

**[Transcript] Founders / #305 Robert Caro on the relationship with your father, power, poverty, ruthlessness, obsession and running.**

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Tiny wants to hear about those opportunities as well. You can get in touch with them by emailing them at [high@tiny.com](mailto:high@tiny.com) and they respond within 48 hours. If you have a business that you want to sell now or in the future, make sure you get in touch with Tiny by emailing them at [high@tiny.com](mailto:high@tiny.com). One more thing before we get into this episode, the opening, I think the opening is like seven minutes long. I think it's one of the best openings of any podcast I've ever made. The reason I got interested in Robert Carrow to begin with is because my friend Sam Hinky kept telling me over and over again how great the books are and how important it was that I read them. I want you to listen to this Invest Like the Best episode that Sam did with my friend Patrick. It is Invest Like the Best Episode 204. It's called Sam Hinky Find Your People. In that episode, Sam talks about the lessons that he took away from Robert Carrow's work. Search the podcast player, find Invest Like the Best, follow that show, and then listen to Episode 204 Find Your People. Biography should not just be a collection of facts. It's of real importance to enable the

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reader to see in his mind the places in which the book's facts are located. If a reader can visualize them for himself, then he may be able to understand things without the writer having to explain them. Seeing something for yourself always makes you understand it better. It took me a long time to understand this, that there are moments of what were for me revelations, of insights that suddenly helped me understand. One of these moments had to do with his father, and with the effect on Lyndon Johnson of a mistake his father made because he didn't understand the land. You can't get very deep into Johnson's life without realizing that the central fact of his life was his relationship with his father. His brother Sam once said to me, the most important thing for Lyndon was not to be like daddy. His father's optimism, his romantic idealistic streak kept him from looking at hard facts. In the hill country, that really cost him. Cost him, among other things, the love or at least the respect and admiration of his eldest son. It was Sam Johnson's determination to buy the original Johnson Ranch. The ranch's soil had worn out. There wasn't going to be any way of making much money out of that land. And his father didn't realize that. His father overpaid for the ranch. He paid so much that the ranch couldn't possibly earn back what he had paid for it. When Lyndon was 14, his father went broke and lost the ranch. And a crucial element of Lyndon Johnson's youth is a consequence of that loss, the insecurity that followed. Lyndon had to live with the fear that the bank was going to take their house away. He lived in a house in which his father, broken by his financial failure, was constantly ill. And there was often no food. His father became the laughing stock of the town, an object of ridicule. Sam Johnson is a mighty smart man, but he's got no sense in the speeches given a political barbecues as his son stood listening. When Lyndon Johnson was 18 and 19 years old, he worked for almost two years on a highway gang driving a Fresno. A Fresno is a device that was used to level unpaved highways. It is a big, heavy slab of iron with the front edge sharpened. The driver of a Fresno puts a hand on each handle, and as a team of mules pulls, he pushes the sharp edge of the iron slab through the ground. And because both of his hands are occupied, he loops the reins and ties them behind his back. Lyndon Johnson was in harness with mules for hours every day. He lived with his father's mistake. His father's one great mistake, all of his youth. Now, what's the relationship of this to Lyndon Johnson's political activities? Of all of his political activities, one of the most remarkable was his ability to count votes. This is incredible. Caro is about to describe why and how Lyndon's father's faults gave birth to Lyndon's greatest talent. Vote counting to be right in your count when you have to be right is a very rare ability. Most people tend to be much more optimistic in their counts than the situation deserves. True believers were always inclined to attribute more votes to their side than actually existed. But Lyndon Johnson never had that problem. His father had been the man of optimism, great optimism. Lyndon had seen firsthand when his father failed the cost of optimism, of wishful thinking, of hearing what one wants to hear, of failing to look squarely at unpleasant facts. Because his father purchased the Johnson Ranch for a price higher than was justified by the hard financial facts, Lyndon Johnson had felt firsthand the consequences of romance and sentiment, of optimism, false optimism. For many people, it's just an unfortunate personal characteristic. For Lyndon Johnson, it was the bite of the reins into his back as he shoved hour after hour under that merciless, hill country sun, pushing the friends no through the sun-baked soil. Of all the aspects of Lyndon Johnson that impressed people when he arrived in Washington, vote counting came first. Over and

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when I was interviewing in Washington, someone would say to me, he's the greatest vote counter who ever lived. He tried to teach his staffers how to do it. He would send them to talk to senators to find out which way they were going to vote and report back to him. And the report that got him flying into ferocious rages were reports that said something like, I think he's going to vote this way. Johnson would say, snarl at him really. What good is thinking to me? I need to know. It was the hill country and his father's failures that taught him how terrible could be the consequences

of a single mistake. Scoop Jackson served under the presidencies of both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. He was once asked, what was the difference between Kennedy and Johnson? And Jackson said, well, you know, Kennedy was so charming. If he needed a senator's vote, he would have him down to the White House. He could explain how badly he needed the vote. But if the senator said that if he gave him this vote, it would ruin him in his state, it would ruin him with his constituency. Kennedy would understand. Lyndon Johnson wouldn't understand. He would refuse to understand. He would threaten you, would cajole you, bribe you,

or charm you. He would do whatever he had to do, but he would get that vote. Being charming, being friends, wasn't what mattered to Johnson. What mattered to him was winning because he knew

what losing could be, what its consequences could be. Hundreds of writers, journalists, and authors of books all agree that Lyndon Johnson was ruthless. I try to explain why he was ruthless,

and a large part of that explanation is the place he came from.

That was an excerpt that gave me chills the first time I read it. And it's from the book I'm going to talk to you about today, which is working by Robert A. Caro. And right on the front cover it says, Caro is one of the great reporters of our time and probably the greatest biographer. I've had this book for a while. I was going to wait until I finished going through all of Caro's books. So far I've read The Power Broker, The Path to Power, Means of Ascent, and I just started Master of the Senate. And so originally I figured, okay, I finished the last two books, then read this one and make a podcast on this one. That change, though, there is a documentary that just came out. It's called Turn Every Page. And the documentary is about the 50 year relationship that Caro has had with his editor. And in that documentary you see Caro's approach to his work. And so when I went, I have this like bookshelf where I have, I don't know, probably 100, I've lost count, like maybe 100 unread books. And so I go every week, when I don't have a schedule for like what I'm going to do next, I just go and look at the books that I have and ask like, what am I most excited to learn about right now? And that's just basically that's how I pick the next book that I want to make a podcast on. And so when I go, when I went to the shelf after watching that documentary, this book jumped out. It's like, okay, no, I can't wait any longer, I have to do this. So I'm going to jump right into the introduction. He's just going to tell us what this book is about and why he is doing it. So he says, here's a book very, unlike the others that I've written, very much shorter for one thing, but its intention is to share some experiences that I've had while doing the others. That's not the only thing that's in the book, he continues. And here also a few things I discovered about myself along the way,

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about what I wanted to do with my life and my books, which are my life. He italicized, which are my life. That comes to the very first note in the book. When I got to, we're like a paragraph, a couple paragraphs into the book. The way he's talking here reminds me of a story I learned in a biography of Steve Jobs that I never forgotten. Steve Jobs, 30 years old, he just got kicked out of Apple. This is before he founds next, before he founds Pixar. And he's walking around, I think Paris with his girlfriend. And you know, he's got the equivalent of about like 200 million dollars at that point. Never has to work again in his life if he doesn't have to. And he's just had this burning desire to achieve something. And he said something that was fascinating that I never forgot. And he says, I am a reflection of what I do. And I think that's exactly what Caro is telling us right here. This book is about what he wanted to do with his life and his books, which are one in the same to him, which are my life. It's about what it was like to sit listening to Robert Moses, who was old, but still mighty, to be in a room with him, along with him, and hear him talk about his dreams, the dreams that had become reality, and the dreams that hadn't yet. It's about what it was like to realize as Robert Moses talk, that compared with him, I knew nothing, nothing at all, that there was a whole level of political power, not what I had learned from textbooks and lectures in college, and not even what I had learned as a political reporter, but a level of which I had hardly ever conceived. I had learned there was a whole level of ruthlessness too, of which I also hadn't conceived. And he's a very young man when these conversations are happening.

And I guess this is where I want to pause this. So he has technically dedicated his entire life to writing two biographies, one of them is multiple parts, a biography of Robert Moses, a biography of Lyndon Johnson. That is not how he views his work, just as writing biographies of people that accomplish a lot, biographies of great men. He wants to understand how power works. He wants to understand and to be able to explain to others how the world actually works. So this is the first time he mentions that he mentions it multiple times, that there is a whole, the world works, powers accrued, and also utilized very differently from what he was taught in college, what he learned in textbooks, and what he learned in lectures. Remember that part, because we're going to revisit multiple times. The book also offers a few glimpses into why I work the way that I do. Into why, for example, it takes me so long to produce my books, usually just about an eight to 10 year gap between each book. And I think now we're waiting on the last volume, and it's already been over 10 years. I think we're at year 11, since he last published his book, he's still working on it. I think he's 86, maybe 87 years old. So it says, for example, why it takes me so long to produce my books, I am constantly being asked why it takes me so long. And when I say that I'm actually a very fast writer, people can barely conceal their disbelief and amusement. And then he brings up a very important time in his life where he transitions from newspaper reporter to working on his very first book. And when I went back and reread all my notes in this section, the note that wrote down, after understanding, I'd already finished the book and went back. I realized it was at this point in the book that I realized what this is. This is a book for those that truly, that truly want to be great at what they do, and for no one else. This will make sense in a minute. When I left Newsday to write a book on Robert Moses, a change occurred. I found myself remembering what Professor Blackmore had said to me years before. I had taken his creative writing course at Princeton. We had to write a short story every two weeks, and I was always doing mine at the very last minute. At that final meeting with Professor Blackmore, and after first

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saying something generous about my writing, he added, but you're never going to achieve what you want to, Mr. Carrow, if you don't stop thinking with your fingers. Thinking with your fingers. Every so often, do you get the feeling that someone has seen right through you? I knew he had seen right through me. No real thought, just writing, because writing was so easy to me. That type of writing, later on writing becomes very difficult to him. I determined to do something to slow myself down, to not write until I had thought things through. And the only way I could think to describe this is there's a deliberate inefficiency to the way that he works.

I find echoes of this in my own work, where it's just like, I'm not trying to do this.

He's not trying to do things as fast as possible. In fact, when he describes his workflow to you, it clearly tells you and I that he sees great value in slowing down and actually spending more time with your work than trying to get it done as efficiently and as fast and outsource everything.

This is something that sings to me. I determined to do something to slow myself down, to not write until I had thought things through. That was why I resolved to write my first drafts in longhand, slowest of the various means of committing thoughts to paper, before I started doing later drafts on the typewriter. His professor says, you're never going to accomplish what you actually want to do because he understood that Robert wanted to be great if you never stop thinking with your fingers. So what does he do? He finds a way to slow his self down, to spend more time thinking through what he's actually working on, to spend more time with his actual work.

And then this is the first mention of something that appears throughout the entire book.

His favorite thing is not writing. His favorite thing is researching and going through notes and sitting by himself or with his wife in some cases and just spending all day reading with hopes of trying to figure out how the world actually works. Once he goes down this line, the reason they take so long is because he has to turn every page. We'll get to that very important.

That becomes his life motto. I'll tell you in a few minutes who taught him that. But I can't overstate how important this part is because he's going to repeat this throughout the entire book.

This is just who I am. I have to do it like this. I can't do anything less. It's the research that takes the time, the research and whatever it is in myself that makes the research take so long, so very much longer than I had planned. It just seems to be part of me. Looking back on my life, I can see that it's not really something that I've had much choice about. In fact, that it was not something about which, really, I had any choice at all. He speaks about this part of himself like it's an extremely powerful force. It's in conflict with other forces because right now he doesn't have to worry about this. But back when he was starting out, this was a giant concern and early in his career, this force was in conflict with deadlines and the fact that him and his wife were flat broke. There were deadlines and publisher delivery dates and money to live on while I was doing the research. But the hard truth was that for me, neither of these constraints could stand before the force of this other thing. He stays on the scene for a while, so a few pages later, he's talking about one of the most difficult chapters in *The Power Broker* to write. This is about this neighborhood East Tremont that was just absolutely destroyed because Robert Moses wanted to put an expressway through it. And really, this is the main theme of the book,

that I have no choice. This is my nature. I have to turn every page. And so he says,

I try to write *The Power Broker* without dramatizing this human cost. I would start outlining the next chapters to go forward without the East Tremont chapter. And it was as if something in me would

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rebel. And I would sit there for hours, fiddling with the outline, knowing it was no good, knowing that if I went forward, the book behind me wouldn't be the book it should be. And my heart just wouldn't be in the writing anymore. But looking back now, I have to accept the fact that in deciding to research and write that chapter, indeed, in doing the books as a whole, the way I have done them, taking so long to do them, there was really no choice involved that I really didn't have one. And so there's two things about this that struck me while I was reading this book, because he's describing what he was doing in his very first book, right? That's *The Power Broker*. In his second book, *The Path to Power*, which is the first of the London and Johnson series, he's doing the same thing. He just cannot move on until he feels he's done all the research and that he's turned every possible page that he could have. And one was the awareness that he has this, that he really doesn't have a choice. But two, that he also accepts it. He doesn't fight against it. He's just willing to spend, to do so much more work and spend so much more time than any other biographer, than most other biographers. And you see this acceptance because he's saying, you know, I'm not going to skip out on this very important part of the story. I have to tell their story. And he says, in order to accomplish that, then the book took a couple of years longer to write. So what? For him, it's not even a choice. Of course, I'm going to turn every page. Of course, I'm going to tell the complete story to the best of my ability. And then, and only then, will the book actually be ready. And then he wraps up the introduction with talking about, what is this book? It's like half memoir, like kind of short stories, what's going on here. And he says, so if this book is not a full-fledged memoir, what is it? It's a book about my work and how I do it. Why am I publishing this book now? Why don't I just include this material in the longer, full-length memoir that I'm hoping to write? Why am I publishing these random recollections towards a memoir while I'm still working on the last volume of the Johnson biography? When I haven't finished it, while I'm still at the age of 83, several years away from finishing it. The answer is, I'm afraid, quite obvious. I am quite aware that I may never get to write the memoir, although I have so many thoughts about writing, so many anecdotes about research, that I would like to preserve for anyone interested enough to read them. I decided that, just in case, obviously he's saying, just in case he's not going to live long enough, if his books take seven, eight, ten years, it's highly likely that that memoir never comes. So he says, I decided that just in case, I'd put some of these thoughts down on paper now. I'm going to go to the last job he has before writing *The Power Broker*. And he becomes a news reporter, an investigative reporter at *Newsday*. And it is at *Newsday* where he's going to get this life motto, this turn every page life motto. But I took notes on the turn every page documentary. And if you think about how I started the podcast, that's that excerpt that I read to start the podcast about the relationship, about how Lyndon Johnson's greatest talent sprang from the tumultuous relationship he had with his father. It hits you in the face that the same applies to Robert Caro. This is unbelievable. And so these are just some of the notes. I don't think these are direct quotes from the documentary, but I'm just typing these and jotting these down as I'm watching this. And I watched this twice. And what I realized about a young Robert was that he fell in love with books when he was young. He had a rotten childhood. His favorite place was the library. He would go to the library, check out a book, take it and read it in Central Park, so he didn't have to go home. Why didn't he want to go home? His mother dies of breast cancer.

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I keep pounding on the book. I don't know if you can hear that. His mother dies of breast cancer. He thinks she gets sick when he was five. She finally passes away when he was 11. And for the rest of his life, he never wanted to come home. When he came home, his father yelled and his father screamed. But the point is that the source, the source of both Johnson's and Caro's greatest talents came from the dysfunctional relationship that they both had with their fathers. Okay, so I'm going to stop pounding on the book and I'm going to read from the book. This is when he winds up getting an offer. This is 1959. Newsday had a managing editor named Alan Hathaway. This guy becomes very, very important to Robert's life. He had a deep prejudice against graduates of prestigious universities, so Robert had graduated from Princeton. The people at Newsday hired me as a joke on him while he was on vacation. He was so angry that I was there that during my first few weeks on the job, he would refuse to acknowledge my presence. And so after a few weeks on the job, Robert gets put on a job. Everybody else is busy. They're like this company picnic. And so no one, they get a call. They're saying, Hey, you should come down to the government offices, the FAA offices, there's some research you should do down here. There's a story down here. And only because no one else was available. The Newsday sent Robert and this is where he falls. He just, this is where he finds what he wants to do in life. And he says, I will never forget that night. It was the first time I had ever gone through files. And somehow in a strange way, sitting there going through them, I felt I was at home. There are certain moments in your life when you suddenly understand something about yourself. I loved going through those files, making them yield up their secrets to me. I worked all night, but I didn't notice the passing of time. When I finished and left the building on Sunday, the sun was coming up. And that was a surprise. I went back to the office and before driving home, I wrote a memo on what I had found early Monday morning, my day off, the phone rang. And it was Alan's secretary. Alan wanted to see me right away. I got in the car and I drove to Newsday that morning, sure, every mile of the way that I was about to be fired. I entered his office, he motioned for me to sit down and went on reading. Finally, he raised his head. I didn't know someone from Princeton could do digging like this, he said. From now on, you do investigative work. I responded, but I don't know anything about investigative reporting. And then Alan's going to say something that changes Robert Caro's life. Alan looked at me, just remember, he said, turn every page, never assume anything, turn every goddamn page. And turn every page is not only the name of the documentary becomes his life motto. And he talks about being very young and talented and smart and just thinking he knows everything. And then his first interaction with Robert Moses and seeing how he sees real power up front, up close. And he realizes, I know nothing. I know nothing about how the world actually works. A few years into my tenure at Newsday, I had won a couple of journalistic awards. But when you're young and you win something, you think you know everything. I thought I was really something. I thought I knew everything about politics and how politics and political power worked. And so he's doing a story, the fact that Robert Moses wants to build a bridge across Long Island. And so that's what Robert wants to happen. He has an unbelievable amount of power at this time. So Robert Caro's up there. Everybody in Albany says, no, we're not going to do this. He says, okay, well, there's no story here. I'll drive back home. And a few weeks went by and nothing changed until Robert Moses wanted them to change. A couple of weeks later, a friend called me and

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said, Bob, I think you better come back up here, meaning to Albany. And I said something like, oh, I don't think that's necessary. I think I took care of that bridge. He said, Bob, Robert Moses was up here yesterday. And I think you better come back. So I drove back up and I'll never forget this. When I went back to the same officials who had assured me that they were firmly against a bridge, they were now firmly for it. I remember I drove home that night all the way down from Albany to our house on Long Island. It was 163 miles. I kept thinking, everything you've been doing is bullshit. So that piece of negative self-talk, this is not the first time. This is something he also, another trait that Robert Caro shares with Lyndon Johnson that I'll talk about later, this fact that they have these, this almost like hypercritical self-talk of themselves in their head. Everything you've been doing is bullshit. Robert Moses had enough power to turn around a whole state government in one day. And he's had that power for more than 40 years. And you, Bob Caro, who are supposed to be writing about political power and explaining it, you have no idea where he got this power. And then he brings up a great point that you need time in your life to slow down and actually think because he's like, well, I'm a newspaper reporter at this time. I have, I'm hopping from one deadline to the next deadline to the next deadline. I have this idea and this thought in the back of my head, but I have no time to actually digest what that actually means. How can one person flip an entire state government? One unelected person accrues such power to do so, and me and no one else understands how he got this power or how powerful he was. And so he says, I didn't do much with this thought at the time. I love being a reporter, but you're always running from one story to another. And it wasn't until I became a Neiman journalism fellow at Harvard that I finally had time to think. I was already 29 years old. So what the Neiman Fellowship is, they invite some journalists, you're able to spend a year at Harvard and the point is you're supposed to learn more about the areas that you're covering. So you're taking college classes to talk about political power, politics, urban planning, all the things that he's writing about in New York City. So I was taking courses on urban planning. One of the courses was taught by two professors who had written a well-regarded textbook on highways, including an analysis in great detail of highway locations, why highways get built, where they get built. And they're naming stuff like, oh, it's about, it's as simple as like this mathematical equations about population density, traffic patterns, elevation of grades, a very like academic way of looking academic into my opinion, very naive way of looking at the world. And this is where Robert Caro snaps. He's sitting there listening to the professors who literally wrote the textbook from which he's learning. And he's like, this is bullshit. No, that's not why highways get built where they get built. They get built there because Robert Moses wants them there.

For the first time, I had a chance to think about what I had been doing and what I wanted to do with my life. And I guess I came to feel that if I could find out where Robert Moses got his power, this power that no one understood, this power that nobody else was even thinking about, if I could explain it, I would be adding something to the knowledge people ought to have. Not the kind of knowledge you learn in a textbook, but the raw naked realities of power, how it really works. And that's just incredible, incredible writing, like you feel like you're in the cloud, like when you're reading this, you feel you're really there with Robin. And so that's the point where he's like, okay, I'm going to write a book on this. He goes and he gets a small, very tiny contract, and he gets a \$2,500 advance. And he's like, okay, I'm going to start writing



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this book, which turns into the power broker. I think it's going to take him about seven years. But this is another, what he has in common with a lot of entrepreneurs that you and I study is the fact that he talked about, like if they knew how hard, at the very beginning, or even before they started their company, if they knew how hard it was going to be, they would have never done it. And so he had no idea it was going to take more than seven years to finish. When I first began writing the power broker, we didn't have any savings to speak of, and we had a small son. I heard about something called the Carnegie Fellowship, which took one working journalist at a time and paid him his weekly salary for a year while he wrote a book. And so he tells his wife, they're going to be paying me for a whole year. And I have this outline, I'll be done in nine months. At the end of the year, we were completely out of money. And for the next four years, money was a problem. And so he is broke and struggling for many years. He says there came a time when we really totally ran out of money. I just didn't have any place to turn. My editor took me out to dinner and I said, can I please have the other half of my advance? There are sentences that are said to you in your life that are chiseled into your memory. And his reply was one. Oh, no, Bob, I guess you didn't understand. We like the book, but not many people are going to read a book on Robert Moses. And you have to be prepared for a very small printing. So I want to pause there because after this dinner, he has one of the worst nights of his entire life. But here's another example of people telling you, trying to tell you how successful you will be in your life, which is complete and utter bullshit. The Power Broker was published in 1974. It is, it's almost like 47th printing. It is on the top list of the hundred best nonfiction books over and over and over again. Walk into any bookstore in your city and you will find a copy. This guy is supposed to be on Robert's side. And he's destroying his dreams right in front of him. Robert is broke. He's married. He's got a small child to take care of. And this guy's like, oh, don't worry about it. No one's going to read a book on Robert Moses. Millions of people have read a book on Robert Moses. My hands are sweaty. I get so mad at this. That was the worst night. We really, we were really at the end of our rope. I didn't know what to say to Ina that's his wife. I didn't know how to face her. I knew I was going to have to go back to work and it was going to be very hard for me to finish the book. By this time, I felt I had learned some things, some things about power. It was important for people to know, but they were never going to know them if I didn't finish the book. Soon after, luckily, things changed. And this is what changed. My editor left his publishing house. So that was the guy that took him out to dinner. And there was an out clause in my contract saying that I could leave if he left. So he does something that's very, very smart here. He gets a new agent. And then really, this really clicked for me. Let me read this whole thing to you. I mean, it's really, what changes in his life is that he finds the right partners and that changes everything. So this editor, oh, no one's going to read a book on Robert Moses. Yeah, I don't want to, I'm going to stop myself from saying what I was going to say in case there's kids listening. Okay, so let me go to this. He needed an agent. He winds up, this is Lynn Nesbitt becomes his agent. And then Richard Gottlieb, I think, or Bob Gottlieb, sorry, not Richard, Robert Gottlieb. Bob Gottlieb and Lynn Nesbitt come into his life, and they're actually in the documentary. And this is, I don't even know what, 40 years later, 1971. So 50 over 50 years later, they're still all, all these people are still working together. So he signs with Lynn Nesbitt. And she's, again, this is how the right partners, how he finds the right partners and that changes everything. He's talking to Lynn.

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And she goes, why do you look so worried? And he says, I didn't know I looked worried, but of course I was, I told her I'm worried that I won't have enough money to finish the book. Imagine, put yourself in his shoes where he's at in his life right now. He believes in what he's doing. He has to support his wife. He has to support his, his, his, his son. They've already sold their house. They've, their savings is gone. They're living in a shitty apartment in the Bronx. You can see, he's so worried that you could see it on his face when he's sitting there quietly. And the reason this is so important, because from our vantage point, we know that he didn't quit. He goes on to write *The Power Broker*, goes on to write some of the best biographies of Lynn Johnson, the best biography of Lynn Johnson ever written. There's something he's still working on 50 years later. Imagine if he would have quit if he couldn't take that pain.

Excellence is the capacity to take pain. There's another, yet another example of how true that maxim is. I didn't know I looked worried, but of course I was. I told her, I'm worried that I don't have enough money to finish the book. My editor had left me feeling that few people will read a book on Robert Moses and therefore no publisher would give me the money

I needed to finish it. She asked me how much money I was talking about. I told her I need enough money so I could spend two more years on the book. I don't remember the exact amount I specified, but I knew it was not large. And all of a sudden, there were other sentences that I'll never forget. She said, is that what you're worried about? Then you could stop worrying right now. I can get you that just by picking up the phone. Everybody in New York knows about this book. Then she said, you can stop worrying about money. My job is to find you an editor you can work with for the rest of your life. I'm going to set up some lunches for you. There were four all well all with well-known editors. Three of the editors took me to some fancy restaurant and told me they could make me a star. Bob Gottlieb says, well, I don't go out for lunch, but we can have a sandwich at my desk and talk about your book. So of course I picked him. So I want to go back to this idea that Robert Caro actually shares some traits with the people that he is researching, the people that he is writing about. And so one trait I actually think Robert Caro shares with Lyndon Johnson and Robert Moses is the ruthlessness that all three of them have and all three of them

use to get what they actually want. That trait was not at all obvious. It's obvious when you read about Lyndon Johnson or Robert Moses. It was not at all obvious to me until I read this book. So I want to go to the section on the power broker and Robert Moses. There's a few stories in here that I think are interesting. Robert Moses seemed to remember every vote, even votes from 40 years ago, and why it had been cast. Now he's actually sitting down for an interview at this point with Robert Caro. On the Jones Beach appropriation, it was eight to seven against us in the ways and means committee he would say. But the key, this is again the ruthlessness that those that accrue power actually use and implement that power. That is a key theme in the work of Robert Caro, what he's trying to explain to us. But the key was that this little upstate guy, and then he named some long forgotten state assemblyman, and he had a mortgage coming due on his farm. And the mortgage was held by a bank up there. And the key to the bank was Charles Hewitt, who was the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. And the governor knew how to get to Hewitt,

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so it was eight to seven for us. So what just happened there? Robert Moses said, this guy was going to vote against us. Then I looked for where he was weak. I found where he was weak. Then I found somebody that could push on that weakness until he changed his vote. And if

he went against me, I would have foreclosed on his farm. And this was not a one off instance with Robert Moses. This was how he did business a few pages later. I asked Moses why Epstein had changed

his mind. He changed it, Moses said, after he was hit over the head with an axe. When I asked him what that meant, he said, I won't tell you what we did to him. He did tell me though. He said, we put our blood hounds. This was a team of investigators who had compiled dossiers on other city officials, which Moses leaked to newspaper, newspapers, if an official opposed him. So we put our blood hounds on Epstein. And then he said he had a talk, he had, he had to have a talk with Epstein, who was married. And the conversation had included some references to a woman. And this is what Moses said to him. I said, this woman, this woman is a chum of yours, he said. She's not my chum. I said, oh, yes, she is. She's your chum. All right. So Robert Moses said, with a broad, charming smile, he wrote his letter, meaning he flipped them. And one thing that made Moses so effective is he had this ruthlessness that was also matched with a particular type, this is from the book, a particular type of vision of imagination that was unique and so intense, that amounted to a very rare form of genius. What Robert Caro is telling us does that Robert Moses was a ruthless genius. And then he builds on this, he adds another layer. First, he told us about his ruthlessness. Then he told us about his genius. Now he's talking about his savage energy, ruthless genius with savage energy. Listen to this writing. They had not been exaggerating

when they described the savage energy Robert Moses had put behind his dreams and his fury when they were checked, how mapping out strategies for overcoming obstacles, he would pace back and forth across his office hour after hour, how the palm of his big right hand would smash down over and over again on the table as he talked, how he would lunge out of his chair

and begin as one aid put it, waving his arms just wild, pick up the old fashioned glass inkwell on his desk and hurl it at aids so that it shattered against a wall, how he would pound his clenched fists into the walls hard enough to scrape the skin off them in a rage beyond the perception of pain. I remember coming across something a few months ago, I spent I think three weeks reading and rereading all of Paul Graham's essays. I think it's episode 275, 276 and 277. And there's something he talks about. There's a bunch of themes that Paul repeats throughout his writing, but one of them is that founders need to be around other founders. And he has a few different ways of saying this. I think the best way to describe this is that I'm going to read an excerpt from his essays on really why ambitious people need to be around other ambitious people. And I want you to remember what Paul writes for the section we're about to go to, because it comes at a time when Robert, I keep saying caro. I know it's caro. That's why I'm just going to call him Bob. In Bob's life, where he's struggling with his doubt and uncertainty, he's completely isolated, he feels like the project's never going to be finished. He feels like a failure because it's taking so long. And I think he's on year, I don't know, four or five, when a project he thought would take him nine months. And so Paul Graham says, ambitious people are rare. So if everyone

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is mixed together randomly, as they tend to be early in people's lives, then the ambitious ones won't have many ambitious peers. When you take people like this and put them together with other ambitious people, they bloom, remember this sentence, remember this sentence for where we are

in Bob's life. They bloom like dying plants given water. Probably most ambitious people are star for the sort of encouragement they'd get from ambitious peers. And so I'm going to read the note that's on this page before I read what Bob wrote, wrestling with doubt and uncertainty. What if this book never happens? Imagine if he quit here. As the year followed year, the project had, in my mind, taken on an air of unreality. This was due to the lack of any relationship between writing the book and the inescapable realities of the rest of life, such as earning a living.

Remember, he's still broke at this point. My wife and I watched our savings run out, and we sold our house to keep going, and the money from the sale ran out. The books sometimes seem more and more like a rather unreal interlude in my life. The most fundamental reason for the feeling of unreality was I had for five years been living in a world utterly unpopulated by anyone else who was doing what I was doing. I need to repeat that the most fundamental reason for this feeling of unreality I had for five years been living in a world utterly unpopulated by anyone else who was doing what I was doing. That's the exact same idea that Paul Graham realized from observing thousands of founders. Founders need to be around other founders. I don't think that during the first five years I was working on the power broker, I had any contact with a single other writer of serious books. There was no writer with whom I could discuss a writing problem. I was bothered by the length of time I had been working on the book.

That was the thing that made me doubt the most. When I had started, I had firmly believed that I'd be done in a year. As year followed year, I became convinced that I had gone terribly astray. One day in 1971, I came across a magazine article describing the Frederick Louis Allen Room. It said that the only requirement for admission was a contract from a publisher, and that its 11 resident writers were allowed to keep books and other research materials at their desk. I'm pretty sure this is at the New York City Public Library. After a wait of some months, I was assigned one of the 11 desks. It was not books that were the most wonderful things that I found in the Allen Room. What is about to happen? He's about to find other people like him. He winds up meeting a writer

and it says the next question was the question I had come to dread. How long have you been working

on the book? This time, however, when I replied five years, the response was not an incredulous stare. Oh, he said, that's not so long. I've been working on my George Washington biography for nine years. I could have jumped up and kissed him. The next day, I could have jumped up and kissed Joe Lash when he asked me the same question. And after hearing my answer said in his quiet way,

Eleanor and Franklin, one of his biographies, took me seven years. In a couple of sentences, these two men, idols of mine, had wiped away five years of doubt. And so now he's having lunch every

day with fellow craftsmen, with the people doing the same thing he is doing. The talk was often about problems of research and writing about the mysteries of our craft. There is not a more mysterious

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craft than entrepreneurship. The talk was often about problems of research and writing about the mysteries of our craft, our shared craft. To me, this book is full of just reoccurring themes that appear in his life and work over and over again. One of them, I don't think I've mentioned yet. And it's this idea of just how bad do you want it? And it's this theme that just reoccurs over and over again in the history of entrepreneurship that those that get to the top of their profession, those are the very best of what they do, just spend more time thinking about their work, practicing their work. So it says, during all the years since Alan Hathaway had given me that first piece of advice, turn every page, never assume anything, turn every goddamn page, I had never forgotten it. It was engraved in my mind. At this point, he is now doing the research. The Power Roper has already published. I think he won the Pulitzer Honor from Not Mistaken, it's a massive success. That allows him, the reward for great work is more work. That's a quote from the new Kevin Kelly book that my friend Patrick O'Shaughnessy sent me. And I really feel it applies to the life and career of Bob. And so really what I'm talking about is like he's just going through all of, he's using Alan's Maxim, right? Turn every page Maxim. And he's applying it to the research that he's doing in the Presidential Library of LBJ. It would take multiple lifetimes to read everything. But what pops out at you is that the fact that Bob was willing to spend more time mining and that yielded unexpected diamonds. Looking through a lot of file folders that from their description, one would assume contained nothing of use to me. And the wisdom of Alan's advice was proven to me again and again, scores and scores of times this happened. And so what he's talking about is this almost deliberate, inefficient way where he's like, okay, you think from the everything in the LBJ libraries, organized into files, and they have these things called finding aids that kind of tell you, okay, this is about his time in Congress or his time in Texas or whatever the case is. And you know, some things are obvious, like, oh, let me read the Vietnam stuff, let me read the Civil Rights Act stuff. But Caro is just like, I'm just going to spend as much time as possible. And that's why these books take 10 years to do. And because he spent more time in things that other people overlooked, he read files, it's almost sure that no one else has ever read, that spending more time mining yields unexpected diamonds. And these twin traits of persistence determination that are present in all of Bob's career, it feeds into this idea is like, you can tell he's demonstrating how bad he wants it by the length in which he's willing to dedicate to his work to make sure his books are the best in class. And at one point, this is like, this is another example of this is like, well, I can write a book on Robert Moses, because I'm a New Yorker, I was born in New York, I grew up in New York, Robert Moses worked in New York, I'm doing all this research, I'm talking to those people, and it's like, I can't understand the people because I'm not from the Hill Country, I'm not from these tiny remote, impoverished towns that Lyndon Johnson was and look and listen to what he does. I said to Ina, that's his wife, I'm not understanding these people. And therefore I'm not understanding Lyndon Johnson, we're going to have to move to the Hill Country and live there. Ina said, why can't you do, why can't you do a biography of Napoleon? But Ina is always Ina, loyal and true. She said, as she always says, sure, we rented a house on the edge of the Hill Country, where we were to live for most of the next three years. I want to go back to this idea that it was the very opening of the podcast, and I think one

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of the most important parts of the book, and it's something that reappears over and over again, that you can always understand the son by the story of his father, the story of the father is embedded in the son. And it's because it ties into what we were just talking about, like how bad do you want it? A lot of people were biographies of Lyndon Johnson before, none of them moved to the Hill Country like he did. And as a result, this is what living there, spending more time there, taking time to get to know the people, allowed Caro to understand Johnson and their relationship with his father at a more fundamental level. And one of this was the fact that he kept trying to interview and successfully, first unsuccessfully, and then eventually successfully got information out of Lyndon's brother. This is Lyndon's younger brother by the time Caro starts writing the books, Lyndon Johnson had already died. Lyndon died early at 64. And so he says, I felt that a key to Lyndon Johnson's youth was his complicated relationship with his father. And so he's interviewing Lyndon's brother, Sam Houston. Now Sam Houston, I said, I'd like for you to tell me again about this terrible arguments that your father and Lyndon used to have at dinner time. Sam Houston was recreating family dinners at the Johnson saying almost shouting back and forth what his father had shouted at his brother, and what his brother had shouted back. You're just not college material, are you? God damn it. You're just a failure, Lyndon. You're just a failure, Lyndon, and you're always going to be a failure. And Lyndon would shout back, what are you? You're a bus inspector. That's what you are. Sitting there against the wall, I felt I was getting closer to the heart of Lyndon Johnson's boyhood. Now Sam Houston, I want you to tell me about all those wonderful stories about Lyndon when you both were boys. There was a long pause. Tell me those wonderful stories again about you growing up. I can't, Sam Houston said. Why not? I asked, because they never happened. I now had a picture of Lyndon Johnson's youth, that terrible youth, that character hardening youth. And when I got to that sentence, the point of reading is to understand, right? It's not just to like put my eyes on the page and run across the words and like, I'm done. It's to stop. It's to think about what the hell is going on. I had a different picture of Lyndon Johnson's youth, that terrible youth, that character hardening youth. This is the environment that hardens a person, that kind of childhood, that kind of relationship with his father. And yet again, maybe Robert Caro understood this when he's writing this, and maybe that's why he's writing it, but maybe he didn't. But it's obvious if you sit with the words and you reread certain parts of this book and you think about all the parts that jump out at you, he's describing Lyndon Johnson. It's the same description of his childhood. Sam Houston was talking about the screaming matches at the dinner table. The same thing happened in Robert Caro's life. He never wanted to come home because his father yelled and screamed. And then once you see the similarities between their two childhoods and the ruthlessness, the determination, the superhuman levels of determination, superhuman levels of genius that both of them possess. And as the book goes on, it clicks. What did Steve Jobs say? I'm a reflection of what I do. The way I work is an innate part of my being. That applied to Steve Jobs, that applied to Robert Caro, and that applied to Lyndon Johnson. I wanted to examine a stolen election in detail. This is the main story in the second Lyndon biography, the means of ascent. So this is what he's talking about. I wanted to examine a stolen election in detail, but part of the reason was neither straightforward nor professional, nor to be honest, was just something I had much to do with reason. It had to do with something in me. That's something in my nature, which wasn't a quality that I could be

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proud of or take credit for. It was just part of me, like it or not. The part of me now that as I was writing books kept leading me after I'd gotten every question answered to suddenly think, despite myself, of new questions that in an instant of thinking of them, I felt must be answered for my book to be complete. The part of me that kept leading me to think of new avenues of research that even as I thought of them, I felt it was crucial to head down. It wasn't something about which I had a choice. In reality, I had no choice at all. Think about that section of the book. He is describing himself and simultaneously. He is describing Lyndon Johnson. Think back to the beginning of the podcast where Lyndon is pushing that plow at 18 and 19 in the hot sun that he knows he is paying for the mistakes of his father. When Lyndon gets the opportunity to escape the mistakes of his father, he was willing to do everything, to do everything, not to make a mistake because he understood the consequences, the repercussions of one single mistake. And so just like Caro had to turn every page, Lyndon had to count every vote. It is just the way they work. It is an innate part of their being and it stems from the relationship with their father. The perpetual need to escape, to run from a great source of pain in their formative years. That is incredible when you realize that.

And the similarities don't stop there. This is about the negative self-talk that they both share. I had all I needed. A good story and enough details to make the reader see the setting in which it took place. Why did I say to myself, is there any more to the story? I had the story. Plenty of details. I kept saying to myself, you schmuck. This is what you always do. You don't need any more details. You've got it. Now just write it. There is still so much about myself that I don't understand. But by putting down on paper these short recollections, I have come to understand that this was simply another instance among so many in which they were available to me no alternatives. That was about Caro's negative self-talk and his work ethic. The fact that no one else worked as hard on biographies as Caro did. This is about Johnson's work ethic. The fact that nobody worked harder than him and his negative self-talk. Everyone I talked to about Johnson's first run for Congress would say, I never saw anyone who worked as hard as Lyndon Johnson. Who would really know what this means? I thought there's one guy who's with Lyndon Johnson most of the day. And it's not his campaign manager. It's his chauffeur. I kept coming back to him. I would ask, what was Johnson doing between campaign stops? What was he doing in the back

seat? Finally, he told me that Johnson often would be talking to himself. It was like he was having discussions with himself about whether he had a successful day, whether he had made a good impression on voters or not. And so I'd say, what do you mean by that? And he'd say, well, lots of time he felt he wasn't doing too good. And he would tell himself that it was his own fault. Johnson would say to himself, boy, wasn't that dumb. You know, you just lost that ballot box. You lost it and you need it. And he would talk out, rehearse over and over again, out loud, what he would say to the voters in that precinct the next time.

This book is incredible. I really hope I can convince you to get a copy for yourself. I want to close with what is my favorite story in the entire book. I think it's a story that a lot of entrepreneurs can relate to, the determination to outrun desperation. Lyndon is 23 in this story. I wasn't fully understanding what these people were telling me about the depth of Lyndon Johnson's determination about the frantic urgency, the desperation to get ahead and to get ahead fast, as if the passions, the ambitions that he brought to Washington,

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strong though that they were, were somehow intensified by the fact that he was finally there in the place where he had always wanted to be. I wanted to show the contrast between what he was coming from, the poverty, the insecurity, and what he was trying for. I first got a clue about how I might be able to do this by talking to the young woman who worked with him as the other assistant in that congressman's office, Estelle Harbin. He was very poor, Ms. Harbin told me. He arrived in Washington in December, 1931 with a cardboard suitcase and only one coat, a thin top coat, not adequate for Washington winters. She told me how quickly Lyndon Johnson learned, how desperate he was to learn, how he became, so quickly in her words, the best congressional

assistant there ever was. One thing that got me was her saying that when he came to work in the morning, he was always out of breath because he had been running. I wanted to make the reader see

the contrast between what he was coming from and what he was trying for. Something on the way to work had excited him and thrilled him so much that he'd break into a run every morning. Here's what

I wrote about when Lyndon Johnson first came to Washington. He lived in a basement of a shabby little hotel. Leaving his room early in the morning, he would turn left down the alley onto a street that ran between the walls of other shabby hotels. But when he turned the corner at the end of the street, suddenly before him, at the top of a long, gentle hill, would not be brick, but marble, a great, shadowy mass of marble, the capital. And the marble of the eastern facade, already caught by the early morning sun, would be gleaming, brilliant, almost dazzling white, a structure as majestic and imposing as the power of the sovereign state that it had been designed to symbolize. And as Lyndon Johnson came up Capitol Hill in the morning, he would be running. The woman who worked with him, coming to work in the morning, would see the gangling figure running awkwardly, arms flapping past the long row of columns on his way to the house office building. At first, because it was winter and she knew that he owned only a thin top coat, she thought he was running because he was cold. But in spring, the weather turned warm. And still, whenever she saw Lyndon Johnson coming up Capitol Hill, he would be running. Well, of course, he was running from the land of poverty to this, everything he had ever wanted, everything he had ever hoped for, was there.

And that is where I'll leave it. This book was incredible. And I do think it's going to have an impact on me in ways I can't even fully comprehend right now. If you buy the book using the link that's in the show notes in your podcast player, you'll be supporting the podcast at the same time. Another way to support the podcast is by signing up for the Founders Premium AMA feed.

I'm going to be doing a lot more Ask Me Anything episodes this week. There's already 20 something that you can listen to immediately. That link is down below in the show notes and available at [founderspodcast.com](http://founderspodcast.com). That is 305 books down 1000 to go. And I'll talk to you again soon.