

**Keith Maillard:**  
*In Their Own Country*

**1 Kate Long:** You're in Vancouver, writing books that are set in West Virginia. Have you had any sense that people in West Virginia were hearing your stories?

**Keith Maillard:** No, I had no sense whatsoever that anybody in West Virginia was reading a single word I ever wrote. Um, I've wondered over the years if they have been. And I find it really, really moving to find people that have read me, are reading me, care what I'm doing. It really touches me.

**Kate:** That's the voice of Keith Maillard, who grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia and teaches now at the University of British Columbia in Canada. I'm Kate Long, and this is *In Their Own Country*, a radio series that brings you, in their own voices, some of West Virginia's finest contemporary writers. Keith Maillard has written eight novels, one book of poetry and is showing no signs of slowing down. And here's how he described himself to me before he even got close to the microphone.

**Keith:** I am an interviewer's nightmare.

**Kate:** He wasn't. He was just plain entertaining.

**Kate:** Language is dirty. It's been in other people's mouths. Every word does not just sit there in isolation. It is interacting with the words around it. It takes on different connotations and different shades of meaning, and language is constantly evolving in the way we speak it. It doesn't get nailed down by dictionaries. They sort of freeze it after the fact, but it's continually evolving all the time.

**2 Kate:** Here's what reviewers like about his writing. From the *Toronto Star*: "... faithful recreation of history, delicate portrayal of character, and rousing narrative that never flags." From *The Vancouver Sun*: "In an earlier generation, perhaps only Thomas Wolfe mined the veins of American memory as deeply as Maillard has done in the Raysburg novels."

What's Raysburg? Well, Keith Maillard created a fictional West Virginia city - Raysburg - and has set at least part of all his novels there.

To what extent is Raysburg modeled on Wheeling?

**Keith:** It's very like Wheeling, my half-mythical, half-real town. But I didn't want to call it Wheeling because I wanted some fictional space to move around and to invent things, which I think is owed me as a fiction writer, good heavens. And also, I didn't want people calling me up or writing me or sending me e-mails saying, "You said they got electricity in Wheeling in 1898. And it was really 1893."

I try to get things historically accurate as I can. But I still want a fictional place.





**Kate:** OK, I can imagine how you would know that women drew lines around their eyes. But how did you know that “You’re hoping you’d get lucky and wouldn’t mess up one of the lines?” How’d you know that?

**Keith:** Oh. I read lots of makeup books. My wife wears makeup. My older daughter wears so much makeup, you wouldn’t believe it. You know, I’m not unfamiliar with women. Good heavens. I didn’t write this living in a monastery.

**Kate:** Yeah, I can see you sitting there watching them put on the makeup, but it’s the feeling about it. You just flashed me back about twenty years, when you’re sitting there with that little brush, thinking, “Oh man, I gotta go to work. Hope I don’t mess this up.” You’ve thought about this a lot.

**Keith:** I have put makeup on my wife and daughter. And I have stood there and thought, “Gee, I hope I don’t mess this up. I’ll have to start all over again.” (laughs)

**Kate:** Now, did you put makeup on your wife and daughter as research for this book? Or you just did it?

**Keith:** I did it because I’m better at it than they are. (both laugh)

**6 Kate:** Keith did have a tough time creating Gloria’s roommate, Susie, a majorette.

**Keith:** Susie was hard. It took me a long time to get Susie. I have never known - I was about to say intimately, why not? - I have never intimately known a majorette (laugh), and I had to compile a really vast amount of stuff before I could begin to get her to come to life. And what you’re looking for as a novelist is not just an accumulation of facts, you know, like building more and more facts. You’re looking for things that will spark you, that will go FLASH!

When Elaine Pollack, the Canadian twirling champ, came to my office and we went out in the quadrangle outside my office, and she showed me the fifties twirls as they would have been done - and I really appreciated that - and then she handed me her baton. And I took it in my hand. And she said, “This is the ball and the tip, and this is the shaft, and you hold it right in the middle. And I held it right in the middle. And I said, “How do you twirl it?” And she showed me sort of the basic twirl, and I did it. And I thought, “Gee, that isn’t so hard. I can do that.” And that experience, you will find, literally, practically the way I’ve told it to you, right in the book. Because that’s what happens to Susie when she’s at the state fair and she sees the majorette and talks to her after the show’s over.

Little things like that start to come together and add up to make a person.

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*“No, I’m not. I’ve done it hundreds of times. We’ll ride it Blanton’s Ferry and take the bus back.”*

*“How the hell do you get on it?”*

*“You jump on one of those ladders and hang on.”*

*“You’re crazy. The damn thing goes a million miles an hour when it gets going!”*

*“Yeah, but it slows down again on the other side of the river. They have to go slow through towns. That’s the law. It’ll be going just like this. Look at it now, how slow it’s going.” Without any warning, she took off and began to run along next to the train. She was moving just as fast as it was. She caught the ladder on a boxcar and swung easily up and onto it. The train carried her ten yards down the track, and she swung off just as easily, landed, knees flexed, and ran a few steps with the momentum of it.*

*He was out of breath when he caught up to her. “That’s how easy it is,” she said.*

**17** *The high arches of her scuffed cowgirl boots had fit onto the rungs of the ladder so perfectly that they could have been designed for the job. His penny loafers would be slick as hell, clumsy and dangerous on the frosty metal. “You’re crazy!” he said.*

*“You’re chicken!” she said. “Coward!” His mouth had gone totally dry. He knew he had to do it. If he ever wanted to stand in the alley behind the restaurant with his tongue in her mouth again, he had to do it. If he had time, he knew he could talk his way out of it, but there didn’t seem to be any time left.*

*It wasn’t fair. “I’ll get on first,” she said, and began to trot along next to the moving train. She knew as well as he did that he didn’t have any choice. “Hurry up,” she called back, “or it’ll be going too fast.”*

*He ran along behind her, stumbling, nearly blind with fear. He couldn’t think. He could only follow behind her girl’s ass moving so beautifully in her tight jeans. If she stopped suddenly, he’d run right into her. But she jumped, and in a single, fluid motion, swung herself up. Before he could hesitate, she caught his hand and pulled. He grabbed the ladder with his free hand, and hung for a terrible moment with his feet pawing the air. Then he scrambled onto the ladder.*

*The steel rung under his right hand was cold as ice. They had joined the motion now that roll and rattle. The ground was slipping away behind them. The streetlights were moving.*

*Her boot heels made for stirrups and nailed her safely into place. She hung there, her knees flexing with the motion, as easily as she would have stood on the sidewalk. His shoes had no grasp to them at all. “Have to get some engineer boots like Alex wears,” he managed to think. His right arm was already beginning to cramp. Fear blurred his mind and sickened him.*

*She let go of his hand, grabbed him around the waist and gathered him in. "Hold onto me," she said. "You've gotta hold on tight, because we're going to be doing damn near sixty when we hit the tunnel!"*

*"Oh jeezus christ," he said. Her face was only inches away. Her eyes seemed black and endless and caves. He could fall right into them. He and Elaine Isaac, this strange girl he scarcely knew, were hanging onto the side of a boxcar together. They were wrapped around each other. They were french kissing. They were rolling along the B and O line through center Raysburg, toward Ohio.*

*He couldn't take it in. "This goes all the way to Cincinnati," she said. He couldn't say anything. "I want to ride it forever!" she said. She had to yell above the gathering speed of the wheels. "I hear it in the night, and I want to be on it. To Cincinnati, to St. Louis! I want to keep on moving and never stop..."*

*They must have been going over forty by now. The street lights snapped by. Whisk! Whisk! Whisk! He could see the speckle of snow falling in the yellow circles under the street lights. The wind cutting back the side of the train was bitterly cold. It burnt his face, brought tears to his eyes.*

**18** *Then they were leaving the streetlights behind, moving through scrub and grass now, past vacant lots, past woods, towards the tunnel.*

*They were going so fast, he couldn't look out anymore, so he looked at her instead. The wind was beating her hair into a black, moving swirl around her face. And suddenly he forgot to be afraid. He felt elation soaring up in him as though he were roaring drunk. He'd never seen anything as beautiful as she looked to him then with her hair flying, her face shining with excitement, wind tears streaming back from her black eyes. And he said it. "You're beautiful! You're really beautiful!"*

*The tunnel struck like fists in their ears, smashing assault of sound, thrust fast as a jet plane into total darkness. Their mouths struck together so hard, he'd find later that he'd cut his lip on her teeth. The only warmth left in moving blackness, freezing cold, impossible roaring was her mouth, her lips, her tongue. It wasn't enough that his legs were wrapped around hers. He wanted to be inside of her. What he wanted was impossible, to rush into her as fast as the train and vanish.*

*They were kissing so hard, it was like death chasing them down the tracks. And then instantly, the sound was gone, and they were sailing high, unbelievably high above the city with the lights streaked out below and the dirty river that was only beautiful at night. His breath was torn away. The awful sound was gone, but his ears still rang with it. They were shot through the dark sky like bullets, must have been going damn near seventy miles an hour, with Raysburg below them, the river below them, then sweeping down and across the bridge. "Oh Jesus Christ!" he yelled. "Jesus Crist!" He couldn't stop himself. "I love you!" he yelled against the wind. "I love you!"*











**Keith:** I don't know how the secret watcher came to me. But the secret watcher is a voice in Gloria's head that says things like "Watch out. This is a dangerous situation." "Don't get into that car." Right? "Keep your mouth shut, you idiot." (laughs)

**Kate:** And then these other voices that are saying, "Is you slip hanging? Is your makeup on right? Are you a good girl?"

**Keith:** Yeah, that's right. Are you a good girl? The little voice in her head is going, "Have you been a good girl? Have you been a good girl? Have you been a good girl?" which is from AA Milne, these little things that rattle around in there.

**Kate:** She seems to find her own voice toward the end of the book. And you take us through a lot of hoops before she gets there.

**Keith:** Well, that's what the book is. All the hoops you have to go through to get there (laughing). Someone from the *New York Times* said "a crinoline-draped labyrinth." And I thought, "That's pretty good. You know, I'll take that." Well, like any hero or heroine, she has to go through her trials and tribulations to get to the end.

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**28 Kate:** A lot of people who are listening to these broadcasts either are writing or would like to write. And people wonder, "How do you do that?"

**Keith:** It depends on who is asking me. If I was talking to high school kids, I would say, "Write whatever you want. Don't worry about your mother seeing it." (laughs) In fact, you don't have to show it to her. In fact, you don't have to show it to your teachers either. Um, keep it. Take it seriously. And at that particular stage of things, don't worry too much about all these formal things that they're trying to teach you in your English classes. You'll get that later.

And don't worry about being derivative either. This is a silly notion to worry about when you're fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. I can remember sitting in study hall writing endless imitations of Elliott's quartets. And it was a great thing to do. I loved every minute of it. And if somebody at the time had told me, "Well, this is just something you do as a kid," I would've been very hurt. Because I took it very seriously. And you should take your writing very seriously too. But the biggest thing about it is to keep on doing it, no matter who tells you not to.

**29 Kate:** Where do you write?

**Keith:** I have an office in my home. I have a little laptop computer that I've hooked up with an old black and white monitor and a keyboard, a really nice keyboard, actually. And uh, that's where I write, is in this little room.

**Kate:** I've talked to one person who says she writes best in a hammock. I found a particular booth at a Doughnut Shop that seems to work. You're in a little room with a laptop.

**Keith:** That's right. And of course, when you're really heavy into something, you're writing all the time, even when you're not writing. You're walking around writing. You're having dinner writing. You drive your kid to ballet class, and you're writing. Bring her back from ballet class, and you're writing. At its most intense, it's a process that practically takes over your whole life.

**Kate:** What do you do when you get ready to write?

**Keith:** OK, I don't have to worry about setting times to write. Because with teaching, a wife and two kids, I grab every second I can. Right? And I like writing. Now, revising or editing, I can do till the cows come home. I love it. I can sit there and move sentences around and put commas in and take them out and change words. That, to me, is fun. I'm weird that way.

**30** What I hate is that blank computer screen. First drafting. Where you haven't got anything yet. You turn it on, and it's blank. To get ready to put something down on that computer screen, I either do something like walk around in circles in the yard, around and around and around and around. Or sometimes I lie down flat on my bed on my back and close my eyes and work through the scene. OK, that's the point at which my wife comes in and says, "What are you doing?"

And I say, "I'm writing." And she says, "Aw, come on." But I am. That's what I'm doing. Because I have to have something before I can put anything down. The more I can have before I actually hit the computer, the better. If I can have the whole scene blocked out or at least a big chunk of it, that's all to the good.

At night, after everybody's gone to bed but me, I'll sit in bed with a notebook and a pen, and then I'll jot down bits and pieces for what's going to happen the next day. Usually bits of dialogue or what we call in screenwriting the beats in a scene. The psychological back and forth, the ping-pong interactions in a scene, we call beats. So I'll sketch the beat outline of a scene or something like that. So when I get up in the morning, I have the notes from the night before.

**31 Kate:** Every writer finds a way to more or less chase themselves around the block and get away from their left brain or whatever it is that's blocking the story from coming in.

**Keith:** And also, every once in a while, there's a day when nothing works. And then, rather than banging my head against the wall, I go and do something else. But that doesn't happen very often.

**Kate:** And I hate this, but I hear this little voice in my head that says, "We're out of time!" Remember back at the beginning of the program, when Keith said that, even though he'd set all of those books in West Virginia, he'd never been sure if people in West Virginia ever heard of him? Well, let's end with this.



