

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

With Ginger Campbell, MD

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**Interview with Roger Reid, Emmy Award-Winning Writer/Producer/
Director for the Public TV Series, *Discovering Alabama*; and Author
of the Young Adult Novels, *Longleaf*, *Space*, and, *Time***

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to [Episode 46](#) of *Books and Ideas*. I'm your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. Before I tell you about today's episode, I want to remind you that you can find detailed show notes, links, and episode transcripts at booksandideas.com. You can send me feedback at docartemis@gmail.com.

My guest today is [Roger Reid](#), from the [Alabama Museum of Natural History](#). He is the writer and producer of the Emmy-winning Public TV series, [Discovering Alabama](#), and the author of a wonderful series of books for middle-school-aged readers.

Before I tell you a little bit more about today's episode, I want to give a shout out to the guys at the [Pod Delusion podcast](#). Some of you may recall that last year I gave a [talk](#) in London that was aired on the Pod Delusion. Ironically, that's how I met Roger Reid, because he heard that podcast, and contacted me. The weirdest part is that Roger lives less than 10 minutes away from me, near [Birmingham, Alabama](#). So, you might begin to sense why today's episode is a little different. First of all, Roger is the first native of Alabama to be interviewed on *Books and Ideas*. In fact, we both grew up in [Huntsville, Alabama](#), which is the home of NASA's [Marshall Space Flight Center](#).

Now, I was actually born in Seattle, Washington, where my father worked for Boeing. We moved to Alabama in late 1964, just as the moon landing project was entering high gear. So, I have spent more than 40 years living in Alabama; and I have to admit that this is not always something I'm proud to admit. But, thanks to Roger, today we will share some of the treasures of Alabama's natural history, and we will talk about his novels, which combine mystery and science in a highly original way. I guarantee that you will learn something new about Alabama, even if you've lived here all your life.

I will have links to everything in the show notes, but you might find yourself wishing you had a map. If you're listening at your computer, you might want to use Google to pull up the [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#). It has great maps that show where everything is.

I will be back after the interview with a few closing comments and announcements, and to tell you about the next episode of *Books and Ideas*.

[music]

INTERVIEW

Ginger: My guest today is [Roger Reid](#), from the [Alabama Museum of Natural History](#). And, actually, Roger is a man of many talents, and I look forward to talking to him about his work.

Welcome, Roger.

Roger: Glad to be here.

Ginger: As you probably know, I'm not a big fan of the long-winded introduction, so I'm going to let you start out by telling us a little bit about yourself.

Roger: The long story short is I started out as an advertising copywriter. I've always wanted to be a writer, just as long as I can remember; and my first paying jobs of any consequence were advertising and copywriting. I moved from that to writing scripts—longer-format programming for major corporations—and that led me into doing the TV work for the Alabama Museum of Natural History, working with [Dr. Doug Phillips](#) on the *Discovering Alabama* Public Television program. We're a natural history program; we don't do the recreational kind of thing, we don't do the hunting and fishing kind of things, we look at the natural history here in Alabama. And from that grew my desire to write these young adult novels, working in the natural history here in the state.

Ginger: Roger, one of the things I want to talk with you about today is how to get kids excited about science. And, obviously, this is something you've been involved in for a long time, so you have firsthand experience. Let's start out by talking a little bit about your TV show, and then we can get into your books. Haven't you just recently got your second and third [Emmys](#)?

Roger: That's correct. We won two Emmys this past year for the show we did on the [Gulf oil spill](#); and the year before that we won an Emmy for the [program](#) we did celebrating Huntsville's role in the 40th anniversary of the moon landing.

Ginger: I'll have to get you to give me a link to that Huntsville episode. I've watched the BP Horizon episode. Remember that many of the listeners to this show are outside the United States, so they might not even realize that Alabama is on the [Gulf Coast](#); so that's something that we can talk about.

How can listeners get, for example, the episode about the oil spill? I know it's in iTunes—if you put in “Discovering Alabama,” you can find it—but is there a way to get it on the Internet?

Roger: We did some special additions for [iTunes U](#). Of course, for the show, we do a lot of interviews (Philippe Cousteau, for example; Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.; and several folks) for this program. And then, for the iTunes U Special Edition, we let some of those interviews run long, so you can hear more about what they're saying than you get in our regular 30-minute program. And all of that is available on iTunes U.

Now, you can get a link to iTunes U from the *Discovering Alabama* website, which is [discoveringalabama.org](#). But, like you said, Ginger, you can just go to the iTunes U website, and type in “Discovering Alabama,” and it will bring up the programs.

Ginger: It's weird; if you put “Alabama” into iTunes, you get the band, Alabama, and you don't get *Discovering Alabama*. So, you've got to put in both words —“Discovering Alabama”—to find it.

So, tell me a little bit about *Discovering Alabama*. You've been doing that show for 25 years. Have you been involved with it all of that time?

Roger: No, Dr. Doug Phillips is the creator and host of the show—Executive Producer—and he deserves tremendous credit. He, in 1985, started the program. Doug was at the University of Alabama, doing teacher training; and he took teachers out into the wilds, and did survival training, and canoeing, and taught

them how to use the outdoors in the classroom. And so, the program grew out of his experiences doing that with school teachers. I met Doug in about '95, and started working with him in '96. So, I've been around for a good portion of the programs; but he started it, and it's still his baby.

Ginger: I will mention that one of the things that is interesting about Alabama is we've had Public Television for a long time—probably almost as long as anybody else in the United States. And I guess that *Discovering Alabama* is one of the longer-running shows. I know I've seen episodes of it; although, I have to admit, now that there are so many channels on my satellite, it's harder to find myself on Public TV than it used to be. Back when it was the fourth channel, we went there for all kinds of different things.

Roger: The Alabama Public TV network is the oldest statewide public network in the United States; and *Discovering Alabama* is the longest running program on that network. So, we've got a history.

Ginger: That's something to be proud of.

Do teachers use the show in schools?

Roger: It is used in K-12, and we have teacher's guides that are correlated with a course of study for the different age groups—different grades. But beyond that, I interview and work with a lot of college professors. And a lot of them, when they have students come in from out of state to study biology, or geology, or any of the “ologies” here in Alabama, they use a lot of our programs to orient those new students to Alabama.

Ginger: And we're going to be talking more about some of our natural history secrets in just a few minutes. But, getting back to the kids for a minute, you travel to the schools. Have you noticed over the years that kids—is there a difference in what they're interested in?

Roger: This is my observation: Long before I wrote these novels, I was traveling with schools—because, with *Discovering Alabama*, that’s part of what we do. And it occurred to me, when my own son was in the sixth grade, that people talk about how do we get children interested in science. The problem is not how do we get children interested in science; it’s how do we keep them interested in science. Because children are naturally curious: these third, fourth, fifth, and sixth graders that I talk with, they are curious; I don’t have to interest them in science.

What’s happening is that the science is getting educated out of them, in some cases, because there’s so much emphasis on testing, and just so many things that aren’t maintaining the curiosity that the children have naturally. I saw that in my own kids. My daughter was in the fourth grade, and my son was in the sixth grade when I started writing these novels. That was one of the reasons I started writing for that age group; because I saw their interest in science, at that time, waning a little bit.

Now, my son is a physics major right now at UAB, and my daughter is a math major at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa; so, maybe they held onto some of their curiosity a little bit. But I visit so many schools—I visit fourth and fifth graders; and I travel, when I do these school visits, with science people—and the kids are fascinated by the natural world. They want to know how things work. I think, at the bottom line, that’s what drives every scientist I’ve ever met. So, it’s not a problem of getting the kids interested in science; it’s keeping them interested.

Ginger: Gosh, even 40 years ago, when we were in school, science, the way it was taught, was not all that good. And we didn’t have to do all the endless tests that the kids have to do now. I mean it’s just ridiculous. But I was wondering, how do the TV shows—I know that they’re sponsored by the University of Alabama Natural History Museum; how are they related?

Roger: We're actually employed by the Alabama Museum of Natural History, which is part of the [University of Alabama](#). We are a production of the Alabama Museum of Natural History.

Ginger: And is that museum open to the public?

Roger: It is. It's on the Quad at the University of Alabama. It's one of the oldest Museums of Natural History in the United States. Alabama has such a rich geological history, that the museum kind of grew out of the rocks of our surroundings; and, of course, [Moundville](#), and the Native American history.

Ginger: So, what's the best-kept secret about the museum?

Roger: There are two ways to answer that question. There are things open to the public. We have a variety of artifacts—[Basilosaurus](#) bones from 43 million years ago, when Alabama was underwater; and we have the [Hodges meteorite](#) that struck Ann Hodges back in '54, and she's still the only person we know of that was hit by an object from outer space—a variety of different natural history items like that.

But, behind the scenes, Alabama is so rich in fossils; it's one of the great places on the planet to study fossils. And we have huge collections of fossils that are available for scientific research. So, we have a lot of folks come in, literally from around the world, to study the fossils we have kind of behind the scenes at the Alabama Museum of Natural History.

Ginger: And I don't think most people—even most Alabamians—realize how rich Alabama is in fossils. Perhaps you could take a couple of minutes to just tell us a little bit about Alabama's geological history; because I think that and the fossils sort of go together, don't they?

Roger: They do. Well, that's a big subject. We have [five physiographic provinces](#) here in Alabama; which is one of the reasons that, for eons, we've had such great diversity in the state—and the ancient diversity, of course, is what led to the fossils that we have to study now.

I can give you an example: We had a fellow come from Spain, back in the spring, to study [coral formations in the Tennessee Valley](#). Now, Ginger, you're from the Tennessee Valley; we don't think of ourselves as having coral formations up there. But there are these huge bluffs on the [Tennessee River](#), and they're ancient coral formations that—I don't want to quote the time frame, because I'm sure I'll get it wrong right now—but this fellow was studying the formations in the Tennessee Valley in Alabama. He had linked them with a site in Vancouver, and another site in Europe. He was putting together the evidence that these places were joined in some way at one time in the ancient past.

You know, there's a lot of fascinating stuff that kind of runs through here. And we're all connected in so many ways. We have rich fossil histories in the coal beds in Alabama, which came as a result of the [Carboniferous](#) era, 300-and-something-million years ago, and the fact that parts of Alabama that are now the coal beds were swamps back during the [Pangaea](#) time frame. And that geological history goes way back; and it's a great place to study geology, as well as the paleontology.

Ginger: Those coal beds that contain the fossils—which I want to talk a little bit more about in a few minutes—those represent a time period that's long before the dinosaurs, right?

Roger: Right. It's like 200 million years before the dinosaurs—as much as.

Ginger: OK. So, it's in the days when there were like giant ferns, and stuff.

Roger: Giant ferns; and it was sometimes, depending on where you are in the Carboniferous, referred to as the “Age of Amphibians.” Life was just beginning to crawl out of the swamps onto the land; and then I guess that all got wiped out, and got started over again.

Ginger: Usually when we see shows on [NOVA](#) about fossils, it seems like they’re always in some dry place, like Montana or something, where they’re looking for fossils. And so, it really does kind of surprise you, if you’re not in the field, to think that a place as currently wet and humid as Alabama, underneath there, there are fossils—because we’re talking about the part of North America that was then underwater for a long time, right?

Roger: That’s correct. Everybody gets excited by [T. rex](#); but these are creatures that went back long before the *T. rex*. And during the time of the *T. rex* (you know, our state fossil is *Basilosaurus*, which is a whale; which tells you that he was the *T. rex* of the water, maybe—or actually that may have been the [Mosasaurus](#); we’re rich in Mosasaur fossils), we were underwater. So, the fossils you find here, so many of them are creatures that were underwater at the time.

Ginger: Yes. A few years ago I went to [Gatlinburg](#) on a family vacation (for listeners not around here, Gatlinburg is quite a bit north of here; it’s in Tennessee, in the [Smokies](#)), and they have a beautiful [aquarium](#) there. And it’s kind of odd, because I think they’ve somehow managed to make a museum in which the word “evolution” doesn’t appear—even though there are sort of allusions to the fact that that area was also under the ocean during this same period; it’s not that far away. It struck me as really odd, how you could make a museum like that, and somehow manage to try to avoid the word, “evolution”—although, it’s Tennessee, so it’s understandable. But it really gave me a strange feeling.

Have you been to that aquarium?

Roger: I have not.

Ginger: It's very nice. There's a part where you can walk almost inside the aquarium, and the sharks swim right over you, which is really pretty exciting.

But, getting back to Alabama, I did want to talk just a bit about [amphibians](#), before we go on and talk about your book; because I think this is another example of the sorts of things that even most Alabamians don't know. We have lots of amphibians, even now, don't we?

Roger: We do. We have [reptiles](#) and amphibians. We have some like the [Red Hills salamander](#), that are unique in all the world, and occur in just five or six counties here in Alabama. There a good many of them that once had a wider range, but their range has been narrowed down, so that they're kind of localized in certain areas in Alabama.

Ginger: Do scientists still come to Alabama to study these types of life forms?

Roger: They do. In fact, the area around the [Mobile-Tensaw Delta](#) has one of the richest diversities of turtles on the planet. There's one other spot somewhere in India that rivals what we have in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. So, turtle experts from all over can come here to study a variety of different turtles.

Of course, we have a wealth of frogs. We have all of the poisonous snakes in North America; and we're the only state to do that. I guess that's something to be proud of. But it is an incredibly diverse state. And we talk about the geology, and you talk about some of the folks in other places who might not even realize that Alabama has a Gulf Coast; but we do. We have the mountains—we're at the ending of the [Appalachian chain](#)—and from there we go all the way down into the lower coastal plain, and on into the Gulf; which is one of the reasons that we have such a diversity of life.

They say that the last [Ice Age](#) kind of pushed everything to a point that it funneled down into the Tennessee Valley and the [Mobile River Basin](#) here, which pushed a lot of life moving south. And this is where they wound up; which is one of the reasons that we have such a rich diversity. We have more species of freshwater fish in Alabama than any other state in the Union. It depends on who you're asking at any given time, I guess, but we're number 4 in diversity of wildlife and plant life in the United States; which, considering our size (we're like 28th in size), that's a pretty significant number of plants and animals.

Ginger: I was going to ask you this later, but this seems like the right place: the subject of alligators comes up in your novels; and I found myself wondering about this, because I didn't know that we had any alligators.

Roger: Well, you know the alligators were actually put on the Endangered Species List before there was an Endangered Species List in the United States. And the alligators have made a heck of a comeback. When I first started working with Dr. Phillips on *Discovering Alabama*, some of the first shows we did were down in the [Conecuh National Forest](#), and we did not see any alligators. And now, when we go down there, we don't not see any alligators. I mean they're just everywhere. They have moved on up the [Cahaba](#). I was talking with a fellow just yesterday about the alligators at the mouth of the [Alabama River](#) and the Cahaba River; so, they're moving on up.

Ginger: OK. Well, you say Cahaba; that's almost our backyard now.

Roger: I don't think they've gotten quite this high yet, but they have been seen up in the [Tallapoosa](#) around [Montgomery](#), and they're moving our way, Ginger; so, you might want to keep your pets in.

Ginger: I guess if it gets a lot warmer, then we do have to worry about alligators, don't we?

Roger: Well, you know, actually there are alligators in the Tennessee River. The alligators in the Tennessee River are from—I don't want to criticize the wrong agency, but somebody from a federal agency put the alligators in the Tennessee River, apparently, to help control beaver populations many years ago. So, the alligators can survive some cool temperatures. And they don't really have a lot of competition in some of these areas beyond the Delta, and so forth.

Ginger: I find that I'm just really curious about all of this. The only sort of predator that I really know about is coyotes—which I know that coyotes are on the increase in Alabama, aren't they?

Roger: Just recently somebody was telling me that the coyote populations are not necessarily on the increase; it's that we're moving more into where they were—our urban sprawl, and so forth. We're more a part of their habitat now, and perhaps we just notice them more. But, yes, we are covered up with coyotes.

Ginger: But we still don't have any wolves; because they were wiped out. We should have wolves, but we don't.

Roger: Well, we should have had bison, wolves, panthers, bear. We still have bears in Alabama, but they're few and far between.

Ginger: And we have armadillos, but they really shouldn't be here, should they?

Roger: Right. The armadillos came from elsewhere; right along with the fire ants, and so many other things.

Ginger: I guess that we've given people a taste of the surprising diversity of Alabama. I just want people from outside of our area to know that we've got something besides football players.

Roger: Yes; but we've got some pretty good football players, too.

Ginger: Well, yes; but we have other interesting things here, too.

[music]

Ginger: You sort of touched on this Roger, but let's talk about what motivated you to start writing your novels?

Roger: My first novel, [Longleaf](#), is dedicated to my son, Ben. He was in the sixth grade when I had the idea for writing the book. Ben is a junior in college now; which gives you some reference time frame. I saw that so many of the books that he was bringing home on his reading list, and that Emily—who, at the time, was in the fourth grade—was bringing home on her reading list, they all dealt with cultural issues. You know, that's fine; you've got to know how to get along, and so forth. But there was nothing that dealt with the real world as I was working in it. If somebody wrote a book about “nature,” it had some environmental theme, and so forth.

I thought it might be nice just to have something where kids were in the outdoors, sort of just because. Do you know what I mean? There's no overriding message that I'm trying to preach here; it's just we're in the outdoors, and this is where things take place, and the real place is a fascinating place. That was my idea when I first wrote *Longleaf*. And I had done two TV shows on the [Longleaf Forest](#), and fell in love with the place when I was working down there. So, I used every excuse I could to go back. Maybe writing the novel was another way to get back down in that area.

But, historically they say that the [longleaf forest](#) was the largest ecosystem, in the history of the world, under one canopy of trees. Obviously there are bigger ecosystems—the rainforests of the Amazon; and the ocean is a bigger ecosystem—but the longleaf so dominated the southeastern United States, that it was the dominant canopy of trees for 93 million acres. And it was such a valuable tree, as

European settlement took place and moved west, the longleaf pretty much built the country to the west; and they cut the longleaf down to less than 3 million acres, at one time.

Ginger: I'm sorry; I'm going to interrupt you; the longleaf, is this a type of pine tree?

Roger: That's right; it's the [Southern Longleaf Pine](#). For folks that have driven down through the South these days, you see a lot of pine trees, but those are generally [loblollies](#) in so many cases, that have been planted in plantations as basically a row crop. Those trees are often also planted in areas that would have been dominated at one time by the longleaf pine. But the longleaf is a tall tree, a straight tree. It makes great telephone poles, for example. It made great ship masts. So, when the English got to Virginia, they cut out all the longleaf in no time, for ship masts, and things of that nature.

Ginger: So, these would be our [Redwoods](#)—although not as old—in terms of them being cut down for everything.

Roger: That's correct. There's one here in the state they say is about 400 years old. Nobody will say where it is; I know it's in one of the national forests. But they can live a long time; and, of course, they can get up to 100, 120 feet tall.

Ginger: For the sake of Alabama listeners, if we're driving down to the beach—which would be when we would probably go through the Conecuh National Forest, can you see any longleafs from the road?

Roger: You can. If you go through the Conecuh National Forest, or through the [Tuskegee National Forest](#), you'll see a lot of longleaf. There are mountain longleaf in the [Okmulgee](#) and in the [Talladega National Forest](#). You know the [Forest Service](#) is regenerating, I guess you'd say, longleaf pines in their natural areas, as they are reclaiming the National Forest. But one of the reasons the

Conecuh National Forest is such a good spot to enjoy the longleaf pine forest is because it's a national forest, and they brought it back as much as possible to what historically would have been there.

Ginger: So, your first book, *Longleaf*, is set in that national forest. Tell us a little bit about your main character.

Roger: Well, my main character is Jason Caldwell; and Jason is 14 years old. Jason's mom is a biologist, and his dad is an astronomer—I did that so I could go back and forth between those different sciences, and also give Jason a little bit of an excuse for knowing a lot of stuff. But Jason, you know, he is a curious kid. I was kind of trying to get into things, and figure things out in ways that a kid at 14 would try to figure out—although he's not always right. And Jason, of course, becomes my counterpoint to a second character in the books; that, in the case of *Longleaf*, is a girl named Leah, who is a local kid down in the Conecuh National Forest, and she can teach Jason a thing or two about the way the real world works, rather than what he's learned in his books.

Ginger: The first thing I thought of when I was reading *Longleaf* was [*Encyclopedia Brown*](#). Did you read *Encyclopedia Brown* when you were a kid?

Roger: No.

Ginger: It wasn't as well known as [*Nancy Drew*](#), or, [*The Hardy Boys*](#), but he was a real smart kid who figured out mysteries; but I don't remember that he ever went outdoors. But that's what came to my mind. So, did you start out with the idea that you were going to combine science with a mystery story, or did that just kind of happen?

Roger: Well, I knew I wanted the setting to be the Conecuh National Forest. I knew that I would have Jason, whose parents would be scientists, and they would be going to the forest to study frogs. And I knew he would get into some kind of

trouble, and then this girl would come along and have to save the day, so to speak. Those were the little bits and pieces that I had in my head as I started working my way through it.

There is a scene where Jason witnesses a crime—as he is flying into the area to visit the Conecuh National Forest, he sees a crime being committed in the forest. That idea came when I was flying into Portland, Maine, several years ago (the first time I'd ever been up that way), and coming into the airport, looking down into the trees below, I wondered what would happen if I saw a crime being committed in those trees down there, and that might be a great way to start a mystery. And that's where that idea came from. That, I know was in 1990. So, they all kind of came together when I started writing *Longleaf*.

Ginger: Well, it's a great format; because I think of [Sherlock Holmes](#). He was a great practitioner of the scientific method. So, it's a good way to teach some of those basic principles in an interesting story. How have the kids been responding to your books?

Roger: It's been kind of overwhelming, actually. I mean the kids seem to really love the books. We've had very good luck. There's an organization called [The Longleaf Alliance](#), which is dedicated to bringing the longleaf back; and they have research folks scattered throughout the Southeast. They're centered in [Andalusia](#), there at the Conecuh National Forest. These guys vetted the book for me before it was published, and they've been responsible for helping me get a lot of books into the schools. They've gotten grants to get a lot of books into the schools. And we've had a lot of just private donors show up, and anonymously offer to buy books to get into schools throughout the state, and Georgia, and Mississippi, and Louisiana, and Florida. So, we've been pretty lucky. And the kids really do seem to love it.

And I'll tell you, my buddy [Mark Hains](#), who is a research director with the Longleaf Alliance, travels with me to schools as often as possible. [Anne Rilling](#), who is another research associate with the Longleaf Alliance, travels with me a lot of times when Mark can't make it. We usually go to fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades—not all together, but individually. And the kids always have more questions of the scientists than they do me, as a writer—which I think is a good thing. They're at an age where they still want to know about how things work. They'll ask me about the relationships with the characters: how did they know to do this, and how did they know to do that? But it's still a curiosity-driven thing about wanting to know how things work. They seem to come away from the books wanting me to write another book—which is good—but also, wanting to know more about the science that's in the book.

It's not like the science is the dominant theme in the book. They're running from a bad guy; they're trying to get away from him, and live to tell another story. So, the science part is just a part of the world that they're in. And I think that's what the kids kind of relate to; because we talk about if Harry Potter wants to hide from a bad guy, he's got that cloak of invisibility, but if Jason and Leah want to hide from the bad guy, they wait till dark and they get behind a tree. So, the kids can kind of relate to that. I mean, Harry Potter, there's nothing wrong with the fantasy, and the science fiction, and all that; it's great stuff. But my books are just a little different, because you've got to hide in a ditch, or behind the tree, or if somebody shoots at you, you've got to hope they miss.

Ginger: I loved, in *Longleaf*, when you started one of your little chapters with his kids definition of the scientific method; and then, after he goes through talking about it, he basically says that he doesn't understand Leah, even if he tries to apply it—because she's a girl, I guess.

Roger: There are some things, I think, that are even beyond the scientific method.

Ginger: In your second book, [Space](#), what motivated you to set that one in Huntsville? What drove that?

Roger: Well, there were a couple of things. When I was writing *Longleaf*—you know, I'd never written a novel before; I've done a lot of TV—I would write a chapter and let my daughter read it, and if she wanted another chapter, I would write another chapter. So, it was like I was telling her the story as we went along. And when she seemed to be enjoying it, about three-quarters of the way through writing *Longleaf*, I thought, well, this might be good; maybe I could sustain Jason's character, and take him to my own hometown, which is Huntsville, Alabama.

The observatory—[Conrad Swanson Observatory](#), up on Monte Sano Mountain; which I know you're familiar with—when I was 14, when I was Jason's age, I had a friend whose father used to take us up there: Louis Lanier, was his name and his father's name. He would take us up, drop us off on a Friday night, and we would stay up all night long taking photographs through the telescope there, and developing those, there at the observatory. Then his dad, at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, would come back and pick us up. You know, I have to say, Ginger, I never realized how much that man was doing for us, until I had kids of my own. But I spent a lot of time at that observatory when I was Jason's age. And nowadays they don't let you stay in the observatory, like that, if you're 14 years old. But that's why I wanted to go back to that place.

And *Space*, in many ways, is me reliving that time in my own life; because so much of the mountain there, at [Monte Sano](#), has not changed. It's a state park, so it's been preserved; and it's a lot like I remember it as a kid. In fact, there's a little poem that I wrote coming down the mountain one night, with my friend's dad driving us back in the wee hours; and I was able to put that little poem into this book. So, it has a direct connection back to my being 14 years old.

Ginger: Well, I spent some time up there when I was 14, too; but not at the observatory. But it used to be the place we always went for all kinds of get-togethers, and things. And, as I think I mentioned to you before, I spent my honeymoon in one of those cabins; so, I really got a kick out of Jason's description of the cabin they were staying in.

Roger: I hope I got that right. It's been a few years since I've stayed in one of the cabins. But they're still there. And the park is very much the way it was when we were kids. It's a wonderful place to visit.

Ginger: I think those cabins were built during the Depression, as a part of the [WPA](#).

Roger: I believe that's correct. That's why some of those rock walls are... You know, Jason had to jump over the rock wall when he...

Ginger: Oh, yes, I could really imagine exactly where you were talking about there; because I've been to that spot many times.

So, going from *Space*, to your newest book (from which I learned something I absolutely did not know anything about), your new book is called, [Time](#)?

Roger: That's correct.

Ginger: Tell us about those fossils in *Time*. I mean I actually found myself Googling that, because I didn't know anything about that.

Roger: Well, you know we were talking about the Coal Age, and the swamps in Alabama, back 300 million years ago: these are fossil trackways. They're footprints of ancient amphibians. When we go to a school and talk about *Time*, we talk about if you find the bones of an animal, you know that that animal is dead; but if you find these footprints, it gives a scientist an idea as to how the

animals moved around in the environment. For example, we know these were amphibians: they can compare the gait of an amphibian from today to one of these 310-million-year-old amphibian trackways, and see how the animals compare from now to back then, and get a sense of what those animals were like.

There are imprints of ferns, and seeds, and all manner of plant life that are buried in these coal fields. They have a real sense of what the entire environment was like. It's not just that they have footprints of animals; they have little skipping prints from insects. There are even fin movements from fish that were swimming in some of the shallow water. You see a representation of all the things that were going along in that swampy ecosystem, 300-and-some-odd-million years ago. And when you see these footprints, there's just something fascinating about them. One of the shows we did for *Discovering Alabama* was called, [Tracks Across Time](#); and if you can find on iTunes U, it gives a great overview of this fossil site, which is just outside of [Jasper](#), Alabama. It's called the [Steven C. Minkin Paleozoic Footprint Site](#).

Ginger: That's what I Googled. I found really fascinating stuff, including the fact that we have an [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) on the Internet—which I didn't know about. And that's like the biggest site of tracks in the world?

Roger: I don't know that "biggest" is the right way to say it. It is one of the most significant for that period of time. There are other sites that are much bigger—you know, when you were talking about the dinosaurs out West, where you find footprints of these huge animals in Wyoming, or Texas, or wherever. This is a fairly small site. It's about 40 acres that the state of Alabama has preserved, around about 3 acres that are exposed, and where the fossil trackways are being uncovered. This has been going on for 10 years, now; and they make new finds continually. But it's significant because these are so incredibly well-preserved; and they're from an era when most everything is gone. I mean 300 million years ago is a long time to have these things so well-preserved. It's of great scientific

importance. And we have had folks, again, come from around the world to study these footprints here in Alabama.

Ginger: I also want to say that I was glad to see that Leah returns in that book. It feels like you're really getting your rhythm. I really did find myself saying, well, where's the next book? Of course, he's about to start high school; so that could get interesting.

Roger: When *Longleaf* was waiting for the publisher to get it out, I had already written *Space*. You know, Leah is not in *Space*. And so, we started touring around with *Longleaf*, and like you say, the kids seemed to really love the book. And everybody said, 'When are you going to write another book about that girl?' And I thought, *Well, man; I don't know nuthin' about no girls*. You know? I've got a daughter. I learn less every day! But people seemed to want another book about that girl. And my intention was, of course, to make Jason my hero, and carry him on—which I did in *Space*. And I did sort of make the second character in *Space* so obnoxious that I thought nobody would ever want another book about him.

But, even after *Space* came out, we got really good feedback on *Space*. And I got to travel around with some [NASA](#) scientists, as we visited schools with *Space*. And everybody would say, 'Well, when are you going to write another book about that girl?' And you know, the thing is, Jason is 14 years old, and Leah is 15. There are things that you would have to deal with for teenagers that age, if you continue on with their relationship. That was not my intention. My intention was not to write about girl-boy things. But I guess...

Ginger: Well, I think the secret is going to have to be that you're going to have to keep him right there at the beginning of his freshman year, and not let too much time pass—because you only have a few months between the events of these first three books, right?

Roger: That's correct; the last book took place in August, and I'm thinking October will be the setting for the next book. I do have plans to bring Leah back in that; and I may throw [Stephen Warrensburg](#) into the mix, too, and see if I can mess things up.

The truth is, when these books came out, we got great reviews; and all of the reviews mentioned the science. They said this would be a great way to teach kids science. And I thought, *Oh, man; that's terrible; I don't want these kids thinking I'm going to try to teach them something.* Because to me, as a writer, all I care about is do you want to turn the page—what's next is the thing that matter most to me. Now, I did want to get the facts straight; and I had the books vetted before they were released. But I wrote first for the entertainment value. Then it occurred to me, well, the kids are not reading the reviews in the newspaper anyway, probably; so, I would probably be good with that. But it is the relationships between the characters that drives the story; along with the running-from-the-bad-guy aspect of it. So, if you don't like the characters, then you're not going to turn the page.

[music]

Ginger: Roger, how do you find the right balance in your writing, between story-telling and describing the facts?

Roger: That's one of the tough things, in some ways. At no point do I want to appear to be giving anybody a lecture about the age of Carboniferous era fossils. And yet, that's part of the information that's a part of the story. So, it's tough to make it a part of the story, without looking like you're just stopping to deliver some information.

You know, in *Time*, there's a scene where the school teacher is orienting the kids to the fossil site, and he's giving them a little background about the site, and

everything. And Jason, while this is going on, is watching some little girl who's in his class. And the little girl starts twirling her hair. And while he's talking about the fossils, Jason's describing the little girl twirling her hair; and realizing that, when girls twirl their hair, a lot of times that's an indication that they're bored. That was my way of saying, 'Look, I know this is boring information, but here it is; but it gave you a little something going on in the meantime.' So, it's part of the trying to work your way through it, I guess.

Ginger: You said you didn't know anything about girls, but I think that you certainly did a good job of capturing, at least what I would think would be (since I was a girl, I don't know) a realistic portrayal of the boy's point of view at that age.

Roger: You know, I've done TV for many years; and if I want to take you to the Conecuh National Forest, I just write, 'Cut to the Conecuh National Forest.' And then we have high-definition photographers that do a great job of photographing that scene. So, to have to begin to describe things was a new thing for me. I had to kind of figure that out. But it occurred to me, I couldn't describe Leah, for example, but I could know how Jason reacted to Leah, because I was a 14-year-old kid; and, well, I still am, at heart.

And I've been amazed at the way that other people have described Leah to me, in terms that I know are not in the book—because I never describe her as beautiful, or in any way like that. You know, Jason just wouldn't use those words. But his reactions to her are what tip off the reader that there's something going on here more than meets the eye, so to speak. I think, interestingly, the reason people wanted more about her is because there wasn't much information; it was all Jason's reaction to her. I got lucky on that one; I've got to tell you. I didn't know what I was doing, but it worked out.

Ginger: And I enjoy his parents also. And you don't overdo the description of parents, because at that age, I think kids mostly try to avoid their parents. But

they're relevant, and they give a reason for him, like you said, to know stuff—which I think seems to work well.

Is there anything else about the books that you'd like to mention, that I've left out?

Roger: Well, you know I have tried to plant little [Easter Eggs](#), if you will—you know, the way things sometimes are hidden in computer programs—about how many books there will be; about other things that may come along down the road, and things like that. So, I try to give things that, if somebody's reading along throughout the series, they can maybe begin to add some things up, and figure some other things out. You mentioned the parents; in every book there's some comment made that Jason's father—who's the astronomer—just doesn't believe in coincidences.

Ginger: That's a recurring theme.

Roger: Yes. And Jason doesn't make a whole lot out of it, but it's in every book. There are things I can add up down the line, that maybe I can bring together in some concluding grand finale.

Ginger: One of the things I like is that Jason keeps coming to Alabama, but he's not from Alabama; and that gives you a chance for him not to know stuff about like why people in Alabama are either for Alabama or Auburn, and why Leah wears that one particular sweatshirt that she wears. He sees Alabama with fresh eyes. And that, for me—as a person who lives in Alabama—it makes me enjoy the story, because it's always interesting to see your home from the point of view of someone else.

There was a TV show that Stephen Fry did—[Stephen Fry in America](#). Have you seen it?

Roger: No.

Ginger: It's got maybe four or five episodes. It's a BBC show, I think. And it's really fascinating, because he goes to every single state, and he picks one or two things that he does in each state. And it's just so interesting to see his take on America. And so, having Jason not be from Alabama, but Leah obviously is, that makes for a good combination I think.

So, I guess we're just about out of time, but I usually ask my guests to give advice. And in your case, you are a man of many talents, so I'm going to ask you a couple of questions along this line. First, the most obvious one is, do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Roger: Well, here's what I would say: do not throw anything away. I mentioned that I've got a poem in one of my novels here, that I wrote when I was in the eighth grade. And when I travel to schools, I have a portfolio that I have from the sixth grade that has things I wrote when I was in the sixth grade. And when I was writing from the point of view of a 14-year-old, I was able to go back and read things I wrote at that age. Of course, I'm considerably older than that now, but I still don't throw anything away. I've got suitcases full of paper. Now everything can fit on a thumb drive.

But sometimes, to get myself started, I go back and look at things that I wrote three years ago, five years ago, last week. So, don't throw anything away. You know everybody says if you're going to be a writer, you've got to be a reader—and you've got to write. Set aside the time to do what you need to do. But don't throw anything away. It can add up in ways. It's like I mentioned earlier, the idea that starts the drama in *Longleaf* actually came to me in 1990; and it's just a little idea that I held onto for 10 years, until I started writing a novel. Hang onto your stuff.

Ginger: Do you think the nonfiction writing that you do for *Discovering Alabama* has helped you, I guess, in honing your writing skills?

Roger: Absolutely! With *Discovering Alabama*, I'm a writer for hire, in a sense, for that show; I'm the writer, and producer, and director of the program, along with Doug. And we have great photographers, and editors, and so forth; and the audio. It's such a team of folks that, we've worked together for a long time, and we work together really well. But my job is to take a great deal of information, and to say it in a very few sentences—as the writer on the show, that's what I have to do—and to say it in a way that, if you're not a scientist, you can understand it.

So, I kind of act as a translator, in some ways. And that, of course, carried over to the novels. At least, I hope it did. My chapters in the novel are very short. That's because I'm used to writing scenes. I write from one scene, to the next, to the next, to the next; and I know (I hope) what it takes to keep one scene interesting enough to make you want to look to the next scene.

Ginger: Yes; even as an adult, I have to say I enjoyed the short-chapter format of your book.

Do you have any advice for teachers?

Roger: For teachers: This may sound corny, but I travel to a lot of schools. You can tell when you walk into a school, you can tell when you walk into a classroom if the teachers and principals of that school love those children. It's shocking to me that you can sometimes walk into some places where you can tell that the teachers just don't want to be there—that the whole staff, from the principal, surrounding them, doesn't want to be there. And, on the other hand, you can walk into a school where it's so obvious that those kids are loved by the principal and by the teachers.

It is tangible; but I'm not sure that I can describe it in tangible terms. My friend [Mitzi Adams](#)—she's an astrophysicist there in Huntsville—she's traveled with me a good bit, and we've talked about these things; and Mark Hains, who I mentioned, from Longleaf. You can see it—that the kids are loved—and it makes a huge difference in the schools.

As far as advice on teaching techniques and things like that; that I'm not qualified to give. But it is very obvious that, if the teachers want to be there because they're driven by their passion to teach the kids, it does make a huge, huge difference.

Ginger: Speaking of one of the many things that cannot be measured by the [No Child Left Behind](#) approach to education.

Roger: Yes; you can't really measure that. And this is a hard thing to say, but there are some kids that aren't going to make progress on a test from one year to the next, simply because they're not able to do that. But that doesn't mean they can't make progress in other areas. If we try to measure just one thing, we're not... I don't know; that just doesn't sound all that right to me.

Ginger: I agree.

So, what about parents? You're a parent, so you obviously have a right to give advice to parents. You've managed to get yours all the way to college!

Roger: I've never known any two of us that did it the same way twice.

Ginger: Well, let's just narrow down the question to: if you want to help your kids keep their interest in science, and not lose it.

Roger: Don't be afraid of their questions. Because the older they get (my kids are taking calculus and physics, and long ago they left me behind), if they have a question, I may not be able to answer it, but I can help them find out where to get

the answer. Some people are a little bit intimidated by not having all of the answers for their kids. But it's a big world out there; there are way more answers than my little brain has the capacity to hold.

Ginger: So, what about people that might be interested in doing science for television? I realize that's not a very large job market these days; but let's say that that's something that one of my listeners really feels that they would be passionate for. That's what you do. Any advice?

Roger: Well, I don't know quite how to answer that, because I didn't come at this from wanting to get into TV, and I certainly didn't want to get into TV production. I'm a producer for the show because we can't afford a writer and a producer. All my life I wanted to write. I did wind up doing that in an ad agency. And we happened, at that time, to do predominantly TV and radio ads; so I had a lot of broadcast experience, and that experience built on another experience, which built on another experience.

I guess it gets back to the same advice that I would give for writers: just find a way to do it. Even before I got paying jobs, writing for the ad agency—and this was more than 30 years ago—I wrote for comedians that would come through town. I did some sketch comedy stuff, and things that I never got paid for, but it helped me learn how to work with people as a writer, it helped me learn how to meet a deadline, and it gave me a little bit of a portfolio for when I actually was out looking for real work. That's just what it is; it's getting the experience in any way that you can get the experience. And, with any luck, you can get paid for it along the way.

Ginger: Yes; at least now we have podcasting, so you can do that. That's a great way to get experience! You have to do your own producing, too.

Roger: And that’s a lot of fun—especially when you start taking out the “oohs” and “ahs,” and the coughs.

I would find people that I can trust, to get feedback from. You know, there are people that are always going to love everything you’ve done. You can’t trust them. There are people that are always going to hate everything you’ve done. You can’t trust them. You’ve got to find those in the middle, that’ll tell you the truth. That’s a big help. You know, when you’re working at an ad agency, or something like that, where everything is on deadline, nobody has time to lie to you. If it stinks, they’ll tell you right up front; so, you can learn to move on in a hurry.

Ginger: Roger, is there anything else that you want to share before we close.

Roger: I would have to say that I am incredibly fortunate to work with [Discovering Alabama](#), [Doug Phillips](#), and the [Alabama Museum of Natural History](#); and to be in a state that is so diverse. We’ve done 100 shows, we’ve been on the air for 25 years, and we never run out of things to write about here in this state, because it’s so rich in its natural history. We’ve got more waters—pretty much more of everything.

Ginger: Everything except desert.

Roger: Except desert. Although we have some [food deserts](#); but that’s a whole other issue. I feel really fortunate to live here. I was especially fortunate to grow up in Huntsville when they were putting those men on the moon, and to feel the ground shake when they would test the rockets. It’s a great place to be.

Ginger: Well, I agree. Now, I know that listeners can get your books on [Amazon.com](#); but what about teachers and librarians? Is there someplace they should go if they were interested in getting books for a class?

Roger: You can go to my website, which is rogerreidbooks.com. There is a “Buy the Book” link, where you can go directly to the publisher. And I think schools and organizations like that can get better prices, because you don’t have taxes, and those kinds of things. So, that would be a way to start. Like I say, we’ve had a great deal of luck with schools being able to get grants to buy these books, because they do tie in, not only with the reading, but also with the science, so you get a kind of a one-two punch.

Ginger: Well, I hope that this podcast will get some new readers for your books. I wish there were more people doing this kind of writing. You kind of have to have an unusual background, though, to be a person who has always wanted to be a writer, but has spent your career writing about the natural history of Alabama for your show. So, you’ve got just a huge base of knowledge to work with; but almost everybody knows something about something.

Roger: Well, you would think so. I’m able to call up anybody at the universities around, or the science folks in the state—and really, around the country—because of my contacts with the show; which is a tremendous asset.

Ginger: I don’t really aspire to write any novels, but I have noticed that people, when they listen to podcasts, they really like to hear the scientists. From the horse’s mouth, so to speak, really seems to make a difference for people.

Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today, Roger. And I know [Time](#) just came out. We’re going to have to wait awhile for the next one.

Roger: If I just had the time now, I could do another one.

[music]

I want to thank [Roger Reid](#) for being my guest on *Books and Ideas*. Thanks to him, I’ve learned to appreciate that Alabama is a treasure for anyone interested in

natural history. Not only do we have some amazing fossils from millions of years ago, but we still have an incredible diversity of habitats and species. If you would like to learn more, be sure to check out the links in my show notes at booksandideas.com, or look for [*Discovering Alabama*](#) in iTunes.

Most importantly, I hope you will share Roger's books with your children, or your local school. I'll have links to these in the show notes, also. The first book is [*Longleaf*](#), which is set in the Conecuh National Forest, which is in southern Alabama. Next comes [*Space*](#), which occurs mostly at the observatory on Monte Sano in Huntsville. And the newest one is [*Time*](#), which takes place at the Steven C. Minkin Paleozoic Footprint Site near Jasper. Of course, these novels are intended for children all over the world. They can also be enjoyed by parents; and even be read to younger children, if they aren't easily frightened.

The next episode that I have planned is an interview with [David Mindell](#), who is an engineer and historian from [MIT](#). We will be talking about his book, [*Digital Apollo: Human and Machine in Space Flight*](#), which has recently been released in paperback. Because of scheduling conflicts, this episode probably won't come out until March.

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Thanks again for listening. I look forward to talking with you again very soon.

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