that you're doing in the regular college classroom setting?

DAVID
Well I guess I can start with the scholarship first. I mean I never had taught memoir before, I had never really studied it, and now I'm teaching a creative nonfiction class in memoir, and the subject is "Prison and Everything that Leads into Prison," so I started reading a lot of prison memoirs, and started writing scholarly essays about rhetoric, and rhetorical criticism of prison memoirs. And then I started reading essays about trauma and healing and the memoir writing process, and then infusing that into my articles about the teaching of writing. It just kept going from there. I'm not that kind of a scholar that just starts in a library, I

start in the community, and then I go back to read, to make sense of what happened to me. *Writing Our Way Out* was one expression of that, as more or less a teacher's memoir, but also the result of a lot of organizing work. And now I'm in a place where I have to figure out a lot more about how memoir works, and the issues within it, so that's sent me back into the library to learn more about rhetorical criticism of prison memoirs. So that's the scholarship, the other part of your question was?

BROOKE
Oh in terms of teaching

DAVID
Oh how it affected my regular teaching on campus. Yeah well, in two ways: one was directly in the content, I developed a new class in prison literature where I could teach all those memoirs and other prison writings, published prison writings; and the second I think maybe was more to do with the teaching style. One of the things that I learned from teaching people who are incarcerated--who are not used to classrooms, or hadn't been in a classroom in a while, and had different levels of trust or suspicion about education overall because they'd been done wrong for so long by the schools, or they had done themselves wrong in the schools--was that, and then related to their negative experiences with school was also their hunger and desire to learn in a real authentic, genuine, emotional way, and so those two things together made me see students in a new way,

students on campus in a new way as people who were really not all that different in their needs. They want first and foremost a direct emotional connection to what they're learning, and they want to see it in your face, and in your passion for the material. And so I got out of my head, and I really started to understand what I call "full body
teaching," which is just my way of thinking of it as more emotionally driven, as opposed to just intellectually--I think we make a mistake too often by assuming that content is king in a college class, and the more the better, and the more abstract, the more rigorous. There's an element of that which becomes counterproductive when you overlook the real lived experiences of the people you're trying to reach. So I think it changed my speech a little bit, and it definitely changed the way I would respond to students I thought might be disengaging, or it might not be clear as to why they were in college in the first place.

BROOKE
What would you say to faculty who have maybe considered teaching in the prison system, but haven't done so yet?

DAVID
Oh I say you should try it, it's a lot of fun. You learn a lot about yourself as a teacher, but also as a person, as a citizen. If you have even an inkling of an interest in helping other people and connecting that sort of service to your own vision of social justice, then it's the

perfect place to go because all of that is there waiting for you, and you will find the most grateful, and heartfelt students that you've ever met. You know they're not paying for anything, they're not getting credits out of it, at least not in Open Minds, but they're getting so much more, something so much better actually, and that's something I
think that every faculty member should try actually. You're gonna be safe--you know it's funny you actually had to sign a waiver, that you wouldn't sue the sheriff's office if anything happened, and one line in there including a hostage situation, and I signed it and I looked up to the staff member who was there and he just sort of made a joke, he said "okay it doesn't matter, if there was a hostage sit--they wouldn't go for you"

BROOKE
[LAUGHS]
They'd go for someone different? Someone worth more?

DAVID
Someone a little more worthwhile right. But no, I've never--very very rarely have I ever felt unsafe. I think the only time I felt like things were out of control--and I wrote this scene into the book--was when a guy who was so angry, so consumed with anger in the memory of his father, that he couldn't write it, and he stood up, and just arms swinging just in gesture, was swearing--words I can't use on this podcast--but angry swearing at the

memory of his father, and then he wouldn't write, and it was that refusal to do the work that scared me, not the anger, I don't mind anger, anger is natural like crying

BROOKE
It's that he wasn't channeling it productively?

DAVID
He wasn't channeling it productively. Exactly.

BROOKE
So have you been in touch recently with any of the men who contributed to this collection? And how have their lives turned out?

DAVID
Sure. I'm in touch with almost all of them, and a lot more whose work didn't come into the book. And I see a lot of them in the city when I'm walking back and forth to campus from Church Hill. In fact I saw one the other day, I was walking the canal walk from right along the James river again, and I was with my brother-in-law and this guy passed me, he was with his girlfriend, he looked vaguely familiar to me, but he had a baseball hat pulled down tight. And then he stopped, and he turned around and I could tell he wanted to talk to me. And so I stopped, and he looked at me, with kind of like a scowl, sort of like an intimidating look and he said "it's just that you look like you could be Dave Coogan" and I said "yeah, yeah I'm Dave Coogan" and he took off his hat, and he reached for my

hand, and he pulled me into a bro hug, and slapped my back hard, he said "I took your writing class, your writing class helped me so much, I miss your class, that was a place I felt safe, I was growing, now I'm out here" and I pointed to his girl, I said "but you got your girl" he said "yeah, that's good, that's good, but I don't have that community. I miss that." I treasure moments like that, because sure I get students who graduate and come back and want to share what they're doing,
but what James shared was a palpable relief at the memory of what he had accomplished in his darkest moments.

BROOKE
It sounds like it would be helpful if they formed a writing group

DAVID
Yeah, I would love that

BROOKE
and met up, once a month or something

DAVID
I do collaborate a great deal with my co-authors, the ones that are living here in Richmond, and are doing well. We've done close to sixty events--

BROOKE
Wow

DAVID
for *Writing Our Way Out* in four different states, and the District of Columbia. And we've done a lot of volunteer work. We've started a new

program, well one of my co-authors and I have started a new program, it's based off of *Writing Our Way Out*, we're very proud of this. We've partnered with the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office to create a criminal justice diversion program. So instead of jail...college. Instead of incarceration...education. The ten low level offenders sign a plea agreement, and through the plea agreement they agree to come to this writing class on campus, it's the same
one I usually teach at the jail, and they sit with college students, and they write their memoir. And we've done it for one semester, we're in the middle of our second semester.

BROOKE
Sounds amazing. How's it going so far?

DAVID
It's very exciting. It's exciting to see this new life in the book, or this new journey for us, because while I just--you know--you ever do that sort of self talk? You just ask yourself "what are you doing, and why?" and I said to myself "I've been going to the jail for like ten years now" I said "am I just going to keep going to this jail, to help people figure out their lives over and over and over again?" I said "I definitely want to, but is that all there is?" And then when I met our Commonwealth's attorney Mike Herring at an event at VCU--and my co-authors were there too, it was Bryan Stevenson's lecture on *Just Mercy*--it occurred to me that they

wrote their way out, my co-authors who were standing right next to me, and there's the top prosecutor, the one who puts people in jail, and I said to him, I said "Mike, do you think there's a way we could just send less people to jail?" and he said "what do you mean? What'd you have in mind?" and we started to brainstorm a criminal justice diversion program, and that's how we started meeting throughout the summer and created this new program, and it's been great.

BROOKE
So it was serendipity, to some extent?

DAVID
Yeah a little bit of that yeah. It was a little bit of serendipity.

BROOKE
So what about your next book? What are you planning?

DAVID
Wow

BROOKE
Do you have anything in mind?

DAVID
Yeah, I have so many next books in mind, it's hard to choose one to talk about, but I had been envisioning for the longest time a history of mass incarceration told from the point of view of the memoirist, who lived through it, and the working title is *The Memoirs of Mass Incarceration*

BROOKE
That sounds like a great project

DAVID
Yeah well I’m excited by it, because when you look at what memoirs have been published since the 1960’s when mass incarceration really began, we’ve had several different kinds, several different approaches, several different ways to claim agency in a place that denies agency. There’s been revolutionary writers, you know there’s amazing witnesses to the dehumanisation, and there’s
been people in recovery, and that’s more or less in chronological order since the 1960’s. And so what I’m envisioning in this book is the rhetoric of revolutionaries, witnesses, and survivors, and a way of telling that story of mass incarceration through the life stories of those who were there.

BROOKE
And that’s a perspective that we need, and that’s missing.

DAVID
I believe so cuz, most of the books you get about mass incarceration are arguments against it. And then of course there’s anthologies of prison literature in all genres. But the role of the memoirist in prison is unique. It’s actually coincidental that when we started to control the public narrative of who’s a criminal and who needs to be in a prison, when we started to do that aggressively in the early 1970’s through the War on Crime, and then even more aggressively in the 1980’s with the War on Drugs, more people started sharing their

narratives. Memoir as a genre really blossomed in the late 80’s and especially in the 1990’s. So at the peak of mass incarceration, when we had reached over two million people in the late 90’s under President Clinton, more memoirs were being produced and sold, and a lot of those were by prisoners. So it’s an interesting kind of--well I think of it as a coincidence, but maybe it’s not so much.

BROOKE
Well good luck with that project, it sounds fascinating

DAVID
Thank you

BROOKE
And thanks for speaking with me today Dr. Coogan.

DAVID
I appreciate it Dr. Newman.

BROOKE
And thank you for listening to the Humanities Research Center’s Meet VCU Authors podcast series. Join me next time for my discussion with Dr. Myrl Beam about his new book *Gay Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*.