Author Q&A for Draining the Swamp

**Questions about the Novel**

**Q:** Why did you write this book?

**A:** People want to know why their governments fail to work very well and why the hell no one seems to be able to fix this problem. Business experts know how to improve operations in a corporation, but they rarely know anything about how the federal government is structured or how to operate in a non-profit environment. Government experts are usually trained in political science, economics, criminal justice, or some other specialty that’s relevant for their job, but they rarely know what’s going on at the cutting edge of the business world in terms of lean operations or managing human capital. New ideas happen whenever someone brings together two pieces of information that used to be separate. Before I decided to become a writer, I was lucky enough to be part of a new program that brought top-tier MBA graduates into government in an effort to improve operations. We were a small group who could only change a small piece of the trillion dollar US government, but we were able to bring together formerly separate ideas—business expertise and government expertise—and combine them into projects that made a real difference in the way things worked. I wanted to share what I learned from that experience with a much wider audience, but I wanted to do so using the best method we have for learning and teaching—the use of powerful stories. That’s the reason I write in general—because great stories have made a great difference in my life and that has inspired me to try to do the same thing for others. I wrote *Draining the Swamp* in particular because I discovered something about how to solve the problem of bad government and I want to share what I learned with other people who desperately want to solve that problem too. It’s only together, and in great numbers, that people can tackle a problem this big.

**Q:** How is this book any different from all the other beltway books out there?

**A:** There has obviously been a lot written and shown about the political games that go on in Washington DC. Take the movies and TV shows like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, All the President’s Men, The West Wing,* and *House of Cards*, or books such as *Primary Colors, This Town, Parliament of Whores,* and *Democracy: An American Novel*—these are all part of the rich history that has covered a vital part of American life. But none of these delve below the surface of the interface between the public and their elected officials. *Draining the Swamp* is the first book I know to tell the tales of the 1 million workers within the federal government. So many citizens are fed up with their representatives’ inability to go to Washington and change things but they just shrug their shoulders and write this failure off to partisan politics. *Draining the Swamp* shows that there’s a more fundamental reason DC has become ineffective though—the massive elephant of bureaucracy that sits below the politicians who ride along on top of it. There’s a better way to tame that elephant, but you have to understand it and know all its parts before you can hope to make any improvements. It helps me as an author that this elephant is also really fascinating and funny to learn about! That’s what made *Draining the Swamp* such a unique and enjoyable project to work on, and hopefully for people to read as well.

**Q:** What is your favorite part of the book?

**A:** I really enjoyed writing the chapter towards the beginning of the book about Justine’s HR Hurdle to get into the executive branch. I think everyone who has worked in a big organization has met a version of the evil HR lady I portrayed with Debbie Demeroff, and since her particular brew of authoritarianism, idiocy, and pedantry came from several frustrating encounters I’ve had in the federal government, it was cathartic to distill those down into one loathsome antagonist. Now that I’ve re-read this novel approximately 400 times though, my favorite parts are actually the last three chapters where Justine’s passion for good government finally gets fully unleashed. Every time I edit the book I find myself cheering her dialogue and racing through to the end with a sense of pride and satisfaction about what I was able to create. It might have been fun to tear down one minor character, but in the end I found it so much better to build a positive role model who I can cheer for.

**Q:** You used the phrase “our heroine” throughout the book and ended with a chapter called “the moral of the story.” Why did you choose to write this as a fable?

**A:** I had something I wanted to say. I’ve worked in government and I spent time at the cutting edge of change management with real thought leaders in the field, so having a moral to my story where I could share what I learned was definitely appealing. At the same time, I knew that to get to that final lesson, my main character would have to have a slightly unbelievable set of circumstances to send her career through exactly the kind of scenes I wanted her to go through. The fable touches gave just enough of a wink to the reader to say, “look, I know this might not all happen to one person in some organic literary fiction realism sort of way, but just go along for the ride with me here.” My first draft wasn’t written as a fable and the whole last chapter wasn’t even there, but when I discussed that draft with early readers, they liked what I had built when I explained it, but they hadn’t seen it all for themselves. I believe if you have something to say, go ahead and say it—vagueness and mystery can often just be a bunch of hand-waving by artists to try to enlarge something that isn’t actually all that big. The fable, on the other hand, lays all its cards out on the table and is exactly what it says it is. I like that. At least for this story.

**Q:** The novel is highly structured, moving carefully step by step throughout the entire range of government and government-related organizations. Why did you choose such a tightly woven format?

**A:** Obviously, you give up a lot of spontaneity in the characters and scenes when you structure a plot like this, but the tradeoff is that you also gain the ability to express a lot of information from the structure itself. As an author, you have to weigh those tradeoffs and go with the choice that gets you closest to the overall effect that you want. The structure I chose gave me the possibility of touching on all the details I wanted to get into, but rather than just bouncing around in them or getting bogged down by all those details, I was able to use the structure to show how the details were all part of a bigger picture. In this case, that picture was one about how the division of labor in the modern age of highly compartmentalized organizations has created a division of power and responsibility too. The myth of the lone individual hero righting wrongs all on their own runs very deep in storytelling, but it’s just not a viable myth anymore for any of the big problems that matter. The structure of *Draining the Swamp* gave me a chance to show just how vain and circular it is for aspiring heroes to try to go it alone. One dream I have for this novel then is for it to inspire like-minded strivers to therefore get together more and hopefully succeed that way.

**Q:** There are several space and astronomy metaphors in the novel. Was there a reason for that?

**A:** One or two of them found their way into the first draft just because that’s a subject I personally like, and it’s possible they bubbled up because I was doing a lot of my writing in the dark month of November in northern England. After I finished my first draft though and spent some time thinking about the novel, I knew I wanted to amp up these metaphors because they fit so well with the circular structure of the novel. Space is so mechanistic and determined in many ways—put matter into motion and it eventually forms balls traveling in elliptical orbits. Unless we take hold of our lives, we can be that way too—floating through the orbits defined by institutions in society. Our heroine definitely did that and it led to her big realization at the end of the novel about exactly what kind of celestial body she really was. That realization about her dawned on me too after I’d written the first draft, and I really liked how it spoke to me. Hopefully readers will enjoy finding that out as well.

**Q:** Two of the most important scenes in the novel—the one near the beginning when Justine lays out her purpose of government, and the last chapter that provides the moral of the story—are both set with Justine’s brother. Why did you choose to do that?

**A:** The first time Justine talks to Jack, I was looking for a way to confront Justine’s choice of working in government at all, so we could hear why she thinks it’s important to be there. A scene with two people who are both on the inside wouldn’t question that decision so sharply, so I needed an anchor outside of government to pull her that way and force a conversation about that option in her life. Choosing a character and setting for that scene was difficult though because the options outside of government were enormous. I knew the stakes for it would have to be emotionally high, so it couldn’t just be a conversation with some stranger, and one with an old friend would be unlikely to become so confrontational. I didn’t believe a husband in a good marriage (which our heroine clearly would have) could provide enough conflict for that conversation to have any impetus either, but a sibling rivalry, however, could easily do so. We argue the most with people who theoretically should think just like us—you couldn’t get into a heated argument about your career choice with an Australian Aborigine for example. The brother-sister fight with equal parts affection and scorn was therefore easy to imagine and write. Only after the first draft, when I decided to add the final chapter on the moral of the story, did I realize that bringing Jack back into the novel would provide the perfect character for that scene because a transformation from him over the years spent outside government could cause Justine to have her revelation. Most of the characters in the novel are flat because we only meet them one time, so it was nice to get to round out another one besides Justine and highlight the fact that people do change. The fact that it was her brother who had changed significantly over the years, yet still kept in touch and ended up growing closer to Justine’s point of view, was easy to believe as well. That happens in families all the time.

**Q:** The names of the bureaucrats that Justine meets are highly exaggerated—Bill Monet for a guy who writes bills about money, Patrick Heron for a guy who’s a patriotic hero, Yvonne Towers for a woman who works in an ivory tower, Clara Ivy for a woman who’s a climber, Buddy Overton for a guy who oversees tons of budgets, etc. Why did you choose such names?

**A:** Coming up with those names was fun for me, but more importantly I found that they added to the fable feeling of the book. It was another wink at the reader to pull them along for the ride. The glaringly symbolic names reiterated the fact that these characters were symbolic of the *types* of people you find in government. Because the structure of the novel meant that I was going to be moving quickly from one minor character to the next, I knew that I wasn’t going to be drawing intimate portraits of a few realistic people, but instead would be making quick sketches of lots of characters and letting the readers imagine other details about those people. Each of these characters could have been realistic people with all the quirks and complexities and changes that a normal person exhibits in life—and they would have been if I had found ways to write about all the aspects of their personalities that I sketched out in my notes for the novel—but that would have meant a book that was ten times the size of the current one and a structure that was stretched to the point that it was no longer plainly visible. For me though, that forest was more important than the individual trees within it. I’d like to think the trees were lifelike because of all the thought I put into their roots and trunk, even tough we only saw one or two of their branches, but that’s for the reader to decide.

**Q:** Are any of these characters based on real people? Which ones, if any, do you most identify with?

**A:** They are all fictional of course, drawing on traits from many different people I’ve met, but there are two that are closer to single individuals I’ve met. I’ll leave it to you to try to guess who they are. If I’m any good as a writer, it won’t be that obvious! As for me, it’s got to be pretty clear that I identify with Justine the most. She’s an idealistic striver who cares about government and wants to see it get better because it plays such an important role in our lives. I wrote a book all about those ideas. She and I would get along well in real life.

**Questions about Government**

**Q:** According to you, what is the purpose of government?

**A:** Well, as Justine said in her presidential debate, *“Government is created to regulate the markets for all goods and services in order to ensure the fundamental evolutionary principles of cooperation and competition are acting for the maximum benefit of all life.”* That’s my one-sentence vision statement for the purpose of government, but it takes a lot of unpacking to understand what I mean by all of the terms in that definition. As a start, I wrote a blog post on my website called *The Purpose of Government* (<http://is.gd/ka4A2y>), which goes into a bit more detail if you are interested. That post is best summarized by a paragraph in the middle of it where I say: “*We will never do away with the evolutionary history we have inherited, which leaves us vulnerable to strong urges to compete. For that alone, government will always be required to take care of protection from cheaters and the punishment of them as well. However, we also know through the study of economics and its definitions of terms like public goods, private goods, natural monopolies, tragedies of commons, externalities, perfect competition, and information asymmetry, that even if every individual was committed to cooperating with their fellow citizens, there would still be things that we need centralized and collective action to address. We know that the invisible hands of the market will lead to market failures if they are left to act on their own. This essentially is the modern reason we have government—to efficiently do for the group what we cannot do acting alone. This is government's purpose and how we the people should design our governments.”* If that rings true to you, read more about it in *Draining the Swamp* and at my website where you can interact with me to have your questions answered. I love to discuss these ideas to help them evolve and survive.

**Q:** There’s a chapter about running for the presidency in this book. How do you think we should choose a president?

**A:** First off, let me say that this is a really complicated problem for which a perfect solution hasn’t been found yet and I don’t pretend to have it. Democracies all over the world need to keep experimenting with their selection processes and gradually keep ways that work and discard ways that don’t. That’s the way evolution blindly solves complex problems and it’s a good method for us to purposefully apply as well when we can’t just calculate an exact answer. As for what’s currently not working, I make the point in the novel that we can’t select a qualified president unless we know what the purpose of government is and what the real role of the president is. Those are the two things you must know about any position in any organization before you can select an applicant for it. Right now, if we asked 100 citizens their thoughts on those two issues, we’d get 100 different answers; and that won’t change until someone takes the lead on educating the public about this. This is not a situation that produces a “wisdom of the crowd,” it’s a situation better described as “blind rule of a mob,” and I think the lack of success from our recent politicians helps to illustrate this point. In *Draining the Swamp*, the heroine Justine clearly states her (and my) beliefs on the purpose of government and the role of the president as CEO of the executive branch of that government, but we need to instigate a more robust discussion of these questions to come to a wiser and better consensus for any definitions to be widely accepted. Once we better understand what we are looking for, then of course we can delve into improving the process by getting money out of politics, combating gerrymandering, encouraging informed participation, reforming the electoral college, adding voices from other parties to the debate, and a host of other issues. There are lots of opportunities to improve the process, but we should really take time to define the outcome we want from that process before we tinker with it.

**Q:** So, are you pessimistic or optimistic about government?

**A:** Both. Does that mean I’m realistic? One look at the history of progress in government shows that the trend is toward us figuring things out. We’ve come a long way from autocratic clans fighting each other to the death for the enrichment of a few leaders, to democratic nations freely exchanging goods and ideas back and forth for the benefit of all members of society. Not all nations or segments of society are included in that benefit yet, but we are slowly enlarging the number of people cooperating in that venture so I’m optimistic that we will eventually get there. As I get older though, I’m becoming more pessimistic about us figuring things out as a species during my lifetime. There’s such a strong emphasis on freedom and competition and individualism in American culture today that the balance that must be struck between the self and society—between the long term and the short term—is in real danger of regressing. That’s frustrating, but it doesn’t mean I’ll give up the fight to improve things. We have to, or we won’t survive. And after all, there will always be room for improvement anyway so I don’t think “figuring it out” will be an endpoint that some future generation reaches about government and no longer needs to contend with. I’m happy to take up my duty to that problem just like everyone else. The temporary optimism or pessimism I feel just grows or saps my energy for the fight, so it’s probably better to focus on the positive as often as I can.

**Questions about Writing**

**Q:** How did you write this book?

**A:** This was my first novel so I wrote the first draft as a bit of an exercise. I had known for a few years about the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) that takes place every November, but I never had the time to do one because of my day job. In October 2010 though, I gave up that day job to follow my wife to England where she had landed her first job as a professor and I had planned to try my hand at finally becoming the writer I’d always wished I could be. The week before NaNoWriMo, I sketched out the plot of *Draining the Swamp* by tracing the path through government that Justine was going to follow. I also made brief background and psychological sketches of Justine and all the characters she was going to meet along the way so I’d know how they’d act in all situations. I knew I needed 50,000 words to “win” NaNoWriMo, so I divided that total by the number of chapters I had in mind and gave myself a target for each step towards completion. I spent a lot of time that November staring at the computer screen trying to psych myself into writing something, but by the end of the month, I managed to finish my first draft. Since I had so few expectations for what I could do in one month on my very first novel, I felt no shame in deciding to share it with anyone who wanted to read it. Fortunately for me, among the people who slogged through that draft was a very kind and good friend who teaches creative writing, has an MFA from Columbia, and is a published author himself. He read it and basically said, “Good job. Now here’s your homework.” He would never characterize his feedback that way, but that’s what I got out of it. And that was really exciting for me. I spent the next 6 months reading fiction-writing textbooks and other novels by “writers’ writers” to do my best to learn the craft, all the while making notes for how I could incorporate what I was learning into *Draining the Swamp*. That was a really fruitful exercise and it led to a major rewrite with additional scenes and chapters and metaphors and tones and descriptions and, well, changes to pretty much every single paragraph in the book. After many, many more re-reads and minor re-writes, I stopped catching errors and making any changes, so I called the novel “done.” The whole process took me about 18 months, but some of that was spent adjusting to the new country I was living in and learning about book design and cover design and query letters and marketing and all the rest of the things that go into making a successful author.

**Q:** Why did you decide to self-publish this novel?

**A:** After I finished *Draining the Swamp*,I sent out about 30-50 queries to the literary agents I found who seemed most likely to give a shot to an idealistic first-time novelist, but with no formal education in the field and a novel that didn’t slot into any mass-selling genres, I didn’t get anything back other than encouraging rejection letters. So, I decided to go it alone for this first book and use my MBA degree to put together my own marketing plan. I liked how self-publishing got my work out there really quickly and exactly the way I wanted it to be, and I knew the market for this niche work pretty well myself. With this first book, I mostly wanted to learn about the industry anyway and establish myself as a writer of serious books with ambitious beliefs. I thought I could do that on my own with a lot of time and effort, so I didn’t wait to get started. After reading a bit about how authors “build their platform,” I decided mine would be based around my philosophy so I built a website around that ([www.evphil.com](http://www.evphil.com)) where *Draining the Swamp* tied in nicely as an introduction to the political part of my worldview. As I’ve gotten really positive reviews back from amateurs and professionals about *Draining the Swamp*, my goals for it have risen a bit, but so far I’m still glad I went the self-publishing route for this novel. I’ve learned a lot very quickly and hopefully have put myself into a good position to continue to grow as an author either with or without the help of a traditional publisher.

**Q:** There are a lot of facts about the government in this book. How did you research this novel?

**A:** I lived it first. After serving in Ukraine for two years in the Peace Corps, I came back to America wanting to do more with my life than just make more profits for a fortune 500 company. I was feeling very patriotic and was thrilled to find a new program that was starting up at the FBI called the Special Advisor Program, which placed recent MBA grads from top-ranked business schools into high-level leadership development positions where they acted as internal consultants for senior executives in the organization. The program got started when the CFO of the FBI decided to bring in a few Harvard MBAs to see if they could help. They did, and they saved more money then it cost to hire them, so the CFO decided to grow the program. I was part of the second class to enter it, and a year later I got the opportunity to build another Special Advisor Program with the Director of the Secret Service after he heard about what we were doing at the FBI and liked it. During my years in the Director’s suite, I got a chance to interact with a lot of high- and low-level bureaucrats in our agency, at the FBI, in the Department of Homeland Security, at OMB, and on the Hill. I hired in a team of Special Advisors underneath me who similarly talked with people all over government and we got together regularly at work and at happy hours to plot ways we could improve things. It was a heady few years, and while I was doing that, my wife volunteered in a Senator’s office, with two NGO’s, and applied for jobs at think tanks while she searched for her first post-PhD job as a professor. From her and my experiences and contacts, we learned almost everything that ended up in *Draining the Swamp*. I wrote it just a month after leaving DC so everything was still fresh and it was a cathartic exercise to dump it all out in one place for posterity. Google helped fill in a few of the gaps of course, but seeing as how I wrote the whole first draft in a month, there wasn’t much time to do extra research. I think if you read the novel though, you’ll agree that it doesn’t suffer from a lack of detail! I’m a learner and I learned a lot during my time in the federal government.

**Q:** Was it difficult to write about a heroine as a male author?

**A:** For this book, no, it wasn’t difficult at all. The issues the main character wrestled with—government bureaucracy, personal desires to make a difference, frustration in the workplace, political philosophy—are all issues that apply to each one of us. I don’t see those as uniquely masculine or feminine in any way. I was writing a fable though so I liked the idea of taking familiar gender roles as a comfortable storybook start and ending with them sort of flipped on their head. In the beginning, we have the more traditional roles of the man in the family being the steady rock, freeing the woman (who couldn’t have children) to move from place to place in her search for the perfect job. By the end though, the woman is the one who is so much more ambitious and successful. That’s nothing at all approaching a shocking turn of events in today’s day and age, but it’s just enough of a subtle subversion to make me happy with the choice of gender for the lead.

**Q:** What’s your advice for aspiring writers?

**A:** Well, I’ve always wanted to be a writer—I still have a copy of a short story I wrote when I was four about an unjust king who was overthrown by his people—but it took me until I was forty years old to build a life where I was actually able to write. I’m still an aspiring writer (and probably always will be), but the only reason I’m a writer at all is that I figured out a way to live a life where I can be the kind of writer I want to be—dedicated to it full time and able to invest energy into what I hope will turn out to be big, great, lasting books. You don’t go into writing to make money quickly, so you either have to have some already, have another source for it, or be able to live without it. I’ve solved this problem in my life by using a little from each of those three strategies. I’ve worked in two different careers where I earned over six figures per year and I invested that wisely and paid off all my debts. I’ve worked in remote Alaska and Ukraine for very little money and found that lives without much stuff in them could be much more interesting than normal American lives, and the lack of luxuries was actually easy to get used to. And probably best of all, I married a wonderful woman who now makes a decent living as a university professor and is supportive of me in my endeavor. These are the life choices that made my particular writing dreams come true, but my advice to aspiring writers in general is to aim high and have the courage and stamina to find your own paths, whatever they may be.

**Q:** What’s the best thing about being a writer?

**A:** You know that feeling you get when you read a good book and the world it creates just envelopes you when you open the pages, and every so often you come across a new idea or phrase that makes you just stop dead to soak it in? Well, for me, those feelings and moments are incredibly magnified while I’m working on my own fiction and I’m continually surprised at the things my mind comes up with when it’s put into the right place at the right time. The length of the writing process means that these moments of reverie and discovery go on for months at a time too. That’s been the best addition to my life since becoming a writer, although hearing from readers, getting to raise a puppy at home, and having the freedom to work on exactly what I want to work on have all been fantastic parts of the writing life as well.

**Q:** How do you deal with writer’s block?

**A:** I’m still new enough to this that I haven’t faced the crippling writer’s block that seems to strike people who have written for a few years or more and find they have nothing left to say. I’m still plenty inspired to write and I have a file with lots of novel and short story ideas in it that I can hardly wait to get to someday. I’m still enough of a novice at this writing life though that I sometimes struggle to have energy or focus to fill a blank page, which is a different sort of writer’s block. That one I’ve dealt with by learning to manage and control the times that my emotions are most in tune for this kind of creative work, and then figuring out a daily schedule that works best for me. I definitely need to keep eating, sleeping, exercising, and socializing well to keep my moods stable and productive—no lonely alcoholism for me! As for getting going on putting words down, I find that if I try to write first drafts in whole, complete, grammatically correct sentences, my mind wanders off to think about all the tiny decisions I have to make about the scenes, and I struggle to get anything down at all. Instead, I find I’m much more in control when I spend an hour or two in the morning jotting down bullet points and key phrases for the section I’m working on, which I can easily juggle and move around as needed. Then, I can go back in the afternoon to flesh that out into finished text without having to worry about exactly where I’m going. These bullet points are at a much finer level of detail than the big outline I do for a piece of work before I start writing anything. That may sound tedious to some people, but it’s just the way my mind works best and I didn’t know that when I first started writing.

**Questions about Me**

**Q:** The book is all about politics…so what side of the aisle are you on?

**A:** I have problems with all political parties as they currently stand, but since I have such strong beliefs about the role government should play in our lives and many in the Republican party just want government to be as small as possible, I feel locked into voting for Democrats in America at the moment. At least they seem open to discussing ways to improve government rather than just cutting it every chance they get. In truth, I’m probably closer to the Green party or a social democrat party, but only in the sense that they are closer to my specific beliefs, not that I conform to their platforms. I would start my own party around my beliefs in an evolutionary philosophy if I thought I could make a difference doing that, but at the moment I’m better off just being an activist for change in one of the two parties that dominate America.

**Q:** In the chapter on the presidency, the heroine gives a pretty passionate stump speech. Would you like to run for office?

**A:** I would consider it, but so far I haven’t lived anywhere long enough to build the community ties necessary to run for office. I’m also not convinced my personal strengths are best suited to the job required of a politician. At the end of a documentary I recently saw about the revolutionaries who helped oust Mubarak in Egypt, one of the main protagonists in the movie said they weren’t looking for leaders, but for a conscience. Once society had the right conscience, then the right leader would emerge. I liked that because I know how hard it is to lead any group that isn’t already behind you. So rather than try to become a politician leading a society where it’s not ready to go, I might be better suited to working as a writer and philosopher to help get society’s conscience pointed it in a better direction. That’s what I’m trying to do now anyway and I’m going to stay focused on that for a while.

**Q:** Who has influenced you in your writing?

**A:** My favorite authors are ones who have big philosophical ideas and write books to illustrate those beliefs using fictional worlds. I really like and have been influenced by Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Upton Sinclair, Ayn Rand, Iris Murdoch, Robert Pirsig, Rebecca Goldstein, Irvin Yalom, Daniel Quinn, and many others. Those are the people who have made me want to write. Cervantes and Joseph Heller influenced *Draining the Swamp* quite a lot too, seeing as how it’s a picaresque where the heroine finds a catch-22 everywhere she goes, which drives her forward on her quest. And of course a tremendous amount of non-fiction researchers and writers have influenced the development of the worldview I hold and am trying to express. Economists, positive psychologists, business strategists, organizational designers, change management experts, government reformers, social psychologists, historians, and political philosophers have all had a hand in educating me about the ideas that ended up in *Draining the Swamp*. You are what you read, so I’m indebted to everything I’ve come across in one way or another.

**Q:** In an otherwise glowing review, *Kirkus Reviews* said *Draining the Swamp* “can be a bit didactic.” Do you consider that a good or a bad thing for a work of art?

**A:** I wrote a fable where the last chapter was titled “The Moral of the Story”—of course I think art can be didactic! In fact, I would say that all art *must* teach us something. To think that it doesn’t means you either haven’t been paying attention or you’ve just been killing time with lazy entertainment. I know that didacticism can lead to excesses of pedantry or propaganda, but those are lines that I try hard to spot and avoid. Some artists prefer to simply raise questions rather than try to answer them, but their work usually comes across as just confused to me, unless they are really skilled at asking the most difficult questions. But then, those artists are usually teaching you something about how to consider an issue too. For me, I’m a Romantic in the sense that I believe art should evoke strong feelings of emotion, but I know from cognitive psychology that emotions are driven by the mental appraisals we make of the world so I try to inform and trigger appraisals that lead to useful and motivational emotions. If you say that is didactic, I welcome that as a compliment. I’ve written more about this in a blog post titled *The Purpose of (My) Art* (<http://is.gd/nGygzA>) if you want to read further about the view of aesthetics that I have in my evolutionary philosophy.

**Q:** What’s next for you? Are you going to write more about politics?

**A:** Not as the main focus, but politics will come up in future novels since it is so involved in the big decisions we have to make as a species and those are the questions I’m interested in talking about. *Draining the Swamp* was set entirely in the realm of government so I could talk in detail about political philosophy, but my next novel deals with the science fiction of a quest for immortality, which gives me a great way to talk about ethics and how to live an examined life. There is a character in that novel who’s a politician, since any life-extension technologies being considered would have such a huge impact on our political and economic spheres that it’s likely to become heavily regulated if it gets any closer to reality, but he’s just a minor character used to discuss those minor elements within the larger theme. This is the novel I’ve had in my head for over a decade that made me really need to try my hand as a writer so I’m super excited to get it down on paper and turned into a finished product as soon as I can. I hope you’ll check it out!