

# Robert Kirk

**Marshall Poe**

Welcome to the new books Network.

Hello everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the new books Network and you're listening to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. It's a podcast that we produce together with our friends at Princeton University Press. Today, I am very pleased to say we have Robert Kirk on the show, and he's the publisher of the *Pedia* series from Princeton University Press. This is a remarkable series of books.

They are mostly about nature. I think I would say they are small books that you can carry around with you. If you're interested in things like dinosaurs and birds and rocks and trees, this is a series of books—a lovely series of books—which you will want to buy. And so, we're very pleased to have Robert on the show today to talk about how the whole thing was put together.

Robert, welcome to the show.

**Robert Kirk**

Thanks very much, Marshall.

**Marshall Poe**

Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I am the publisher for nature books at Princeton. I've been there 21 years. Before that, I was working for a trade publisher in the UK called Bloomsbury, who actually published Harry Potter there. So, that was fun.

Well, yeah, but I've been here 21 years developing the Princeton Nature list, which is now one of the largest in the world.

**Marshall Poe**

It is one of the largest in the world. Are you also—do you do their math books as well?

**Robert Kirk**

No, we have a dedicated editor who does the math.

**Marshall Poe**

That's unusual, I have to say. 'Cause whenever we do a math book on The New Books Network, it's from Princeton. I was wondering about that.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, you know, some people say this is a sort of contradiction in terms, but we call it our popular math list. And yeah, they are very very popular books.

**Marshall Poe**

They are. Well, we do a lot of them, and we're always happy to see them. So, let's jump right into it. The *Pedia* series is quite unusual for an academic publisher. How did it originate, and what were you hoping to accomplish with it?

### Robert Kirk

It was—I have to say, I'd love to say it was my idea, but Lawrence Millman, the author of the *Fungipedia* volume actually sent a proposal, already finished pretty much, that said, would you be interested in publishing this? It was, you know, a simple word document, A-Z coverage of fungi. And I thought it was great. He's an excellent writer. His first novel—or not novel actually. His first book was shortlisted for a Pulitzer Prize.

### Marshall Poe

Wow.

### Robert Kirk

So, the guy can write, and it's very entertaining. I thought it was great.

But I think the thing I brought to it was the idea that we could package this to be very attractive, small, boutique looking. The kind of books you see on the front desk at Barnes and Nobles or independent bookstores. So, it had to look very attractive. So, we needed some very nice complementary illustrations, and that's sort of packaging was mine, really. But the concept was actually Lawrence's, and I give him full credit.

But then I could see that you could do this. That, take this concept, extend it into many other areas, which is what we've done. And I have to say, Lawrence is super happy about that. He doesn't feel cheesed off; he's actually very happy.

### Marshall Poe

I should also say that the books are beautiful, and they're very interestingly designed, and they're full of art. And again, this is unusual for a university press.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, yeah. These are really—these could have been published by any large trade houses, I have to say. Yeah, we really have focused on the design and packaging and try to make them as accessible and sort of nifty as possible. The content is sort of dumbed down in a kind of way, but they really are very attractive.

### Marshall Poe

I was gonna say, it's funny because these are collectible books. I mean, you would want—I don't know, maybe it's just me, but if I bought one, I would want to buy two. And if I bought two, I'd want to buy them all.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, I think that's, that's—you're the ideal kind of customer, obviously. But, the intent, yes is that you at least buy one or two. And if you like the concept, and you like delving into one, you're probably going to like looking at the others.

### Marshall Poe

Well, I just like the idea of them sitting there on my shelf as a, you know, like they would look very nice. You know—exactly. Yeah.

### Robert Kirk

I'm showing Marshall their spines because they are beautiful.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, not good for radio.

**Robert Kirk**

Nope.

**Marshall Poe**

They look really good there sitting on your shelf.

**Robert Kirk**

You can go get them.

**Marshall Poe**

Um, I imagine one of the challenges of producing a series like this is what to cover. And how do you decide, and can people propose new books in the series, and so on and so forth?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I mean, obviously, there are certain things that suggest themselves. Stop at *Fungipedia*, then you think, well, this would be good for trees. This would be good for flowers. This would be good for birds and so on.

So, I reached out to either current or potential authors for all of those particular topics, but we do have submissions from people who've seen books in these areas and say, I'd like to do one on this or that. Some of them are actually too small or too niche to consider, but one or two have come through.

**Marshall Poe**

That's great.

**Robert Kirk**

Which is really nice, actually. The books are clearly hitting a market, and people have an interest—interested enough, at least, to actually send in a proposal.

**Marshall Poe**

That's just what you want.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, yeah. I know plenty of people in this space, but I certainly don't know people in Neuroscience. We have a *Neuropedia* coming up. So, it's actually one on the brain.

So that's great. And I think that as long as people can achieve the right content and right level and can actually write, well, they are sort of candidates to do one.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, we have a channel: New Books in Neuroscience. So, you'll have to send me a copy of that book, and we'll interview the author.

**Robert Kirk**

Right.

**Marshall Poe**

I want to get that book, though.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, I have to say, you know, it's such a nice concept that my fellow editors have actually sort of hijacked it and were suggesting books for the series or are in fact doing books for the series.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah, I can understand that.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, because it's really about the format and the appeal. We're kind of running out of colors, now. We've slotted, you know, allotted rather, multiple number of colors for these pretty little books, and we're sort of running out.

### Marshall Poe

Well, it's funny you mentioned that because The New Books Network has grown and grown and grown, and we used to, for every channel, have a particular color. This is really inside baseball, but finally, the designer just said, it's all going to be blue now.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, we're gonna get to shades at some point. You know, shades of purple.

### Marshall Poe

Inside baseball design. So, could you talk a little bit about the books themselves? What does one find in them? How are they arranged—are there chapters or entries or essays? How would you characterize the books in terms of structure?

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, they are all A to Z references. They have between 120 and 200 individual entries, which vary in length a great deal. So, the *Dinopedia*, which is coming up in the fall, actually has fewer entries, but they are much longer.

It is entirely up to the authors to suggest and compile the entries. It's a very personal take on a broad topic. However, amongst all of those topics, there are some that obviously suggest themselves. You wouldn't do a bird one without talking about 'mobbed' or some of the technical aspects. But really, it's up to the author.

We do suggest that they have some entries on folklore or law or, you know, sort of some more light cultural stuff and biographies of key people in that field. But it is interesting to look at the different biographies. Again, some, you'd expect like Audubon in the *Birdpedia* one. But there are some odd—well, I wouldn't say odd—there are some interesting biographies, you know. People who you actually haven't heard of. So, you know, it's author selection.

We give them a brief—they do vary in length a little bit. The *Birdpedia* one is much longer than the others, and there's a reason for that. I mean, there's so much to talk about with birds, and they're so popular.

### Marshall Poe

Well, that's actually a nice segue because I wanted to talk a little bit about birds. I'm not a birder, but I do feed birds in my backyard.

I don't really know much about birds except that my understanding is that they are, evolutionarily speaking, flying dinosaurs, or something like that. They lay eggs and things like reptiles. So, my

question is, how would I use *Birdpedia: A Brief Compendium of Avian Lore*, and what would I do with it?

**Robert Kirk**

You would dip in and dip out. If there was a particular topic you're interested in, you know, dusting or something that you've heard but don't really understand, you go there and you just go to D, dusting, and find it. And read a nice snappy, short, and quite funny, actually, entry. Some of the entries are fairly light and amusing. There are lots of birding terms in there, like twitching and that kind of stuff, but there's some serious science too. So there's a lot on migration, and there's a lot on bird biology.

So, you just sort of hunt around. But quite frankly, I think the nicest thing to do is just dip in and dip out. You're always going to find something you didn't know, and it's super interesting. They're really intended for non-experts. I mean, and they're fun. Actually, I have sold so many copies of *Fungipedia* to entomologists and people outside the area.

And that's, that's really nice. I mean, that shows that they, that the books have appeals packages but also interest to sort of sister disciplines, if you like.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, I mean, it sounds like it's the case that you know, someone like—I'm not a birder. I really don't know a lot about birds. I'm very interested in birds, but it sounds like a good place to start.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Marshall Poe**

I can learn birding terms.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, because if you're going to be in the field, I can guarantee you that if you go out there you'll be very puzzled by some of the terms of people.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, when I go in my first birding group, I don't want to be embarrassed.

**Robert Kirk**

You know, they are fun. They're meant to be informative, light, casual. You could certainly read them from start to finish and be much enlightened by the end of it, hopefully. But really, you know, it's a sort of dip in and just flick through them. And they have such nice, cute little illustrations.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. I say they're beautiful books. Yeah, and I was also going to comment, when was the last time you read a book start to finish? I can't remember the last time I did that. I usually dip in and dip out in any case.

Well, why don't we tell the listeners a little bit about some of the titles that you have in the series already published? I think already published; maybe some of them are forthcoming. And I want to tell you that my ignorance in these subjects knows no bounds, so I'm probably going to ask some dumb questions.

So, let's talk with about *Insectpedia*. I'll tell you quite honestly, I'm afraid of insects. Will this book allay my fears, or will it frighten the heck out of me?

**Robert Kirk**

Parts of it are guaranteed to frighten you a little bit because it's Illustrated, but I'm hoping very much that—and the author actually expressed this that you know, he is hoping to sort of enchant people with just the range of insect life and their natural history and have you see I mean, you know, they are extraordinarily beautiful. For instance, dragonflies. That's good stuff.

So, he really is on a mission to sort of educate and convert, if you like. I mean, I fully understand there are plenty of people who, you know, insects in the house? Let's just get the pest killer in. But he's really trying to show the diversity of insect life and why it's important.

**Marshall Poe**

And there is a great diversity of insects. Yeah, there's a lot of insects. Well, you know, I'm from Kansas originally. I'm from agricultural stock. And so, insects were always the enemy, where it was like, we were trying to do everything we could to kill them because they were trying to take away our livelihood.

**Robert Kirk**

Right. That's right. Yeah, every business does not like insects.

**Marshall Poe**

Not really at all. Although, I do have a friend who works in... I don't really quite have the words for this, but he's an entomologist. And he gets insects that he likes to eat the insects that we don't like.

**Robert Kirk**

Right, right.

**Marshall Poe**

See what I mean?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I know. It's using sort of a form of pest control.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, that's what he does. He's at the University of Minnesota, and he does pest control, but he uses insects to do it.

**Robert Kirk**

We have to be very careful there though because if you introduce an insect that is non-native to deal with something that's native or non-native, often you get sort of rather bad side effects.

**Marshall Poe**

I'm sure you do. Well, I'll contact him, and we'll talk about that. So, here's a dumb question, and you may not know the answer to any of these questions: are spiders insects?

**Robert Kirk**

No, they're not. They're arachnids. They have eight legs rather than six.

**Marshall Poe**

Six. Yeah, see I told you I didn't know what I was talking about. And then a follow-up question: are lobsters insects? Because they look a lot like insects do.

**Robert Kirk**

Absolutely not, no.

**Marshall Poe**

Don't they look like insects, though?

**Robert Kirk**

They're crustaceans.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, right. But they look like insects.

**Robert Kirk**

They're a little tastier than most insects.

**Marshall Poe**

They are much tastier, yeah. Alright. So, let's go on to *Dinopedia*. This is obviously going to be a popular favorite. I'm also afraid of dinosaurs. Happily, there aren't any dinosaurs around anymore. Or am I wrong about that?

**Robert Kirk**

There was a time when many folks believed that birds were somehow special. Sort of a different lineage from dinosaurs.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

But all of those recent fossil finds in China have just confirmed the fact that, interestingly, most if not all dinosaurs were feathered.

**Marshall Poe**

Is that right?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, the famous T-Rex would have some feathering, some residual feathering on the shoulders.

**Marshall Poe**

We learned about that in the book, right? That's explained in the book.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, absolutely. There's a great thing on proto birds, they're called archaeopteryx and all the other things that people, kids, know so much about usually. But yeah, so the idea that birds are not—were not dinosaurs is really the nail in that coffin.

**Marshall Poe**

How do you like that?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, I do really—when I do, think about them as feathered dinosaurs, it makes a lot more sense evolutionarily.

**Robert Kirk**

Yes. Absolutely.

**Marshall Poe**

They are very reptilian in many ways.

**Robert Kirk**

Many. Just look at young birds particularly. They really are.

**Marshall Poe**

Kind of flying dinosaurs. So, here's another question to follow up on that. My favorite dinosaur when I was young was the Brontosaurus. And then as an adult, I learned that the Brontosaurus didn't exist. What, why is it the case that we can't get the taxonomy of dinosaurs down right?

**Robert Kirk**

It is extremely fluid, as they say. The real problem is that we seldom find skeletons intact. You have so many problems about aging, and you know, you find one bone and then you realize this bone is actually associated with something else, and no one can agree. It's a very contentious area, and there's tremendous disputes about what's related to what. We now think that, for instance, T-Rex was not one beast. It's a super species. So, there are lots of different T-Rexes, if you like. Some smaller than others.

**Marshall Poe**

Oh, great. More kinds of T-Rexes.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I think you'll be pleased to know if you're scared of dinosaurs there.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

T-Rexes hunted in packs.

**Marshall Poe**

Oh, good.

**Robert Kirk**

They had fantastic eyesight.

**Marshall Poe**

Wonderful.

**Robert Kirk**

They were probably a lot smarter than dogs. I mean, they were the ultimate apex predator.

### Marshall Poe

Well, this is kind of interesting because one of the things that I remember when I saw Jurassic Park and so on and so forth, and that was based on some sort of recently modern understanding of dinosaurs, and they were all at least raptors. That is, general Raptors. That is, the carnivorous dinosaurs were all really fast, like birds.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, I mean some of them are super, super fast. Yeah, lots of raptors. It's still just a lot of argument about T-Rex because it was so large, and it people now think it was a sort of snatch-and-grab predator. So, it creeps up on stuff and then just go grab it and then get it in those incredibly powerful jaws that could exert 3,000 pounds per square inch on a tooth. Yeah, you wouldn't want to be in there, in the mouth of a T-Rex.

### Marshall Poe

So, where do we stand with brontosaurus now?

### Robert Kirk

Actually, Darren Naish in *Dinopedia* covers that in a very lengthy entry, which is super fascinating. So, back in 1903 I think it was, some patio guy found the first specimen, if you like, of this thing really was called brontosaurus.

### Marshall Poe

Right.

### Robert Kirk

Now it actually turned out that this was just one of a whole family, and it wasn't very clear that this was an individual species as such. But the curator at the American Museum of Natural History put the label 'brontosaurus' on the specimen there, and it became so popular that he just wanted to retain it. Even though science just said no, no, no no, you can't do that.

### Marshall Poe

It was good branding for the museum.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah. In fact, just recently, the [inaudible] guys have said well, that particular specimen was an individual species, so let's call it brontosaurus against

### Marshall Poe

Alright. So kind of reminds me of Pluto somehow. Sometimes it's a planet, and sometimes it's not a planet. Well, I'm glad to hear that brontosaurus is back.

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, three cheers for brontosaurus because every kid loves it, so.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah, that's absolutely true. So, let's move on to *Geopedia*. And now this is about rocks, right?

### Robert Kirk

Yeah, rocks and rock formations.

### Marshall Poe

Rocks and rock formations. So, this is a dumb question: why are there many kinds of rocks? Why isn't there just one kind?

**Robert Kirk**

Well, there's three basic kinds, you know, formed by fire or pressure or both. And then amongst those, there are all of these different minerals. Again, really hard to—

**Marshall Poe**

Now that includes crystals and things like this?

**Robert Kirk**

Yes. So, you know, crystallized stuff is found in many rock formations, and it's a question of pressure and heat and time.

**Marshall Poe**

I did not know that, and I have nothing else interesting to say about rocks. Yeah, really. I don't. So, let's move onto trees, *Treepedia*. I'll be honest with you, I'm not very big on trees these days. There's a huge oak tree outside my house that could crush my house. I think it might weigh—if you include the roots—it might weigh as much as my house. And this worries me. Is the book going to give me any indication of like, would I be able to like find out how old this tree was, or when it's going to collapse and destroy my house? Or?

**Robert Kirk**

You could certainly find out how to age it because there is an entry on—it's called... What is it called? Dendro...?

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. I know this word too, but I can't pronounce it.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, and—dendrochronology.

**Marshall Poe**

Dendrochronology is right.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. But it won't tell you how, you know—I think you just pick up the phone if you're really worried about it and call your tree service. But there's a section entirely on oaks because there are so many different oak species, and also, they are pretty special. They have huge sort of ecosystems living within them, their own ecosystems. So, there's a lot of, you know, biology biographies. Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, I have to confess that most of what I know about trees comes from a knowledge of lumber. I've renovated several houses, so I know people who can grade lumber very exactly. They can just look at it and tell you what grade it is and what kind it is and these other things. I can't do that, but there are people who can.

**Robert Kirk**

Having just come back from California and the California coast, which is, you know, probably being there and all of the eucalyptus there were introduced in the 19th century.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, that's right, yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

And they thought they would be good for three things, you know: shade, fuel, and wood for construction. It's the most awful wood; you can't use it in buildings. It warps, and also, the trees explode in fire because they're so full of oil.

**Marshall Poe**

And they're pervasive, at least in Northern California.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, they're trying to eradicate them from some areas, but they do provide a lot of shade and they're pretty old, some of them, so they've become the sort of non-native native. That's difficult for people.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, there's a—on the University of California Berkeley campus, there's a place called The Eucalyptus Grove.

**Robert Kirk**

That's right.

**Marshall Poe**

Which has these enormous trees.

**Robert Kirk**

The blue gum trees, yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

They're kind of like weeds, actually.

**Robert Kirk**

They're very tough. They are drought-resistant, and they do provide a lot of shade.

**Marshall Poe**

They smell nice.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

It's about all you can say: they smell nice.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

We used to have this kind of tree—I used to teach at the University of Iowa, and I can't be specific about that, but it was a kind of tree, I think it's from Japan, that stinks.

**Robert Kirk**

Oh, ginkgos.

**Marshall Poe**

The ginkgo tree, yeah. This was a horrible tree.

**Robert Kirk**

Try to remember if it was the female or the male. The male has to be—obviously, you don't plant that one because it does really stink.

**Marshall Poe**

It stunk. Yeah, they were all over campus and people were like the stinky tree.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, very nice in certain ways, but they stunk. Well, let's move on to birds. This is something, as I said, that I'm a little bit more up to date on. Is there a section of the book about corvids and blue jays? Is there, does it get that specific?

**Robert Kirk**

There is—in *Birdpedia*?

**Marshall Poe**

In *Birdpedia*, yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

There isn't actually an individual section on corvids, but they are mentioned in bird intelligence because corvids are the smartest birds. They can actually do pretty sophisticated puzzle-solving. There are lots of experiments that have gone on with them.

**Marshall Poe**

This is something I've seen myself because we feed them in my backyard. Blue Jays.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

They're very bright. They have it all figured out. And they're also very bold. I mean, you can get them to come to hand, if you take enough time.

**Robert Kirk**

You can also get some corvids to speak. I had a friend who had a jackdaw in the UK that could actually talk pretty fluently.

**Marshall Poe**

A jackdaw—that's what you call a crow in the UK. Or is that a different species?

**Robert Kirk**

No, it's actually a crow species. But it's not—it's its own such.

**Marshall Poe**

Okay. Yeah, no, these Blue Jays—and the Blue Jays have a bad reputation, and I don't really quite understand why. I think it's because they are... what is it called?

**Robert Kirk**

They're nest robbers.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, right they're nest robbers. But aren't all birds nest robbers? That's very common in the bird—?

**Robert Kirk**

No.

**Marshall Poe**

No, it's just Blue Jays.

**Robert Kirk**

Well, there are plenty of birds that will—and squirrels do it of course as well.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

But there are plenty of birds, crows, that will take nestlings, yeah. There's a very famous guy who wrote the book called *Birds of Pakistan*, and he had a garden in Pakistan where he'd go every morning around and look and see what was nesting. But he had to stop because he worked out that the Indian house crows knew that he's worked out [inaudible] and went down and just rubbed them one by one by one if you found them and they just went. So, he had to stop doing that. That's how smart they are.

**Marshall Poe**

And are they parasites? I think it's called parasite brooders. Will they take over, will they put their eggs—?

**Robert Kirk**

Oh, no. Not crows. That's more cowbirds.

**Marshall Poe**

But that's a nasty habit too.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, it's actually not that common in the bird world.

**Marshall Poe**

Is that right?

**Robert Kirk**

It's some cuckoos and some cowbirds. And one species of duck.

**Marshall Poe**

Yes. And just so the listeners understand—let me see if I understand. So, what this means is, a bird of one species will go to the nest of another species and drop its egg there so that the bird is essentially—that's a cost... can I do that with my kids?

**Robert Kirk**

It sounds appealing. That's exactly right, yeah. So, say a brown-headed cowbird will find another species' egg. The, you know, the predated species—the one that's had the egg—I think will feed that baby and treat it as its own. And sometimes, the young bird will actually push out the eggs or push out the young of the—it's not very nice.

**Marshall Poe**

No. It's very clever, and it's an amazing economizing measure.

**Robert Kirk**

One wonders how that actually evolved or how evolution... but as I said, it's actually not as widespread as you think.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, you would think it would be more because it's kind of a, it's kind of parasitism but it's a very—

**Robert Kirk**

It is.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, but it's a very clever kind of parasitism. But, alright. So, let's move on to *Florapedia*, and that's flowers and things, right? Plants generically. Is that right?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. Well, generally.

**Marshall Poe**

I know nothing about flowers to be honest with you, and I'm a humanist essentially. And what I know about flowers is that I think I took a Shakespeare class once, and the professor said, if I can remember that flowers meant something for Shakespeare—like there were different flowers that meant different things, like grief and other stuff like this. Does that come up in the book?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, she touches on that in various accounts. It's true, so Shakespeare clearly had a very deep either folklorist knowledge. I mean, if you know that when Ophelia is floating, when she's described as floating down the stream, it talks about all of the different flowers.

**Marshall Poe**

Right.

**Robert Kirk**

That actually she walked through to get to the willow before she fell in. And throughout all Shakespeare, there are tons of mentions of flowers. Obviously, there was a sort of Elizabethan knowledge of either herbal medicine and flowers generally, but she doesn't talk about—in the book—about Georgia O'Keefe and Van Gogh and their sort of representations of flowers. O'Keefe was the first to really use the flower, sort of an iconic very detailed painting.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, I'm from—as I told you, I'm from Kansas, and everybody from Kansas will know that's the Sunflower State.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

And I don't know if you've ever seen what I think is a tremendously genetically engineered by selection sunflower, but they are freaky.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Because they're so big.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, they're huge. Yeah, I mean the commercially grown ones are massive.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. They look like something out of *Star Trek*. I don't know if anybody knows what *Star Trek* is anymore, but like yeah, they're like something from another planet, they're so big. Well, let's move on to *Fungipedia*. And that's mushrooms and things, right?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, yeah. Mushrooms and rust and molds and all of those weird things.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, so I was in—I used to live in Russia, and I'd go to the market there. And I remember I was at a market stall, and there were a bunch of mushrooms. Russians like to go out and collect mushrooms, and I didn't know anything about mushrooms and I'm like, are these safe to eat? And this old man said to me, anything that grows in the woods is safe to eat. At which point the nice Russian woman next to this gentleman took me aside and said, don't listen to that idiot.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I think that's right. She gave you the good, sage advice there. There are plenty of poisonous mushrooms that grow in the woods.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. So, this is obviously not a guide to go and pick mushrooms or anything like that, but does it talk about difference between edible mushrooms?

**Robert Kirk**

It does, it does. It focuses—it's not a book about, you know, how to cook and all of those kinds of things, but it talks about different kinds of, you know, shiitake and all of those kind of mushrooms. But it also talks about the super poisonous ones and also the chemical properties of a lot of these things. It talks about magic mushrooms and, you know, mycorrhiza. All of these things that are absolutely essential to the functioning of a lot of ecosystems. Without them, you know, a lot of trees would not be able to operate.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, this is another thing. I mean, I, as I said, I've renovated houses and things, and when you get into the soil, you realize how much of the soil is actually fungus.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. I was actually looking again at the book today, and I had forgotten there was a really great entry on King Tut. So, you know, when they broke open his tomb and they all died, or the two guys died very close to—

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

And there was a curse of—it's actually called the cursed painter.

**Marshall Poe**

Right.

**Robert Kirk**

It's quite likely that the food that they buried with the Pharaoh—for his afterlife, to feed him on the, in the afterlife journey—actually had a fungus. Had mold, had spores.

**Marshall Poe**

Really? Wow.

**Robert Kirk**

And 3000-year-old spores, they would have inhaled that stuff, and he says, you know, it's possible and almost likely they would have had some massive allergic reaction to it.

**Marshall Poe**

Right. So, fungi aren't plants technically, are they?

**Robert Kirk**

No, they're not. They're actually more closely related to animals than they are to plants.

**Marshall Poe**

Right.

**Robert Kirk**

Some mind-bending thing.

**Marshall Poe**

And I'm sure this is explained in the book.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Spores and such. You can see how the [inaudible].

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, but they are truly, truly fascinating, and I'm taking—

**Marshall Poe**

Well, I want to ask you what books are coming up. But before I ask you that, it's a question I've always had: is there going to be a “Viropedia” about viruses? Because I think the question here is, are those alive? What are those?

**Robert Kirk**

I—yeah, that's a really good idea actually. A “Viropedia” book would be great, actually.

[inaudible]

**Robert Kirk**

I was speaking to a virologist on NPR, actually, who was asked that very same question: so what the heck are these things? And she said—which was reassuring—it's really hard to describe because we don't—are they alive? Are they not alive? Because they're not alive without a host, and yet they are very hard to classify.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. Well, they're like little machines.

**Robert Kirk**

They are, they are.

**Marshall Poe**

But weird little—weird little machines. Of a different order, yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

Just constantly replicating. But they have to have a host to do that.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah. I encourage you to do “Viropedia” because I find viruses absolutely, evolutionarily speaking, fascinating because they are the closest thing that you can find to a machine for the replication of DNA.

**Robert Kirk**

Absolutely.

**Marshall Poe**

That's all they do.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. That's exactly all they do.

**Marshall Poe**

They can't do anything else. That's all they do though.

**Robert Kirk**

So, if you want to call that life, which it is, I guess they're alive.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, certainly I'll hear from listeners, who will explain it all to me in great detail. I don't know—

**Robert Kirk**

That's good, because I'd like to hear that explanation as well.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, me too. Yeah, maybe somebody has it figured out. We're crowdsourcing this topic.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

So, can you tell us a little about what titles you have in the pipeline now for the Pedia series?

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, I mentioned one—which isn't mine. It's actually the Neuroscience one. The *Neuropedia*. It's coming up. We have a *Geopedia* we mentioned earlier.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Robert Kirk**

*Dinopedia* is out this fall. *Insectpedia*. We're considering doing one on dogs, "Dogpedia." Which is going to be more about all of those behavioral things and dogs, as much as anything else. And "Cosmopedia", about the galaxy cosmos.

**Marshall Poe**

Wow.

**Robert Kirk**

Well, as you said, you know, the world is our oyster. Oysterpedia.

**Marshall Poe**

This is the thing with, you know, you're not only the person that follows you could be doing this, but the person who follows you who follows you could be doing this.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah. Yeah, it's fun.

**Marshall Poe**

It's fun for a long time.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

And you get updates and new additions.

**Robert Kirk**

Right.

**Marshall Poe**

And fun. And you could have a whole library of Pedia books.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Let me get on the mailing list for that.

**Robert Kirk**

Yeah, they're fun. They are fun. But, you know, I would stress that they are both fun and informative. They really are.

### **Marshall Poe**

Let me tell everybody that we've been talking to Robert Kirk about the Pedia series from Princeton University Press. You can go to the Princeton University Press, and you can find the books there and you can buy them. Robert, thanks so much for being on the show.