

Recall This Book
Episode 104
Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada (JP)
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John Plotz: Hello and welcome to Recall this Book: Collaboration Edition. I'm John Plotz flying solo today, and along with our upcoming conversation with composer Francisco del Pino, this conversation is going to inaugurate a series of what it's like to work together, write together, make art together. So, coming from a world of lonely makers. So not just the novelists I write about but all the scholars who study them alone in book lined rooms, I've always been really jealous of, well, people like my own journalist brother who works with the team to come up with a shared product. So, what better way to overcome my own fraternal issues than to interview a prize-winning pair of journalistic brothers Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada? Welcome to *Recall this Book*. It's great to have you.

Steve Fainaru: John, thanks. Great to be here.

John Plotz: OK, so I'm going to begin by introducing Steve because he and I have been working together at Princeton this fall, and in fact, like some kind of Graham Greene characters actually living together in this weird apartment building, we do everything but drink vermouth cassis together at the end of the day. So, Steve needs no introduction, or maybe I should say he needs many introductions. I'll just say briefly, he won a 2008 Pulitzer for an amazing series of stories about American private contractors during the invasion of Iraq and that he, along with his brother, wrote a bestselling book that I'm sure many of our listeners know about. The NFL cover up of concussion trauma *League of Denial*, which won a 2014 Penn ESPN award. For literary sports writing and Mark is equally impressive. I say that either as an older brother, but I have to admit the younger brother is equally impressive after breaking the bulk of steroids scandal in 2004 or 5 with his colleague Lance Williams, which he nearly went to jail for refusing to reveal sources you wrote a 2013 bestseller on that topic. *Game of Shadows*, Barry Bonds, BALCO and the steroid scandal that rocked professional sports, apart from your groundbreaking concussion work, both of you have many other fantastic stories in the past and are currently at work on some other stories. For example, I think you're working on the NBA in China that I think are no doubt going to draw further attention. There's a ton to talk about. I want this conversation to go wherever the best stories. But maybe we can begin at the beginning. And so, this beginning I thought of as like, what's the first story you guys? Worked on together.

Mark Fainaru: I was on ESPN already, and Steve thankfully joined. They were doing a big push to hire, you know, a bunch of really talented writers, and they hired Steve, you know, not long after he won his. Pulitzer and I had gotten assigned a story that were that ended up sort of hatching league of denial and in the course of doing the reporting on. That book. Steven just got hired. I came back from doing the reporting on that story. And I told Steve about the experience and how somebody had suggested we write a book about the NFL and brain. And you know Steve had already written two and you know I was really good at conceiving books and stories as books. And so, we sort of shared this idea and then put together a proposal and in the course of doing that, we started to work on the book together. And we're also working on stories for ESPN, ESPN was supportive of the project and so we ended up in addition to the reporting for the book, producing stories. So, I don't know exactly. What the first story is do you remember like?

Steve Fainaru: I think it was. I think it was the story about how when we were, we started to report the book and so we were doing a lot of traveling for the book and we went to interview a lawyer who represented the first NFL player who was later diagnosed with neurodegenerative disease, Mike Webster.

John Plotz: Did you guys go together? Cause you always traveled together? Or was it a special? I mean, it seems like a big deal for two reporters to go out so.

Steve Fainaru: You know, it's interesting because like we, we do seemingly usually travel together like we, you know, we're. So, we went to Morgantown West Virginia. And yeah, and we this guy was operating out of, like, a kind of a converted Firehouse and so, we were just almost like, at that point, familiarizing ourselves with this story. And this guy pulled out a bunch of documents related to a disability case that he had filed against the NFL. So, he pulls out these documents, and we could tell immediately that the NFL had been handing out that they've been handing out millions of dollars in benefits to NFL players who had been diagnosed with neurodegenerative disease related to their playing careers. While at the same time the league very publicly and emphatically was denying that NFL players ever get brain damage. Then that was, among other things, it was the central focus of a class action lawsuit filed by players against the NFL. So that was, I think, our first story. We wrote it as a news story for ESPN. I mean, I would say that even though we hadn't worked together before any of this, and you know, we have been working, as you know, journalists for both of us, you know, for well over 2 decades that point. You know, we were constantly talking. You know, we're really close and sharing ideas. And we had talked about wanting to work together and we had, like, edited each other's stories. I helped out at Mark's first book, and so we did a lot of stuff together. So, I don't think actually, I mean it was, it was great that we were fine. We always wanted to do a book together. So, it was great that we were finally doing it. But I think actually the process itself. Well, it didn't feel that unusual like that revelatory, because I think we had been. We had been talking about journalism together for so long that it really came naturally to us, particularly the reporting.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah.

Mark Fainaru: Reporting especially, I think that's right. The book I think as a different animal, but the reporting for sure was pretty natural. You know, and we and we. Fell into a group. Of the sort of areas, we either felt more comfortable in or around people. We knew that we were going to call and the sources sort of separated pretty naturally, almost in an odd way. It was pretty natural, strangely.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, I actually, I was going to ask you that about this sort of sorting out. So how would you divide that? Cause I know in any collaboration there's like implicit division lines, but what? Yeah, what did you do you sit down and sort of draw that out or how do you how?

Mark Fainaru: Do you figure out how to share it out? I mean, I think there was different animals for the book. It was an entirely sort of different process, but for stories it seemed to sort of almost organically happen. I mean, we had we, we just sort of developed a series of sources between us and then if there was a question of who's going to call who, we would just say, hey, you know, here you take these three and I'll take these three or whatever. And we were constantly talking about the story, so we were always on the same page you know, and so I don't think, and I also think like you know we've talked about this a bunch around both with ourselves and other colleagues. That, like so much of this kind of reporting, is really about trust. I think when you're working with somebody else and if you don't trust the person. That's just, you know, massive. And so, with us, we had a built-in level of trust obviously. Made it so much easier and so I think that.

John Plotz: We've Mark, can I just jump in? Cause when you first said trust, I assumed you meant between yourself and your sources, but you actually mean between the people. Can you say more about that?

Mark Fainaru: I mean, the trust between you and your colleague. I just think that's, you know, because if you don't, I mean, you know the process, I mean I think of any reporting but like on these stories, there's a delicate nature in some ways that the investigative quality of them and sometimes you're talking to people who are really reticent. And talk. And so, I think that you and your colleague have to be on the same page about how. You approach people. Or at least about sort of the nature of where the story is headed and if you don't, I don't think if you don't have, I think if you don't have that trust, it makes it. It just makes the process dramatically more difficult. And I almost think impossible.

Steve Fainaru: Yeah, yeah, I would agree with that like, because I mean journalism in particular, I think that's probably true of just about any collaboration, but also sort of like any work of journalism or probably even writing. I mean, I've read any fiction, but like it just involves a series of endless choices that you're making all the time,

like constantly, like there's choices around the reporting choices about what you're going to emphasize in the book choices about where you're going to go and when you when you're going to do it. It's just analysts, they're just coming at you constantly. And so, if you don't have a partner who you're who you trust implicitly. And can have a dialogue that is based on sort of trust and mutual respect, your project is dead. Well, I can give you one really good specific example. So, like maybe five years ago, I did a story on the Syrian national soccer team and how the Bashar dictatorship was using before the last World Cup. The Assad government was using the soccer team as a basically a propaganda instrument and it was tearing apart soccer fans and the team itself and so that it was a really interesting story, but at least initially, the producer on the piece who's a close friend of ours. He and I had completely different visions of what the piece should be and what happened was the piece initially splintered in two different directions, and so he wanted one thing and he wanted to go to, you know, he wanted to go interview people who I was not really that interested in. I felt like the story, the story that he wanted to put on TV was not a story that I was really interested in doing and basically, we just sort of like for several months, we kind of coexisted with it and with a lot of tension and but then ultimately, we had a. Like a mind meld and it came together, and it was great.

Steve Fainaru: Like we finally figured out a story that worked for both of us and. But you know that period before we got to that place was super difficult. I mean, it is a guy who's a close friend and. You know, and I think there were, you know, we were sort of like, you know is this going to affect our friendship and it can be very painful actually.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's interesting. And actually, maybe that's a connection cause of course, as you guys started talking, I realized that as journalists, you've had lots of reporting partners over the years who are not your brother. So, like is there something you could say specifically about, you know, the difference of having a partner who where, you know, the emotional bond is there and it's not going away? I mean.

Mark Fainaru: I mean. Yeah, that's really an interesting question because I I've had a mix of experiences and I. I mean, it's funny because I think this process you know, I think the emotional bond with Steve is obviously very different than I've got with anybody else I've worked with and so, but at the same time, I have all as the younger brother, I have all sorts of insecurities around that. And so not that I never thought that Steve was not going to stay my brother and stay friends and stay close with me. If this didn't work. Somehow, but I think that. There was an added element of pressure to the process. That I didn't feel necessarily with saying my colleague who I work in *Game of Shadows* with, because it's just a different level of pressure to perform and to deliver, and all of those things we we've had this conversation in various ways over the years. And Steve hates that he despises this part of.

Steve Fainaru: The conversation was just impatient with it.

Mark Fainaru: he's impatient, he. Thinks it's sort of *****, but it's my reality. You know, he had to live with it so.

Steve Fainaru: I I'm not. You know, I I'm. I'm not in any way like, deny your reality. I'm just.

Mark Fainaru: it's so I you know. I think it.

John Plotz: Sounds like a league of denial.

Mark Fainaru: It creates a different animal for sure. You know, I think it's and it, and it I think I think on the one hand it emboldened the partnership for sure like 100% it the just types of things that Steve just described we never have I don't I can't think of 1. Instance really where we had a sort of fundamental disagreement about what the story was or how we were going to pursue the book or how to move forward and. And I think a lot of that has to do with the sort of bond we share and that connection. You know, on the other hand, I think the thing I talked about earlier and the insecurities around being a younger brother created its own level of tension that at one point, you know, it didn't threaten to implode the book, but it it's certainly like created a really difficult sort of period of time.

John Plotz: For me, it's interesting. You know, I've been trying to get my brother to write this book. With me for a long time and that's actually really helpful. He's like, I mean, he has lots of good reasons. He is much busier than I am, but I wonder, you know, I always feel like there's some added element of why he doesn't want to do. The project, I don't know. It also made me think that there's this wonderful description Max Weber has this argument about how capitalism evolved in northern Italy because there were all of these kinship networks between the cities where people could rely on each other, like you could do business with your cousin in Florence if you lived in Venice in a way that you wouldn't do business with some random dude. Florence yeah.

Steve Fainaru: You were asking about like the sort of, you know, what happens when it doesn't work. You know the flip side of that is like when it does work, like when you're working with somebody who are like where the collaboration is really pure, you know, it's just like the greatest thing, like, I mean I really like collaborating. I think. I don't know if I like it more than working alone, but it's just such a different, qualitatively different experience in doing journalism and there's something about like when you're In Sync with somebody of being able to sort of, you know, screen your ideas and. You know, and just sort of riff and get some feedback and know that you're not going to be judged and or that maybe you are going to be judged, but it's not really going to be something that's you know, that's personal.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Steve Fainaru: I mean, I'm doing a book with someone else right now and it's a totally different relationship, but it's a similar thing. Like I'm really, we have an enormous

amount of trust in each other, and so the creative process of figuring out how we're going to prosecute this book is really, really exciting. And so, when it's working, it's like the basically the opposite of when it's not working well because it's not working. It's like torture. And when it is working, it's like, you know, poetry. It's unbelievable. And it's great.

John Plotz: Yeah, I heard you say that. You know, in a way, you've had two decades where you're both, you know, learning how to be reporters. Can you do? You each have like a particular mentor or someone who made a huge impact on you of like how to be a journalist. How to be a reporter? I'd be interested to see how they chime with one another.

Steve Fainaru: I mean, for me, it was Phil Bennett who was the. I mean, I've had several mentors. You know, when I was, when I was doing, you know, just sports. But I think that the person who really helped me kind of like unlock my potential as a journalist was Phil. He was the foreign editor of the Boston Globe. When I was the Latin America correspondent, I had met him a few years before. Then he helped bring me to the post. Where I am I worked as an investigative sportswriter first, but then I went to the foreign desk where he was the AME for foreign and he was in that job when I first went to Iraq, and then he became the managing editor. And I think more than anything like he really. You know, I think like, you know, if I had to sort of like, think of like what my strengths are as a journalist, one of the biggest ones is my ability to kind of see stories, you know, and conceptualize them, sort of see what they might be. Yeah, and how to how to execute them? And I basically learned that from Phil like he just thinks at a completely different level than any editor I've ever met. And I've seen him do that for others I'm not unique in that respect. I've seen him do that for other journalists.

John Plotz: So it's like. A kind of an X-ray vision like you see the bones. Underneath like there's all this flesh out there and you can.

Steve Fainaru: Yeah, I think I'm somehow able to take topics or like shards of information and kind of piece them together and conceptualize them in a way that they could make very interesting, interesting story. Or in this case our book or, you know.

Mark Fainaru: It's 100% true. I'm so envious of it.

Steve Fainaru: You know it, it seems it feels like. The quality and but I learned that from Phil. Like I don't think I would have that if you know and it's a really, I mean of skills to have as a journalist I feel really lucky to have it because you know it's. Just you know I it helps you pick stories. Like the stories you pick is so it's just there's it's so important. You know if you stick yourself with a story that you don't really feel passionately about or it's just kind of a dog of a story or you can't do you know you're sort of sunk and.

John Plotz: Wait, those are three categories, the ones you don't feel passionately about, right? Ones that are a dog, meaning like it turns out not to be that? Interesting as well.

Steve Fainaru: Well, that happens. I mean, especially with investigative reporting.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah. And then, but then the third one is the one that you can't do is that.

Steve Fainaru: I mean, there's some stories that just, you know, for whatever reason are unmakeable, you know, like, I mean I. Say this to.

John Plotz: Because there's some vital piece of the jigsaw. That's missing or.

Steve Fainaru: You don't have enough time, or you just can't get the information that you need. You know it can be any number of factors. But I think one of the biggest things is not being able to see. It you know, like if you can't see the story, you can't really do it and you know. And so, I find myself a lot of the time, you know, just sort of kind of talking and thinking about, *OK, well, what actually is it that we're after?* What is it that we want to really say? You know, can we actually get that story? You know, like that we have a I mean, probably half of our conversations are about that really. You know, and I find myself having those conversations, especially now with my students like you know they have 12 weeks. You know, these are the parameters. You know, they're many of them are just starting out, you know, so they have to be, they have to pick, well, do something they because if you're not, I feel like ... they have to be passionate about what they're writing about. Because that's another way I think to just completely torpedo a story; like you don't believe in it yourself, or you're not really into it. You're not curious about it, you know it's just going to be, you know, a best kind of flat.

John Plotz: Yeah, I hope we get back to talking about teaching actually.....But I want to hear about your mentor first.

Mark Fainaru: I mean I there's sort of, I don't know, I'll cop out and sort of say three. I think three things that led me to sort of where I am like or how I've been able to be somewhat successful. I think 1 is. Well, one, Steve ah, pretty obviously. I mean, I just think it's sort of like clear and you know, I mean Steve is just 2-3 years older than I am and this is an extension of our my second like we were we in high school with this amazing journalism program. And so, my teacher is the two people who taught me. Sylvia Jones and Don Brown were 100% in addition to Steve, the reason I decided to do this, and I wanted to get into it. You know, and it was a it was like a legitimate as I look back on it now, it was a legitimate entry into journalism and.

John Plotz: That's amazing. Wow.

Mark Fainaru: At the high school level. You know, they really were pushing the idea of how to do this in. A professional way. And so, and they were just so passionate about it and cared about it so deeply. You know and then. And then his little brother, I was always watching sort of Steve and where his career was going and the level of passion he had. And then. And then over the years, being able to have conversations with him, not only about stories, but about my career and how to shape my career and how to move and change, you know, I think those were those were fundamental sort of parts of my development and then you know and then I think you know on the. Here is where I worked on. I ended up working with Lance Williams and. And I didn't really know, Lance, when we started working other than just as a colleague at. The Chronicle and,

John Plotz: This is the *San Francisco Chronicle*? And what was your high school in Marin?

Mark Fainaru: Marin. Redwood High School, yeah. And so, with Lance at the *SF Chronicle*, we ended up partnering on what I think he thought was going to be a couple of months of reporting and ended up being several years of reporting including our book. And he just, you know, he had both the different sensibility about the way he went about the job than I did in terms of he's just this very mellow, laid-back guy who is really sort of quirky and humorous, but is just ridiculously do-good and so, you know, watching the level not only of his persistence, but he covered cops and courts previously. And so that I didn't have a lot of experience in that area. So being able to watch him and learn about everything from document hunting to maintaining sources, you know, those were all sort of critical things for me. And so, it's sort of a hybrid of those.

John Plotz: Maintaining sources in this sense means like keeping someone who will keep talking to you...?

Mark Fainaru: Lance is really good at this. I had never really processed this that much, but he's always really good about talking about once, you know, he'll establish a source. And then. On one story and then years later, and this actually became really critical in our reporting. He had a source that he developed like 25 years earlier on a totally separate story. And he'd maintained a relationship with that guy for 25 years, oftentimes not writing stories about what. They were talking about. And but that guy ended up being acritical source for us in the reporting.

John Plotz: That's fascinating. Yeah.

Mark Fainaru: It's really. He talks about that all the time, how he's just and he's just that kind of guy. He just sort of, you know, maintains a hold on people.

John Plotz: Yeah. So, so Steve's phrase is like seeing the whole story is yours about like....?

Mark Fainaru: I don't know what my thing is. I mean, I think if I have something it's I level of persistence you know instead of calling one person I'm going to call 6 or you know and sort of just continuing to Badger. People in a nice way, not in a like pain in the *** kind of way or trying to be a nice person or whatever. And so, I think that's probably my thing, I guess if I have a thing.

Steve Fainaru: Yeah, he's kind of shortchanging it like so. So, his if I had to define sort of what his thing is, it's really like it's not only the sort of like what he's describing, which is true, but I mean, a lot of people have that. There's a certain ingenuity around it that. Around sort of like the capturing of information and also being able to do it in a way that is completely disarming. You know, that's really rare. You know, investigative reporters, you know, they're kind of a type, really. And, you know, and a lot of them are I think, not to generalize, but I think there is a sort of like, you know, very aggressive single minded you know quality that you know can be extremely beneficial. I think Mark has that, but he's able to balance it and just completely disarm people and, you know, I think that's one of the reasons why they were able to you know, break a story that basically the entire country was, you know, was trying to chase and. So yeah, it's not. Don't listen to him. I'm really glad, though. He mentioned Don Brown and Sylvia Jones, who were also my teachers in high school. I mean I figured out what I wanted to do when I was. Like 15 and. I learned it through them, and I'd never really like.

John Plotz: You know. Yeah, I wish. I had someone like that in high school.

Steve Fainaru: I mean, it's unbelievable. Like I never that was ever there was never....I never thought about really doing anything else and it was really because of them and. Yeah, we're really, we're really fortunate in that in that respect its totally 100%.

Mark Fainaru: And they're still around.

John Plotz: That's amazing. So, I want to, I want to sort of take what you guys are saying and connect it to something that Steve you mentioned when you presented your "Fellows talk," which is that one of the challenges you guys have faced is reporting people who really don't want stories to come out. And I don't mean individual people. But like, you know you're going up against organizations like the NBA right now, but clearly the NFL. Maybe the US Army or the US State Department? A challenge and I just wanted to hear you guys think about that. It's like different. Yeah, the relationship between your stories and these large structures that could pose a threat to you that don't want this information dislodged. You know what? You know, how do you think about that and what are the tools you have to go into that?

Mark Fainaru: That's a part of the job that I love. I think that's the thrill of the job is not I find it much more powerful when we're chasing stories that have to do with institutions than individuals. And I don't think I've ever felt threatened by the

process, I think I felt emboldened by the process more than anything, you know, because it's, I mean, it sounds very corny, but I feel like this is in its perfect form. This is what the journalism is supposed to be about, right? Like you should be holding these institutions accountable. And so there's a thrill of being able to do that, I think that. You know, getting through that bureaucracy, I think can be really difficult at times, but. But I don't know. I think you know a lot of people. People are very critical of ESPN for all sorts of reasons, sometimes very good ones and, but I think the reality of the place we we're at is like we're writing about our business partners pretty regularly, you know, massive business partners. I mean, the NFL, ESPN pays the NFL \$2 billion a year right for the rights to air Monday Night Football and other you know related shows and so. I found the idea of being able to do a book that they cut to the core of the league's presence thrilling, you know, not intimidating, not fear inducing. And I don't think that's because I'm like any. This is the courageous thing. I just think, like, that's the journalism, you know, I don't know. That's a sort of simplistic answer probably. But, but that's sort of how I feel about it.

Steve Fainaru: Yeah, I totally agree. And I don't. I mean it's like that's part of the thrill. You know you're you know. You're like two guys just kind of rooting around and, you know, and, you know, in our case, you know, the NFL was. You know, not thrilled with what we were doing and. I don't know that they actively tried to. Well, I guess when we came to. The film they. They you know, they actively tried to stop us.

Mark Fainaru: Yeah, they are.

Steve Fainaru: But like you know it, it just feels like. I don't want to like, say this cavalierly or sort of like in a in a kind of dismissive way. I think this is just kind of part of the deal, right? You know this it's like a, you know, you have a situation where there's a, you know, a major public health issue that that thousands, if not millions of people are trying to understand. So they can make decisions either about their own lives or about their kids or, you know, whatever; the NFL is the biggest actor. So figuring out kind of how they're handling it and what they're doing. That just feels like, you know, journalism 101 to me, really. And so, I mean, we were very transparent with the NFL. We told them what we were doing. We went to New York and we tried to persuade them to cooperate with our project and you know, ultimately they wouldn't do it. I never took it personally. It's a massive corporation. In my experience, like when it comes down to these kinds of issues, whether it's the NFL or the State Department, or you know any other sort of massive entity like they're, they're, it's the, the, the, the. Whatever, whatever that entity is, you know it's instinctive reaction is to hunker down, defend. And attack, you know, that's sort of what these things do almost universally, and it just feels like it's part of the part of the deal to me.

Mark Fainaru: But it is also like I mean it's sort of a thrill, right? Like I mean, we work at a network in which 99% of the material on the network is sort of celebratory of sports. Or at least just airing the sport. And I'm not critical of that. That's what pays

our salaries, but then to be able to sort of like, flip that a little bit and do something that takes a hard look at those leaves. You know, it's thrilling.

John Plotz: WSo what about, you guys are the experts, so you will correct the nature of the question....but what about when you're breaking those questions about institutions (Steve, I'm thinking about your series in Iraq, about the contractors) and you're talking about the institution, but you're doing it by way of individuals. Like you're kind of going through individual stories, right? Does that pose his own particular set of ethical questions? Because you're like you're aiming at that larger structure, but the cracks you're going through have to do with people's individual stories.

Steve Fainaru: What would be?

John Plotz: You have to name names of particular people who are involved. You know, I was really aware of this with that the Patrick Radden Keefe book *Empire of Pain*, where he's getting at the, you know, he's getting at the Sackler family. But he has to do it by blowing open particular moments. Where people did humiliating things like take money to write an article or something. Yeah, and you can tell that he's not angry at, you know, he's not like interested in that person. He's interested in the network of deceit that was going on behind it. Yeah, but you have to go through the person because you have to open the story. So, I guess I don't know. Maybe the answer is you only tell the positive stories that help you get at the negative but...?

Steve Fainaru: I don't know. I mean, I don't know. I mean, in the case of that story, yeah. You know, I've been in Iraq for, you know, 2-2 years at that point. Positive stories, then the war wasn't going well. So, a lot of negative stories and a lot of sort of neither, right, just stories. And you know, so this was just a phenomenon that I had, you know, noticed was out there, that there was this large group of sort of, you know, mercenaries basically who were had carte blanche to run around the battlefield and do whatever it was that they were doing, like I don't think I really understood what their role was. I mean, except in a very kind of general way. And so when I got into it, my first goal was to understand that, and the only way to do that was through individual stories to, like, go to companies and ask them, ask people like, why are you there? What do you do? How much are you paid? You know what is your contractual relationship with the US government or the State Department? Like, what are the rules of engagement? How much violence are you? Have you experienced? You know, just like all that stuff was a complete mystery to me. Then when I got into it, it became, you know, it did not take an investigative reporter to see that the whole thing was, like, completely out of control and you know, and once that happened, I had to go to the institutions because the institutions were. Technically, you know the ones who were overseeing this entire, you know, system that had emerged, you know, within the sort of inside the war. And so I didn't feel, you know. That just felt like a kind of a natural thing to make.

Mark Fainaru: I know, but I think that John's question if I'm getting it right. Like so you know you end up developing close relationships with some of those people, the individuals and some of that stuff is not some of the things they're doing. Or involved in or the dynamic that they're involved in is not necessarily reflecting that great on them. And so, if I, if I'm understanding correctly, I think you're getting at this question of like, you know, how do you balance that idea of, you know, you're developing these sources who want to cooperate, you and be helpful, but they're not always going to look that great themselves.

Steve Fainaru: Yeah, I mean, I guess you know, it's sort of, it becomes a little bit more complicated, sort of like the I think the sort of the less authority that people have like, you know for so like for the contractors themselves like I never felt any. I guess like judgment around them taking the job because to me they were no different than. Like lobbyists who had worked in government and then were capitalizing on their skills like these were almost universally people who have been in the military and were making like 10 times as much money as they did in the military, doing exactly the same job with less oversight and supervision. So it was it was just like I didn't have any real judgment and it was sanctioned by the US government. So I had I had zero, but I. But what happened within that framework was, you know, a lot of really reprehensible things. And so to the extent that people were getting involved, you know, and being, you know, paid essentially by taxpayers and they were getting involved in activities that were, you know that that were problematic, then I don't, I didn't really have any problem writing those things. I mean, there were, there were people that I wrote about who I really ended up being close with or being close with their families. And you know, and so I think some of the material that ended up in, you know, particularly in my book was difficult I think. But I think the relationships were such at that point that they knew what was going in the book. And I, you know, I talked about it with them and they and they had not themselves. Not anything like I wasn't accusing anything.

Mark Fainaru: Yeah, but I think that's the I, I do think the critical piece of that is the level of transparency because I think being transparent with those sources early on about where this is going to go and the potential for how it's going to look and all that, but also describing your own motivations is really sort of a key piece to convincing people to talk to you that there's a reason to talk to you even if it's going to prove to be uncomfortable.

John Plotz: Yeah, I feel like you guys are putting a finger on something really important here which is that your role as investigative reporters and ultimately like journalists writing it up is like partly you have your own set of judgments about how you feel about people. But like when you what you were describing Steve, about like the people who take this higher paid job working, you know, outside the military structure and you're saying you have no judgment against them. But your job as a reporter is partly to tell their story, and I just know that there are people who do read that and they don't pass judgment against. The institution they think they focus on the individual, but in a way that suggests you're doing your job right, which is like

you're making it available for people to feel one way or the other. About these people.

Steve Fainaru: Well, I think that like you know, I mean we learned this with the NFL. I mean there we there are certain truths that people just do not want to hear you. We I mean, when we were writing the NFL book and we started going on the radio, you know, people were asking us like, why do you why do? You guys want to kill football? You know, and we were. Like, you gotta be kidding me. Like, really and I think it's just because, you know, people get very protective around the war or around the sport or whatever.

John Plotz: But see, you and I have gone back and forth on this about football. I think it's a really interesting one. And Mark, I'd love to hear your thoughts too, because like I shared with Steve that my brother just doesn't want to hear about concussions at all. He loves watching football. He watches it with his son. It's great. He doesn't want to see it. Now, you guys I know are football fans, and yet you wrote this story about this incredible impact. And so my brother doesn't want to hear it. I do want to hear it, but the result of my wanting to hear it is that I don't want to watch football anymore. But you guys wanna hear the story? You broke the story. And yet you also still love football.

Mark Fainaru: Yeah, there's a level of our own denial, I think. I mean I, you know, I like. I just I. I mean it's funny because I think. You know people, people. I think one of the values of the reporting, not just ours but any is that you're exposing people to truths and people can then make their own decisions about it.

John Plotz: Yeah, sure.

Mark Fainaru: And I certainly don't have any judgment for anybody who decides after finding out the level of exposure that like I can't be a part of that. I can't contribute to that.

John Plotz: Like I'm dreading the day when the concussion data comes about soccer and it turns out because if that happened, I would just. I don't know what I would do. I would just weep, you know, watch cricket, I don't know.

Mark Fainaru: Well, they've already, they've already eliminated heading for young people too, so yeah.

John Plotz: I know, believe me, I know.

Mark Fainaru: But I don't know, I just I mean. Look, I think that they're amazing athletes, the sport's incredible and, and I find myself, I think I watched differently than I used to for sure. And I cringe in different ways than I used to. But I'm more I don't know. I find myself more bothered by the leagues. Sort of like belief that the world begins and ends with them. Then then sort of anything else than other issues.

They're dealing with things like Kaepernick and they're dealing with things. Like, you know, domestic violence. And you know, I'm. I'm more you know the concussion issue is it's not that it's over but you know it is now been exposed in a fairly wide way and if the player is playing they understand it I think it's a different question at the youth issue. At the you know the youth level but for the NFL it is sort of what it is. And I you know the sport isn't inherently violent sport. That's what it is. And so I think you just have to understand that and accept it.

John Plotz: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense. So, we're sort of pivoting towards the end here, but I really wanted to ask you guys just sort of continuing this topic of reporting up, you know against these big institutions you're working on the NBA in China now, right? So we did it, we. You feel like you're done, or is that? It or are you?

Mark Fainaru: I don't know if we're done on China, but we're still really interested in the NBA and, but we did a lot on China, we've done a few, several stories on China.

John Plotz: So, so sort of same. Do you have the same general conclusion there? Like you haven't felt personally threatened at all? It doesn't feel impacted now.

Mark Fainaru: The only time I've ever been scared of that? No, I think the only time I've ever and it was not, I didn't feel physically threatened. The only time I ever felt any level of like really deep, ugly hatred was around the steroid stuff because the level of emails we would get and phone calls and messages were. Is this vitriol? I mean, it was just like, you know, and most people, you know, they the, you know, e-mail enables and emboldens people, right. They just feel like you don't exist as a human, and so they'll just say absolutely anything. And so Giants fans who hated the reporting because we were reporting largely on Barry Bonds. You know, they just were, you know, and then when we were when we were looking at, you know, possible prison sentences for the reporting, you know that that emboldened people even more to say all sorts of, you know, crazy stuff.

John Plotz: Right. But you didn't get that with the concussion stuff.

Mark Fainaru: We've been, we got a lot of, like Steve said, why do you hate football or why you trying to kill football, that kind of stuff, but not the kind of vitriol we got on Bonds.

Steve Fainaru: It's funny to me like the question is honestly like kind of amusing to me. Like what? Somehow the NFL is going to like. Or are you? You know, like worried about, like, the NFL? Like what they're going to do to. You, you know, like.

John Plotz: Well, I would say as an academic with China, I'm really worried about academic freedom. So because I've seen that at my university like the Chinese Government is trying to use funding as a lever.

Steve Fainaru: No, I think that. Yeah, I think that's true, though I think that, yeah. But there was sort of like a, it's almost like in the Will Smith movie like where the NFL is like. Supposedly like following people around, you know, like that, that stuff you know, is not going to be like, they're not that sinister, you know, like they're not, they're corporation, you know. So they're protecting their they're protecting their business, but they're not. You know, I never felt like threatened by them. I mean, the most we got threatened really was when they. You know, when they tried to, when they pressured ESPN to withdraw from the, you know, from the documentary and that was super uncomfortable for sure. But, but it wasn't like a physical. It wasn't like, you know, like I felt in Iraq or anything like that. And I mean, there were, you know, I think there were issues. In Iraq, not so much around the institutions, actually, because the institutions respond. Institutionally, you know, so like when the NFL put pressure on ESPN to get out of the documentary, that to me was an institutional response designed to protect their. They're, you know, the relationships with the business partner protect their brand, you know, like all that stuff which you know and I feel like, but you know, in Iraq, there was just a lot of like, you know. It's just there were not a lot of rules, you know? And so I don't think I ever felt like. Physically threatened by a particular person but the environment, you know, in which you were doing the reporting was, you know, was obviously, you know.

Mark Fainaru: The environment being a war.

Steve Fainaru: You know you're trying to do investigative reporting, you know? So like.

Mark Fainaru: But I don't think, but I think you're right. Like I think China, I mean I think we were. You know I think as. We did the reporting. There were questions around like, not our safety, but just like do we have to worry about this? You know, we were looking a lot of like, you know, one story had a lot to do with AI in China and it's used and. And so I, you know, I think we were always talking about are there issues that we need to be protective of the work but never. Physically fine. Then I think that's the same. I mean I did a story that took me to Russia and you know there was. A lot of discussion about, you know. My phone and all sorts of laptop issues and those kinds of things, but I never, I don't think I can't think of a situation where I felt physically threatened by what we do.

John Plotz: Right.

Steve Fainaru: I mean, we were trying to be protective of sources, you know, and protective of information, you know for, like, hacking or surveillance.

John Plotz: Yeah, actually that was a final set of questions that I had for you guys, which is sort of like looking back over a couple of decades. What things have made doing the work you do easier and what things have made them harder, like for example, I don't know whether FOIA works better now than it did in the past, or other ways that you get information. And you know things that are advantageous

about the world of the net and not having to be in the same place with someone versus disadvantages now.

Mark Fainaru: It is a good question. I mean some of them are basic things like. I mean I think you know largely the net has made things dramatically easier in a lot of ways in terms of research and finding material and accessing material. And you know, I mean, there's that there's that famous scene in in spotlight where those guys are rifling through like old. Phone books or whatever, right? And you know when the archive of the Boston Globe and you know those? Days are over. So you know, that's nice, but. And so I, you know, I think I don't, I don't know. I'm not a fully expert, but it would be interesting. I mean it. Strikes me that. That institutions are dramatically more emboldened to hold back material and have become much more legally savvy or found ways to get around it. I don't know how true that is, it just, that's how it feels to me.

John Plotz: Well, the source maintaining that you were describing mark like that thing that you're you know you learned from, Lance, I guess about like keeping does that still hold true like?

Mark Fainaru: I think definitely I think that the elements of the job remain like that. That hasn't changed. Like it's fundamentally about developing relationships and convincing people to. Trust you, you know. I mean, there's a different animal around getting documents and finding that material, but I think in terms of. Getting people to talk to you and keeping sources in the way that Lance has described or you know, being transparent around why you want somebody to talk to you and giving them a motivation to talk to you. None of that changes. I don't think you know. I think it's all about. It's all about developing. Relationships and trust. You know, I mean, we were talking about trust. Earlier and obviously we were talking about the context of partnership, but it's fundamental in dealing with sources. Obviously you have to have people have to, you know, I think people generally a lot of people. Do want to talk? But they have to trust you. You know that, especially in sensitive situations like this.

Steve Fainaru: You know, I think the other thing that's really changed is that. You know, kind of like both the role of the media and society and the perception of the media, you know, like we were, we started off talking about trust. And I don't think there is a lot of trust. Well, there isn't. You know, there's not a lot of trust in the media. It's certainly not in the way when we first got involved and it's not as. I guess I would say it's like it's not as treated with the same degree of. I don't know. I guess you know, respect to the institution of the, you know, the media. You know, there's just a lot of. There's been an erosion of that over the last, you know, over the last 10 years. And I think that probably it's hard to know to quantify, but it feels like that probably has an effect on. Your ability to do your job and.

John Plotz: Yeah, it'd be really interesting to circle back to your teachers and see if their students now are still feeling the same thing that you guys felt like, you know, it's like if they can reach students the same way.

Steve Fainaru: Well, like I was. Talking about the. You know, The thing is, it's like. I mean I showed the 1st 9 minutes of all the president's men in my class. You know, it's the 50th anniversary of Watergate and you know, so that movie came out in 1976. I graduated from high school in 1980. You know the media. I mean, people were flooding into journalism. The schools people were creating investigative reporting units within their, you know, there were people like me and other people who were just, like, wanted to be, you know, Carl Bernstein or, you know, wanted to be really Dustin Hoffman or Robert Redford or.

John Plotz: I just want to close one final loop which is like Steve. You've been teaching this semester. I don't know, Mark, do you ever do any teaching? So, any thoughts about that?

Mark Fainaru: I taught high school for a little bit and I miss it and I have an interest in teaching at the college level, but I haven't.

John Plotz: Oh, cool.

Mark Fainaru: I haven't gotten a gig, so I would love to do it at some point. I think it's you. I mean, anybody who wants to get into this world, I think, you know, I just want to help because I do think it's, you know, as corny as it sounds, it's completely, you know, at its purest. It's an admirable thing to do, and it's critical so.

John Plotz: Yeah, it'd be fun to track your students, Steve. Like 10 years from now. See how many of them have ended up as reporters.

Mark Fainaru: It's true. How many of you aspired to greatness.

Steve Fainaru: Inspired to. To throw over their lives for unclear rewards.

John Plotz: Well, Mark, see, thank you guys both very much. This is a great conversation. I really appreciate it. Thanks so much.

Steve Fainaru: Thank you. Thanks, John.

John Plotz: *Recall this Book* was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It is sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanity Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen, website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms and thoughts. If you like what you hear, please subscribe, rate and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts from all of us here at *RtB*. Thanks for listening.

