Steven James: Hello everyone and welcome to The Story Blender. I'm Steven James and this is where great storytellers share the secrets of great storytelling. Today's guest was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is the author of the internationally acclaimed story Searching for Bobby Fischer, which was later adapted into an Academy Award-nominated film by the same name. Fred Waitzkin is also the author of articles that have appeared in the New York Times, Esquire, Forbes, and Sports Illustrated, among others. When he's not writing, he enjoys spending time fishing off his boat, the Ebb Tide and his latest book, Deep Water Blues, is available for purchase wherever books are sold. So, Fred, thanks so much for being on the show with me today!

Fred Waitzkin: Great. Yeah, great to be on with you today.

Steven James: Great. Let's talk for a moment about fishing: From your website, it sounds like you've had quite a number of adventures. Are there any that jumped to mind that are intriguing or unusual from your fishing trips?

Fred Waitzkin: Oh, there've been so many adventures. Let me try to go through the file in my mind. One day we were fishing off this little island, a million miles from anywhere called Crooked Island. I'd say this was 15 years ago. I have an old boat. It's a Hatteras, 40 foot fishing boat. It's about 40 years old. It's like a member of my family. And when my kids were a little younger, my wife and my son and my daughter, we used to get in the boat, float down and head south three or four hundred miles to a little island called Crooked Island. And there was no port to pull into a dock. It was really a pristine place. No one ever went there, but there was great fishing. And my daughter was a beautiful little girl. She was, I guess at the time of the story she was about 19 and she used to be our angler. She was the one that sat in the fighting chair. She was feisty and a good fishermen and it was about four o'clock in the afternoon and we were trolling for Marlin and you know, hoping to catch 150 or 200 pounds. And I saw this big thin slicing across the transom of the boat and I almost came out of-- I was up on the bridge and I almost came out of my chair because it was a monster and it came back and it grabbed the lure and we hooked it. And my wife and my daughter started fighting this thing and it jumped out of the water and it was like, it was as big as a barn. I mean it was absolutely unbelievably big and she fought it for like two hours and we almost had it to the side of the boat. We would have grabbed the wire reader and taken out the hook and let it go. But it went down. It went down and down and down and down. It went 3000 feet down, and then it died. And it took her three hours to pull it up. And now we're at 10 o'clock at night. We had lights on the water and we didn't know where we were exactly because of this fish had towed us about 20 miles. And we got it to the surface and we all pulled and put ropes on it and pulled it on the boat. It was dead and it weighed over 800 pounds.

Steven James: Oh my Lord.

Fred Waitzkin: It was the biggest fish that any of us had ever seen or caught. And frankly speaking, we felt terrible because it was the first marlin, to my knowledge, we ever killed. Cause usually you fight these fish and you let them go. They swim to fight another day. But this one just died very, very deep and it was really exciting and sad at the same time. That's the story that comes to mind.

Steven James: Yeah, that's a poignant moment. I like how it's a mixture of, you know, success and also sort of a note of failure in the sense that you wanted it to survive, but that's crazy. Yeah.

Fred Waitzkin: It also has a kind of metaphorical resonance because when I started fishing with my dad in the islands many, many years ago, there were so many fish. I mean, if you were going to go tuna fishing in the spring, you could see these giant bluefin tuna migrating south past the Bahamian islands and there were so many then, you could feel like you could walk across their backs. Same things with marlin. But today, now, you can fish a lot of days and not even see one of them. So when we get to talking about Deep Water Blues in little while, that's kind of like one of the themes that I write about. It's a different world out there fishing today.

Steven James: Yeah, no kidding. It is. I've seen some documentaries on just the shark population over the last, well I think you said a couple of decades, and I think that's where they've tracked it and it's just tragic how the shark population has plummeted like 90% or something like that in Alaska.

Fred Waitzkin: And, and you know, and the main reason why is because Asian countries fish for sharks commercially for their fins to make soup. And so what they do is they catch these sharks by the thousands. They pull them into the boat, they cut off their fins, the sharks are still alive, and they dumped them back into the ocean and they die slowly and tragically without the fans. It's a terrible, terrible thing.

Steven James: Now that we've depressed everyone listening...

Fred Waitzkin: We really started on a positive note right? Maybe we should start from the beginning again. Talk about happiness.

Steven James: Yeah, no kidding. So... I know that you mentioned your daughter. And also, your son is a chess prodigy and I think the story that you're most well-known for is writing about his journey through the chess world.

Fred Waitzkin: Yeah. I wrote that book Searching for Bobby Fischer. It's hard to believe it's 30 years ago. We had a great time. Josh and I. We traveled around the world together. Him playing in tournaments and me writing about it. Chess was my life for the better part of 12 years. I mean, I wrote that book and then I wrote the biography of the world chess champion Garry Kasparov.

Steven James: Oh, really. Yeah.

Fred Waitzkin: That was exciting. I did a lot of feature writing on chess players because there was no one else in the country that was doing it. But I found chess players so interesting that I, you know, I'd meet this one, meet that one. They were such interesting characters, quirky and brilliant and impoverished. So I wrote a lot of articles about chess players, but searching for Bobby Fisher was my first book.

Steven James: Now, were you interested in chess? How did that sort of get started in the first place?

Fred Waitzkin: It kind of started like millions of other Americans. When Bobby Fischer was playing against Boris Spassky for the world championship in 1972, I started watching on television and I found it so intoxicating. I thought, well, maybe I'd be a chess genius. So I watched how they played and I tried to play, and then I started playing against my friends and I was beating my friends and I thought, \*\*well, maybe I'll be the next Bobby Fisher. And then I went to the Thompson Street chess shop and I played against the pimply adolescent who was reading the newspaper while he was playing against me. And he beat me easily without looking at the board. And that was my sign that I wasn't going to be the next Bobby Fisher.

Steven James: I remember the first year that I was out of high school, I worked as a counselor at a summer camp and there was a boy there who had won like the Illinois state championship or something. He was one of my campers. And so he's like, Oh, do you play chess? I was like, yeah, I play chess. So we set up the board and I was white, so I went first and he goes, \*\*oh, my chess teacher told me never to start with that opening move. I'm thinking, \*\*this is not gonna end well. So... Yeah. Some of us are not maybe the chess geniuses that others are. So, I'm really intrigued by writing true stories. You've done a number of not only just true stories, but based on true events. When you're working with a story in that realm, I mean, you want to be honest to the facts. How much do you adapt the story to sort of fit in more of a narrative structure?

Fred Waitzkin: I've been thinking about this subject quite a bit lately. In fact, I wrote an essay a couple weeks ago for Writers Digest in which I posit that, there really isn't so much of a difference between fiction and nonfiction as a lot of people think there is. When I started writing stories when I was in my twenties, I had this idea that I wanted to write great novels like Tolstoy and I was working in this little painting studio that my mother owned. My mom was a great painter and she kept her canvases in this cold water studio on 14th Street. And so I'd go up there and I was getting set to write my Tolstoy-like novels. And I'd sit down in my chair and I try to imagine what the plots of these stories would be. And I spent two years trying to figure out a great plot for a story. And I couldn't think of one, not even one in two years. The only plot, the only things that I came up with were the dreams that I had at night, many of which were depressing. My stories were rejected everywhere, writing these depressing Greens. And then I spent a period of time writing for feature magazines. And I spent about a dozen years doing that. I wrote for most of the big national magazines and I discovered that stories were everywhere. You didn't have to invent them like fairytales. I mean, you could meet a guy in the subway and he could tell you great story. Or your best friend could tell you a story. Or you could meet a professional basketball player and go out and have drinks with him and he might tell you a story because you got to be friends with him and he let something slip and you think, \*\*Oh my God, that's a great story. And so after spending all that time doing journalism, I realized stories weren't so difficult to find. They were everywhere. And that really opened doors for me as a novelist because I found that stories were like fruit trees. They're everywhere. Yeah. And so, how does fiction take place? Well, you find a story that intrigues you. You gotta love it. If you don't love this, it's like finding a girlfriend. You gotta love her or else she's not going to be your girlfriend.

Steven James: It's gotta work out. Yeah.

Fred Waitzkin: Yeah. So you gotta find a story that you love and then you've got to delve into it and you start writing it and you allow it to go its own way. In other words, just because Peter meets Mary and they get married and they live happily ever after in real life, doesn't mean it has to happen that way when you write the story. They could marry then all of a sudden she could find out that he had a drug habit for 20 years and secretly he beat his girlfriends and she didn't know that. And so the story could go that way. You know what I'm saying? We start with a story and with characters that you sort of might know and then let it go your own way. I discovered later on... maybe if I'd known this when I was 20 I could have saved myself years, but I discovered that a lot of the great novels that we love so much were really true stories initially. Like, for example, a lot of your listeners probably know The Old Man and the Sea by Earnest Hemingway. And when I read that as a kid, I mean, it blew my mind. It was such a great story. But I didn't realize until many, many years later that that story was based upon a true story that he wrote as a magazine article for Esquire 20 years earlier, and that the old man was a guy named Santiago who actually lived in Cuba and was still alive when the novel was written. So a lot of the stories that we read in novels... like Philip Roth wrote this very interesting novel called Deception, but it was about his wife, Claire Bloom. And in fact, in the early draft, he calls the woman protagonist "Claire," which blew her mind and she made him change it. But you know... you follow my drift?

Steven James: Yeah. What is it that when you have a true event... Let's say, Fred, as you're looking for some stories to tell or something, what is it that says that makes you say, \*\*this fruit is worth picking from the tree. This has the seed of a great story.

Fred Waitzkin: Well, let's be specific for the moment rather than being abstract and I think maybe the listener will be able to grasp it. So this new novel that I wrote, Deep Water Blues, is about an island in the southern Bahamas, not the island I was referring to before but a different island called Rum Cay, which I discovered about 20 years ago again with my family on my boat. And it was intoxicating. It was lush green and it had hills, which is unusual in the Bahamas because most of those islands are very flat and sandy. But this was a beautiful green island and it had a very small population in the center of the island with 50 or 60 people. And it had a beautiful little marina on the south end that was run by this guy named Bobby Little. A couple dozen very, very wealthy sportsmen, a lot of athletes like Mark Messier, the hockey player, and Dale Earnhardt the race car driver, would go there and have fishing vacations. \*\*\*Jackie on the assets used to go there because the place was so beautiful and it was like your own garden of Eden. And I went there a few times and I just fell in love with the place. And then one time what happened - one evening, what happened was that a terrible accident happened in front of the island. I don't want to tell your listeners what it was because I didn't want to take away from the drama of the book, but something terrible happened. Really grotesquely awful. And many people died. And in the aftermath of this terrible event, which is described in the novel, everything changed on the island. Generous people became usually ambitious and avaricious and crime spread through this little tiny, tiny place. And there were awful, awful crimes that took place and even murderous crimes that took place. And so the evolution of the history of this island from this gorgeous, pristine Valhalla of a place to someplace that was rotten at the core was very, very intriguing to me. It captured on my imagination. And I thought, this is a story that I want to write.

Steven James: A lot of people look at stories as if they're just a series of events, but usually when I teach on story and storytelling and writing, I always emphasize that in the story, something has to go wrong, and at the core of a story you have tension. Without tension you don't have drama and you don't really have a story. And so very often what draws people in to a story early is this disruption of the normal life into something terrible. And it sounds like that's similar to what actually happened and what drew you into writing this novel in the first place.

Fred Waitzkin: Absolutely. Absolutely. When I went to college I was... I fell in love with John Milton's Paradise Lost because it was constantly a war from beginning to end between good and evil. And when I create a protagonist, if he's a good guy, I will invariably try to examine the dark side of his personality. Because I think all of us have a dark side. And likewise, if I'm writing a villain, and there's a villain in this new book, an awful person, I'll try to discover a side to him which is surprisingly positive. Because it's the play between those, as you just pointed out, it's the play between good and evil, those tensions, those surprises in people that make writing interesting. And you don't want to just write about a person that's, just a wonderful, good person. And he's never been touched by dark thoughts. I mean, first of all it would be unrealistic and it wouldn't be interesting. Don't you agree?

Steven James: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. And I think when we see a villain and we see him justifying what he's doing in a way that to readers are like, \*\*\*you know what, he's actually got a good point, or he's maybe not such a bad guy after all. And then all of a sudden he does his deed, whatever it is, and we get troubled even more than if he's just sort of one dimensionally evil in everything that he does. I think that that sense is true. Yeah.

Fred Waitzkin: Exactly. I mean, when I used to read, newspaper articles of that Bernie Madoff for example, and God knows the lives that he destroyed, the people that committed suicide. But if I were writing about him and he was someone I thought about writing about. If I try writing about him, I would also be writing about all that he lost. He lost his two sons, they both died. He lost his wife, she doesn't come to visit him in jail. He owned the world and now he has nothing. Again, the juxtaposition between the evil that he incurred and the suffering that he feels is what would make the story much more interesting than just to write about the fact that he was a terrible guy.

Steven James: Yeah. Yeah. Some people have said that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is that nonfiction is true, but doesn't need to be believable. And fiction isn't true, but does need to be believable.

Fred Waitzkin: Yeah. I'd never heard that, but I like it. I like it a lot.

Steven James: Yeah. Because if we read a novel and something happens that's so extraordinary, we say, "Oh, I don't buy it. That would never happen." But yet in real life, it may happen. I remember hearing this story about someone who jumped out of an airplane with a parachute that didn't open in New Zealand and fell like 13,000 feet and hit a blackberry bush and broke her leg and had a few bruised ribs and that was it. No doctors could really figure out how she survived. Well, you couldn't very well do that in a novel because as soon as it happens, readers are gonna say, "No way. I don't, I don't believe it." So it's made up, but it has to be believable.

Fred Waitzkin: But that's the art of the book. When you talk about falling out of a plane, there was a great poem written by the poet James Dickey who... I don't know if you recall this, but back in the day he bought a fantastic novel called Deliverance and they made a movie starring Burt Reynolds.

Steven James: Oh, sure. Yeah.

Fred Waitzkin: Anyway, he was a great writer and he writes, and he writes a poem about stewardess falling out of a plane at 30,000 feet and, and he gets into her head while she's falling. And of course she's dealing with the horror of falling, and I don't know off the top of my head how long it takes to fall from 30,000 feet, but let's say for four minutes. You don't just think about the horror for those four minutes. You're thinking about people you know, and maybe a love affair that you'd enjoyed... he makes this very thing come alive that you're describing. That's what a great writer can do,

Steven James: Yeah, yeah, no kidding. That's neat. In my own life, whenever I've read novels that have really taken me to another place, it's often because there is that sense of believability where I say, "I can picture being there," or, "I really accept this." But the stories that drive me out tend to be the ones where something happens and I just say, "No, no. Don't buy it."

Fred Waitzkin: In my last two novels, in my in prior novel - it was called the Dream Merchant - and the last third of it takes place in a gold mining camp in the middle of the Amazon jungle about 150 miles south of the city of Manaus in Brazil. It's about as decadent and dangerous a place as you could find. There are bandits that will kill you, there are jaguars that will kill you, there's a million different snakes. And I knew that to pull the novel off, it had to be very real, so I went with my son and we spent five weeks in the jungle. And likewise, in this new book, Deep Water Blues, I traveled to the island with three guys that were inexperienced seamen on my old boat and we had a harrowing trip. There were navigational problems, we ran into rough water. One of us almost gotten eaten by a shark on that trip down south and again, apropos to the point that you just made, that trip was necessary in order to make it completely believable. Because if your reader doesn't believe what you're writing, he doesn't buy the book. He'll put it down.

Steven James: Yeah. That authenticity, I feel like in your stories is vital, and just the fact that you went to those locations, you wanted to experience for yourself what it was like, you wanted to get the details correct. That tells me a lot about you as an author that you really care about not just the story, but about your readers. You want to give them the most authentic story that you can for that location or those characters.

Fred Waitzkin: To be sure. I've loved reading and writing my whole life and, and to make it real is basic. Actually, the phrase that you used a few minutes ago, to make unreal, to make fiction believable is essential. If you don't capture that aspect of the magic, it's not going to be a good book.

Steven James: You mentioned in your new book that there's a villain and he does terrible, terrible things. How do you step into his mind to write his character without getting drawn into the darkness yourself?

Fred Waitzkin: Well, you do get thrown into darkness. Just like an actor playing the part of a terrible person in a stage production or in a movie, you have to do that. Thomas Harris, who wrote...

Steven James: Silence of the Lambs?

Fred Waitzkin: Silence of the Lambs. I read an interview by him in the Times a couple of weeks ago and he said he never makes anything up. Even Hannibal Lecter. He didn't make him up. He says he's experienced, in his life, everything he's written about. Now obviously he didn't know Hannibal Lecter exactly, but he obviously met people that suggested Hannibal Lecter to him. So no, I think you have to give yourself to it while you're doing it. You have to feel it. You have to kind of become a little evil yourself to write it well.

Steven James: I actually agree with you in the sense that in the stories that I've written that have had characters that have really chilled me the most, that have had the villains that really scared me, were times where I really felt like I was thinking like that character. And that was disturbing. That was scary. Some people kind of liked the idea of stepping back, but yeah, I'm on the same page as you are. I think to get that authenticity, you almost have to climb into their mind and ask yourself what would they naturally be thinking or doing or saying.

Fred Waitzkin: I agree completely. And you know, one trick that I use is that... people have asked me, cause I've written two memoirs and I write about myself candidly, again because it's the only way that writing makes sense to me. If I'm writing about myself, I'm going to put myself out there. But while I'm doing it, I pretend that the Fred that I'm writing about is a fictional character, which might sound strange, but that's what I do. I try to move away from the Fred that I know and write about him as if he's a character rather than myself. And then when the book comes out, I have to deal with the fallout. Another trick that I use, which is just a half step away from what you're asking me about, is that sometimes there's a character that I don't fully understand, and if you don't fully understand a character, you can't write him well. In one instance... Actually, I've done this three or four times. I've worked with models. I was writing this one book in which there's this beautiful girl in her middle twenties, this woman, and she's physically beautiful and she has a sense that, she has a feeling that there's art in the world and there are great things that she'd like to know about, but she doesn't know about them. And she's kinda been physically used by guys, and she's got a kind of a bitterness and a brassiness all at once. And I didn't really know a woman like this. I knew the type I wanted to write about and, and my son said, "I want to introduce you to someone." So he introduced me to a 26-year-old actress and she was beautiful. She looked just like Marilyn Monroe. And we went out and we had lunch together, and I described this character to her, this character of Ava that I wrote about in The Dream Merchant that I wanted to write. We were having lunch together and I was describing her darkness and her inability to embrace the sense of art that she knew was out there in the world because of her background, because her husband was kind of ignorant, and she sort of took it in but didn't say much over lunch. Then we left the restaurant and we were walking up this Rhode Island stairway and she was ahead of me and she turned around at the top of the stairs and her entire character changed. And she said to me, "Oh, leave me, I can do this." And the hair on my arms stood up because for about 15 seconds, she was Ava. She was the character that I wanted to write. And then so she met with me for the next nine months, about every three weeks we would meet in my office. I would send her a scene, we would block it out together, and by the end of the nine months I wasn't even giving her dialogue. She was giving dialogue back to me because she'd become my character. So there's a lot of ways to get a character.

Steven James: That's fascinating. I've never heard of an author using that technique, but I like it. I feel like it brings great authenticity, again like what we were talking about earlier, to the story. I know a lot of people when I go to writers' conferences to teach on writing, a lot of people want to write memoirs. So many people are saying, "Yeah, I'm writing a memoir." And very often I'll sort of say, you know, "Why would someone want to read about your life? What is it about your story?" I don't mean to make them feel badly, but unless they're famous, why would someone want to read that story? And I want them to climb into the universal truths that are in their story. What would you say are some of the keys that you've found for writing memoirs that have been picked up and sold?

Fred Waitzkin: Well, I've written two memoirs. The first one we don't have to talk about was searching for Bobby Fischer. Such a compelling and unusual story about having a seven year old kid who becomes a chess champion. Its sale-ability was pretty obvious. But my second memoir, which was the story of my own life, which a lot of people think is my best book. I'm very confused by the idea of best books. For me always my last book is my best book. But that was a story which was born, as I was, from my parents. When people ask me today, "Who were your great literary influences?" and I say, "Ernest Hemingway and Jack Kerouac." But if I'm forced to say, who are my singularly biggest literary influences, I would say my father and my mother because my mother was an abstract painter and sculptress. A great one. Her work today is in museums all over the world. And my dad was a salesman, a lighting fixture salesman, and a very, very good salesman. And I loved him insanely when I was a kid. I just was in love with my dad and my parents were... it was a hideous marriage. They hated one another. They never had a calm day together. They had nothing in common. They should never have gotten married. But the whole idea of literary tension for me was born from these two parents. Like God and the devil, like we were talking about before. An artist mother and a salesman father who would sort of break all the moral rules to make the sale. And so writing about these two people... writing about how I survived within the tension of this hideous marriage was kind of how I framed the book and I think that a lot of people loved the book. They really related to it.

Steven James: Oh, that's interesting. I think a lot of people, even if they didn't have that experience growing up, can still identify with it because even if we didn't have that as our parents, we can still identify because we've seen enough of that type of conflict in the lives of people around us that we can identify with it.

Fred Waitzkin: But let me say a few more things about the memoirs since you've asked me. One of the cool things about writing that memoir, and it gave me a lot of insight into writing fiction, actually, was that when I started writing it, I thought, "Oh, this is going to be easy because I'm writing about my own life. And if there's one life I know about, it's my own." But I discovered that I remembered certain events very, very well, and then I remembered another event very well. I mean, I'm talking about when I was a kid, let's say like when I was 11 or 14 or 17. But how did I get from one event to the next event? That was a question mark. And so what I would do is I would, I would think about it and I would ask some older relatives that were still alive, but they weren't really sure. So I kind of took the conjectures of people that were still alive and then I took the memories that I remembered and then I filled in the blanks. And a lot of it was filling in the blank. So was really a history, or was it a fiction, or was it a combination of both? Do you see what I'm getting at? And I think that that's really what a great memoir is. I remember around the time that my book came out, there was another great memoir written by... it was called This Boy's Life. And I'm having a blind spot about the author right now, but there were two brothers and each of them wrote the memoir. One was This Boy's Life and the other was called The Duke of Deception. And they were both terrifically good books, but they both remembered the same life completely differently. And I watched them in interviews on television and they argued completely to one another, "This didn't happen!" "Yes, this happened!" Same life, same parents, and they envisioned it differently.

Steven James: How about that? I mean, instinctively I know that that's the case that we would probably have disagreements about some memories that we have, but that they would both write impressive memoirs about it and have such a different view. That's fascinating.

Fred Waitzkin: Yeah. It was the case, though.

Steven James: So, tell us a little bit more about Deep Water Blues. I know that it's your most recent book, and it's not a long read. It's a shorter novel. And I'm curious if it has that same mixture that you're talking about with fiction, with fact trying to shape something that is, at its core, a great story, but it's based on events that you're really familiar with.

Fred Waitzkin: Yeah, well.. very much. It's very much a combination of both. In fact, I had this idea going in. I might've mentioned before that I knew about the story, about what took place on the island. I knew about the evolution, of it going from a kind of Eden place to very decadent place where terrible things had happened. But I wanted to see it myself. I'd been there earlier, but I hadn't gone there in recent years. So I took this boating trip with several elderly friends that had never gone to see, and we had this harrowing adventure going to the island. Then it occurred to me that, wouldn't it be interesting to take a history, like what took place on the island, and come to it with some real people? And so what I did is I took real people... I took people like myself, two of the guys that came on the boat, and they'd go ashore and they entered this story, this fiction, with events some of which took place in the island and others that didn't take place on the island. And I was curious to see what would happen if I took real characters and put them into a fictive landscape. So that was also part of the setup of the book. It was very exciting to write that way and I think it worked out really well.

Steven James: Do you think that fiction should tell the truth about life? In other words, not the facts about life, but the truth about life.

Fred Waitzkin: It has to. It has to. I mean, I think what you said before was really true. I think if you lie in fiction, it is so glaring and it's a great paradox. You have to tell the truth. Your characters have to be real, even though they're fictive. I mentioned before about the Hannibal Lecter character, but also the great writer, Graeme Green said the same thing in his biography. He said he never has written about a character that he hasn't known. I mean, if you looked at Ernest Hemingway novels, for example, if you looked at The Sun Also Rises and looked at the first draft of that... the first draft of that great novel, Hemingway used the names of all of his friends for characters. Jake Barnes and that novel is called Hemingway, for example. So then in later drafts he takes off the names of the characters and gives them fictional names, and of course he develops the characters a little bit and lets them go in their own way. But to be sure, the truth has to be baked in deeply into a novel. If it's fake, if you're a good reader you know it from the fifth page and you don't want to read it.

Steven James: Yeah. A lot of people who are interested in the memoirs, like we were talking, about almost always come to me and ask these questions regarding, "What if I use a real person? or, "What if my mom reads this and it's in a bad light?" How did you deal with those sort of questions, Fred, when you were writing your books, your memoirs, whereas you didn't want to hurt someone but you also wanted to render the truth of what happened?

Fred Waitzkin: That is a great question. And it's a question that I have wrestled with my entire writing life. When I wrote my memoirs, when I wrote The Last Marlin particularly, I had the word of my mother, this great mentor to me, and she always talked about the importance of telling the truth in great writing. And I put it all out there. And when the book was published, my mother at first admired it and then became furious at me for revealing certain things about her that she had not wanted me to write about. So we had a lot of interesting discussions about that and about the conversations that we had in a lifetime. But, you know, it's an issue that writers invariably trouble over and it's not simple. I just recently read a great memoir by David Carr. David Carr was a terrific journalist at the end of his life. He worked for the New York Times for 10 years, but he was living in Minneapolis for most of his writing life, and he was an abject drug addict. He was a crack cocaine user and he lived in the streets and he beat up his girlfriends and he beat up his first wife and he just... he lived the most disgusting, avaricious, decadent, self-mutilating, and utilizing his friends life that you can even imagine. And he put it all out there in this book, and I read this book about three weeks ago and it completely blew my mind that he had such balls. It really did. I don't know that I could have written that book. I would like to think that I could've done it, but I don't know. So it's a very singular question that a writer has to take on. But this much I'll tell you: if you're going to be a good writer, and if you have it in mind that you're never going to walk the line - and what I mean by that is you're never going to risk hurting anyone's feelings by what you say - then you're in the wrong profession. So... you might draw the line somewhere. You might decide not to write about one thing or three things because the effects could be so deleterious, but basically you've got gotta be willing to put it out there or you're not gonna have a successful career.

Steven James: That risk as a writer of putting yourself out there, I think is something that young writers, aspiring writers, maybe have not been warned about or told about too much. I think that very often they're told to be persistent and that's good, that's good advice. Or to work through different drafts and not fall in love with an early draft, and that's good advice too. But this idea of when you write, there's always risk; there's always the risk that people will think about you differently, that you might fail, fall on your face, and that art and risk do go together.

Fred Waitzkin: It's a high wire act. It really is. And every time I start a new book... I mean, I've written a bunch of books now and I've written a lot of stories and a lot of articles. Every time I start something new, I have the sense I... I'm asking myself this question: "Can I pull it off? Can I pull it off? And what am I can't pull it off? Who am I going to be the next morning if I can't pull it off? And how am I going to be if everybody thinks it's awful?" And you have to somehow, grapple with those demons and put them out of your mind and just go for it. And some people can't do it. Some people, it's too paralyzing. Young writers worry, "What if I can't get published? What if I can't get published? How do I get published?" And so they get so preoccupied with those questions that they never give themselves a chance to truly experience the art of what they're doing. Which incidentally is the big payoff. I write about this sometimes too. I mean, I've been very lucky in my professional life. I've been reviewed very well and I've had great essays written about my work and I knock on wood because I have friends that are greatly talented and that haven't had big success. But the great success that you have as a writer isn't doing the work. It's in making those paragraphs sane. It's in discovering ideas in yourself that you never thought were there. That's where the greatness lies. Not in getting it published and getting a great review in some newspaper or magazine. That's very nice, but the greatness has to do with the feeling that you have in yourself that you've created something that's important and the feeling that you have while you're creating it.

Steven James: I heard that Emily Dickinson in her life only had seven poems published and that every one of them was altered by an editor. And yet she produced this body of work, of poetry, that today she's considered one of our country's premier poets. I can't imagine today an editor saying, "Yeah, I think I'll just tinker with this poem by Emily Dickinson and I'll just change it a little bit." But, yeah, in her life she never found that publishing success that you were just mentioning, but was true to the craft and true to writing, the poems that she felt called to write.

Fred Waitzkin: It's very confusing, incidentally, the question of heavy editing. Are you familiar with the work, the short stories of Raymond Carver, for example?

Steven James: Yes, I have heard of him.

Fred Waitzkin: He was a great writer, and his great collection of short stories when he turned it in to his editor... and I can't recall the name of his editor right now, but I think that his editor pared 40% of the writing out of that volume before it was published. So in a sense it was almost a collaboration. Again, now, some writers couldn't cope with that. I wouldn't be able to deal with that myself. I have issues with edits. I don't mean that I couldn't accept any editing. I mean, some editing is very, very important. But taking 40% of the prose out of my novel would be very hard for me to except. But anyway, some authors have profited greatly from editing.

Steven James: Yeah. Honestly, I would have a tougher time with that as well. When I write a story, if I wanted it different, I would have written it differently. And I figure this is this the story and this is honest to the story.

Fred Waitzkin: And honest to who you are.

Steven James: Yeah. Yeah. I agree. So, I was curious a little bit: When you craft your stories... We've talked about creating dimensional characters by weaving in both good and evil, we've talked about honesty and authenticity, believability and all of these keys. Do you tend to outline your stories or do you write more organically as you build idea upon idea?

Fred Waitzkin: Great. A great question, again. This is what I think: When I sit down to write a book, or for that matter an article - I've just finished writing a bunch of articles recently - and when I sit down to do a writing project, I have a sense for what I'm going to write, right? Like when I wrote Deep Water Blues, I had a sense for the story. I could've told you the 10 major movements in the story, but I couldn't have told you how the book was going to end. I didn't know that before I started. I didn't know, for example, that the book would depend on a trip down to the island, which I described to you before. I didn't know that. What I know is some general ideas. And then I began to write a chapter, first chapter. And maybe I'll take a three by five card and I'll write four or five points that I think I'm going to cover in that first chapter. And then I start to write. And I write until I feel like something is stopping me. And then I leave my computer and I kind of walk through life. What I mean by that is I get on my bike, I ride alongside the river, I go home, I have dinner with a friend, I have dinner with my wife... I go back to the office on my bike. And if things are really clicking while I'm on my bike, I get an idea. An idea comes to me. I'm not thinking about the book, but an idea comes to me and I jot it into my little notepad that I carry in my breast pocket. And that little idea is suggestive of where I'm going to go next in my writing. Now here's the idea, the way I think of it. I think that in great writing, the most important work that you do comes from a pre-analytic place. I think that starting from page one and writing a complete outline of almost everything you're going to say in your chapter or in your book is almost a negation for the possibility of greatness, because the great writing, the way I see it, has to do with discovery and discovery happens in ways that are significantly unconscious. You're getting at the kinds of thinking that we have in dreams, where dreams come from. Well, the ideas in great writing come from the same places. But if you crowd out the work so much with outlines and are afraid to leave your design, you don't give yourself a chance for the most valuable writing to take place. And sometimes ideas need to grow quietly. You might just have a seed of an idea and it needs to grow inside without being looked at directly. And when it's ready to show itself to you, it will show itself to you if you don't crowd it. That's my thinking about it.

Steven James: I like it. That's great. That's a great place to kind of wrap things up. Before we do, do you have any other closing thoughts that you might want to share for aspiring writers or storytellers or people writing memoirs or tapping into true events to share stories to impact others?

Fred Waitzkin: The last thing I said is maybe the most important along those lines. Have the courage to not plan too closely so that you have a chance to discover stuff that's inside you that you might not know is there. Because I think that that's where you might astound yourself with revelations.

Steven James: Excellent. And so our guest today, Fred Waitzkin, and his book Deep Water Blues is available right now. Fred, I appreciate your time and just your insights. I really like how you wrapped things up and brought things full circle there towards the end.

Fred Waitzkin: I enjoyed our talk greatly, Stephen.

Steven James: Thank you. And to everyone listening, we appreciate you tuning in and listening. For more information about other broadcasts and guests, you can click to thestoryblender.com. Don't forget to subscribe to our podcast. And if you want information about my books, you can click to stevenjames.net. Fred, is there a place online where you would encourage people to connect with you, maybe if you're doing a book signing or to keep track of when your next project comes out?

Fred Waitzkin: I have a really good website, fredwaitzkin.com. You can read about all mt books there and read about my lectures and ideas about writing there. Amazon.com is a great place to buy the new novel Deep Water Blues. You can also buy it at some bookstores, but Amazon's a great place. And this has been a wonderful conversation. I've really enjoyed it, Steven.

Steven James: Thank you so much and thanks for being on once again, Fred. And friends, everyone listening, always remember...

Fred Waitzkin: The art of the story is in the blend.

Steven James: We'll see you next time.