ASK ME ANYTHING

Steven Pressfield & Shawn Coyne

Hi, this is Shawn Coyne and welcome to the very first Black Irish Books podcast.

What we're going to do today is answer some of the questions that we received during *The Authentic Swing* promotion for everybody who signed up for First Look Access to Steve's website. Boy, that was a long sentence. So anybody that you know who goes to Steve's site, you should really encourage them to sign up for First Look Access because I think we're going to have a lot of fun with this.

Anyway, I'm going to just jump right in. Steve's on the other line. So I'm going to begin with a question from Alexandre Moisan and I apologize if I mispronounce your name and everybody, I'm probably going to mispronounce everybody, so bear with me. Anyway, Alexander is a visual artist for video games and he's in the middle of a project right now that's sort of an incubator time period where a lot of experts are coming in and giving advice to the team and his question, I think, is a really good one and here it is Steve.

Q: [Alexandre Moisan] How have you managed to select good from bad feedback? Are you a bit like Steve Jobs, who didn't believe in focus groups or do you think there is an optimum amount of outside intervention that makes our work better?

Steve: That is a good question. I am a non-believer in feedback and I think that 99.9% of it is bad. So the only person I listen to is you, Shawn and a lot of times I don't even listen to you. But I think really that feedback is tremendously overrated. I'm with Steve Jobs on it.

One of my first jobs was in advertising; I was a copywriter in New York at a place called Ted Bates. We used to have these things called Gang Bangs every once in a while and it was like when the agency was pitching a new account like Burger King or 7-Up or something like that and the whole creative department, which was like maybe 60-80 people would be in a room, big, giant room and we would go around the table and each team; copywriter or art director, would pin their campaign on the wall and then they would pitch it and then everybody would judge it. If you sat in that room for about 20 minutes, it became very clear that even among these highly paid, award-winning professionals, 80 people in the room, there were only about 2 people who really could see what was working and what wasn't working.

So if you show your writing to 8 people in a writing group, you're going to get 8 wrong answers that area going to screw you up. So I think that I'm a believer in finding one person that you can trust and not going very far back beyond that. You'll drive yourself crazy. And what a writer has to do really, is cultivate his own instincts and his own self-evaluation, so you can read you own stuff and say 'that's good' or 'that's bad'. I'm definitely not a believer in feedback.

Shawn: Just to jump in on that point, I think it's a kin to sort of seeing a doctor. You want to find the best specialist for whatever ails you and the very, very difficult part about writing is that there aren't many doctors available for you. So you actually have to train yourself how to diagnose your own problems.

And Steve, you've worked for decades learning that skill and now it's something that comes intuitive to you. So anyway, the idea of letting people sort of shit on your work (sorry to use that expression) just because they're trying to be writers themselves, I think you're absolutely right. It's going to really lead you down the wrong path and you really need to develop your own skill as an editor, so I'll leave it at that.

Steve: There's actually another question here in my printout, I don't have the name of who it's from, but somebody asked:

Q: [Ulla Lauridsen] Do you show your Foolscap version to anyone? Is it discussed back and forth and subject to a lot of revision before you start work on a text?

Steve: The answer, as you can tell for me, is no. I just do it once and I'm the only one that looks at it.

Shawn: That makes absolute sense because I think you say this in THE AUTHENTIC SWING, Steve. But once you start sort of letting the things in your mind outside of your mind, it really kind of robs them of their power. So when you're working on a Foolscap method or any kind of outline method, it's really best to keep it to yourself. Even keep it to yourself after you finish the novel and it's been published.

I mean, the fact is Steve, that you're sharing the Foolscap method for THE LEGEND OF BAGGER VANCE now. That's a good 15 years, 10 years after the publication of the novel and as I recall, you were a little reluctant to even do that. Oh Steve, here's one that I think would be really interesting to answer.

Steve: Okay, plunge right in Shawn.

Shawn: It's from a guy named Jack Yeh and he says:

Q: [Jack Yeh] How many projects are you working on at any given time? How do you choose which projects to focus on?

Steve: I'm from the school of only working on one at a time, although sometimes I'll have 2 or 3. But I know that I have a lot of screenwriter friends because I live in Los Angeles and they regularly juggle 3 and 4 projects and it doesn't seem to be a problem for them at all. But I think you definitely have to compartmentalize and do 2 hours on one, stop no matter what, 2 hours on the other or however you're going to do it. One day, the next day, whatever.

Shawn: That makes a lot of sense. The other thing that's important when you're trying to figure out what kind of story to write is to, and again you mentioned this in *The Authentic Swing* you have separate files that you have in your office and you put information in there that you find that would be applicable to an idea that you may have had 6 months ago if you stumble upon it.

And so eventually, after a period of time and this is how actually you came up with the concept of TIDES OF WAR, as I recall. Let me just take a step back, when Steve sent me GATES OF

FIRE, I loved the book but I really needed to have Steve write another book in a similar sort of genre so that we could build an audience for him.

I was an editor at Doubleday at the time. And so, I said this to Steve and Steve at the time basically told me to screw off. There was no way he was going to be able to write on command, especially from some smart ass editor in New York, but about a week later he called me and he said "Look, I was very, very quick to write off doing another one of these but as I was poking around in my office, I found a file that had the name 'Alcibiades' on it and that was actually the beginning of the novel 'TIDES OF WAR' and Steve had collected information over a period of time, probably years, about this very charismatic figure in ancient Greece.

And so when the time came where he was asked if he had anything that was close to something that he had written before, he actually did. And it wasn't being dictated to, it was something that came organically from your own mind. So I think working and having files of different ideas and then peppering them over a period of time is a good idea.

Steve: Okay, let's see. This one here that we picked out.

Shawn: Okay, number 23. Here's the next question, Steve. It's from a man named Kevin Worthley and here we go.

Q: [Kevin Worthley] Steve, I have many project ideas, as do many writers including you I'm guessing. All seem to have potential of course, so in your experience, how do you select which one to start and stay with and what criteria do you use to determine whether you should abandon a project when the process starts to stall or you hit a dead spot?

Shawn: That's a good question.

Steve: That's a great question. The short answer for me is, I always try to pick the project that I'm most scared of. In other words, where resistance is the highest. And I kind of use that as a guideline for me because the more resistance you feel, I have found the more important that project is to your evolution as an artist and as a person. And the more passion you'll have for it, the more important it is. Usually there's a hump you have to get over of terror, but once you're

over the hump, that project really grabs you. Once you acknowledge it, it grabs you and then you go forward.

The second half of that question is 'What criteria do you use to determine when you should abandon a project?' and all I can say is I don't abandon projects. I think for me at least, once I've made the decision that I'm in love with something and it has hooked me, and the way I make that decision, thing with a novel is, or with a movie if you're directing it is, you've got to commit like 2 years of your life to it. So you have to ask yourself 'Am I willing to give 2 years to this?' and once you've made that decision, then for me at least, it's pretty hard to abandon it. So I think when you hear those voices, at least for me, in your head saying 'I should drop this project', those voices are probably resistance and you should disown them and keep going, dismiss them.

Shawn: That makes a lot of sense. I'm working on a book now and Steve has known about it for 15 months and recently, I've written 115,000 words in it and it's sort of that resistance book that we all have within ourselves that we know we really need to finish it and we really need to give everything that we have to it. And what I'm finding right now in this very moment is that my brain is coming up with a million wonderful ideas of different things I should be doing. So right now, it's extremely difficult for me to just sort of push those away and focus on the beast that I've been working on for 2 years. So thanks for that question. I think I'm going to take a little bit away from it myself.

Steve: Now I'm going to throw a question in here which again on my page, I don't have the names of the person who read it. But maybe we'll dig that up later. This is for both of us, Shawn.

Q: [Ray Napoliano] Hi Steve. What 2 books must I read before I die that will have a profound effect on me? Not yours or the Bible or Shakespeare.

Steve: So Shawn, I thought I'll answer one and then you answer one and I'll answer another, you answer another. Is that okay with you?

Shawn: That sounds good. Yea, that sounds good. I got a whole bunch of them.

Steve: Oh, great. I want to hear yours anyway. Now, and I thought about this. This first book that I'm going to suggest, no one, of anybody that's listening is ever going to read this book. It's *Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War* and it's the kind of book that you have to read in college in a Greek history class and for the brief version, the Readers Digest version of what this book is… Oh by the way, you can get it at a Penguin paperback for like $9 and it's great. The Peloponnesian War was a 27 year war between Athens and Sparta, and Thucydides was there for the whole thing and wrote this incredible book about it. And the reason I suggested this book is, a life changer, is for the level of aspiration of this book.

The writing is so intelligent, it's so deep; the issues that he takes on are profound and so much like our contemporary America too, that it really shows you what can be done and what is out there. For instance, right now there's some great shows on TV like Game of Thrones and Breaking Bad and the Soprano's was on and House of Cards and stuff like that. And if you're watching that stuff, you might think 'Well that's the limit of how good stuff can be' but it isn't remotely the limit. It isn't even scratching the surface of what the limit is.

So I'll blather on a little bit about Thucydides and bore the hell out of you. And Jeff, you can cut this when you do the editing. There's one great scene in the Athenian assembly where the Athenian Navy has captured, this island has revolted from them and they're trying to decide how to punish this island. And so debate goes back 'Should we kill all the men and sell all the women and children into slavery?' Half of the people want to do that. 'Or should we let them go with just a warning?' And there's a debate, a true debate that really happened in the Athenian assembly and Thucydides reproduces the speeches on both sides. It goes on for like 8 pages each and the speeches make the best speech that Barack Obama ever gave look like child's play. They're so intelligent and goes so deep, and so it's great to read that stuff. And by the way, here's what happened there. The Athenian assembly decided to kill all the men and sell all the women and children in slavery. They sent a boat, a fast boat, a galley under oars to deliver that message to the army on the island. And the next morning, they woke up and they decided 'Oh my God, what have we done?' They changed their mind and they sent a second boat out to overtake them and the second boat, the guys at the oars slept, ate at the oars all day long and they did overtake

the first ship and told them not to kill all the people. So anyway, *Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War*, that's my first one. I'll have another one after Shawn goes.

Shawn: The question again was '2 books everyone must read before they die that will have a profound effect on them'. Of course, I can't speak for everybody, so the only thing that I can do is to give the things that have a profound effect on me and I'll tell a little story about it but whether or not they will for you, I can't guarantee. So anyway, the title I'm going to bring up is something that I read when I was in college. Now the great thing about this book was that my roommate at the time was studying government and I was studying biochemistry. So my mind was completely frazzled and I really needed something to relax. My roommate had this book on his desk and I just picked it up and I thought 'Why not? This government stuff might be pretty good'. So I started reading it and it was a book called *The Time of Illusion* and it was written by a wonderful writer, a New Yorker writer named Jonathan Schell.

I think it was published around 1976. What I really, really loved about this book was it's the story, the very, very long story and very complicated story of how Richard Nixon and the Nixon administration had come into office and how they had really brilliantly brought in some advertising executives. H.R. Haldeman I think worked at Ted Bates, Steve. He was one of the premiere advertising men in the 1960's and he became very close to Richard Nixon, became his chief of staff in the White House. What they did is, they were able to use all of the methods of advertising to really put on a really great sheen on Richard Nixon. They reinvented him because as you remember in the early 1960's, Nixon had basically dropped out of the political life. He said "Look, you're not going to have Richard Nixon to kick around anymore. I'm out of here.' This is when he lost the governorship of California. And then in 1968, he comes back. He comes back and they call him the new Richard Nixon. And he's completely repackaged by these advertising guys and the way he presents himself is very American, very genuine, very authentic and he was just dynamite. He won the election in 1968 and as soon as he got into office, he sort of was like 'Oh, great. Now I'm in office, let's do what we really want to do. But we can't really show anybody what exactly that is'.

So what Jonathan Schell has done in this book at *The Time of Illusion* is, he has really deconstructed the political machinations of one of the most brilliant politicians and his staff over a period of 6 years that led to the Watergate controversy. And how that happened, how the country changed because of that and how we sort of lost our innocence as a country. We started to really question any political figure from that point forward. Today, if you ask anybody "Do you think a politician is speaking the truth when they're out campaigning?" most people would be like "Well no. Probably not". So anyway, this is a book that I read while I wasn't supposed to be doing this work and it was just so profound for me because it explained what I suspected may be true and that people present a façade of who they are and deep down, they're quite different.

Steve: And did that change you somehow, Shawn? Did that change your career path or anything? Why was it so profound for you?

Shawn: I always suspected, you know how it is when you're in a group of people and you have ambitions to be something. At the time, I was in the science department and I was working at a laboratory at the School of Public Health and there were all these poseurs in the group, you know, these sort of people who wouldn't wash their clothes and they would let their hair grow long and get straggly and then you would ask them a direct question and they would pretend that they didn't understand what you're saying and it struck me as a lot of people pretending to be these geniuses because that's the way they were supposed to be. They were supposed to be distracted and all these things.

So at the time, I was feeling very isolated from the group that I was supposedly trying to integrate myself into. So when I read this book, it was just confirmation of what I thought was true, just from that experience. So that I think is why it had such a profound effect on me, because it basically said 'You're not crazy, people do play games and it's your role to worry about yourself, not so much about what other people are doing'.

Steve: Ah, okay. Very interesting. I never knew that. Okay, let me jump in and do my second book, which is *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway. If you haven't read *The Sun Also Rises*, I can't recommend it enough. For me, it's kind of the polar opposite of Thucydides or any of these. I think if you're going to pick 2 books, one should be a classic that goes really, really deep.

I know that *The Iliad*, *Shakespeare*, the *Bible*; that kind of stuff. But the other thing I think, should be something that is hip and contemporary and very American, since that's where we're working. And even though *The Sun Also Rises* was written probably close to 100 years ago, it's about a bunch of ex-patriot, cool people in Europe in the aftermath, a lost generation aftermath of WW1, I think it's still as hip as it can be. It's very, very American. The other thing that's so great about it, above and beyond the content of it, the gist of the story is that it's told by a guy named Jake Barnes who's a veteran of WW2 who has had his manhood shot away in the war. So that's kind of the metaphor of the whole piece of impotence that casualties, how do you survive after this cataclysmic event. So it's very contemporary to today and the way that people respond to it in the book is by being very hip and going to places that nobody's ever gone to before and doing things that nobody's ever done and doing them in a very cool way. One other thing I want to say about this book is it's about pain. It's about how you deal with overwhelming pain and I think that a lot of what we write about is about pain.

That's a lot of why artists take on a project, because something has happened to them and they're trying to deal with it or that's just what's compelling to them and are in their life. Hemmingway I think is one of the greatest writers about pain because he does it all in the negative space. He never will directly say what the agony is. It's all done obliquely and by leaving things out and you can read *The Sun Also Rises* from start to finish and never realize that the lead character had had that accident happen to him or been shot that particular way because Hemmingway, it's so elusive. I think he only mentions it twice and you could go write over it. So he's a brilliant writer on how to deal with pain. I know that in my own evolution as a writer, I sort of started with that, trying to put on paper certain agonizing things and I couldn't do it. I kept doing it the wrong way; it looked clumsy, it was obvious, it was stupid. I think learning to write about pain is a big part of getting to anything deep. So that's one of the reasons why I would highly recommend *The Sun Also Rises* by Earnest Hemmingway.

Shawn: That's a really good point about Hemmingway and thinking of space. I've always had a hard time of sort of figuring exactly how he did it, but his short stories are like that too.

Steve: Yea, they're great.

Shawn: It's like I think somebody asked him about a short story he wrote and he said "Oh, well I just sort of decided to cut out the beginning and the end' and the end is the father goes into a room and hangs himself. And you get that. I wish I had the short story off the top of my head. Hills Like White Elephants, there's a great short story about a very, very difficult decision that a couple makes. Anyway, I can completely agree about *The Sun Also Rises*. That's one of the masterworks. Just to give you my second book, and I think you're right, Steve. But I think it's whenever somebody asks you about this, you should try an epic sort of look on something and then a more focused, tighter construction of events that just start and then finish.

This one's a thriller and I love thrillers and the reason why I love thrillers is because I think that they are what really speak to contemporary life. Thrillers are about an average sort of person or even a superhero who gets thrown into extraordinary circumstances that are just completely baffling. And not only that, in one point in the story, it gets very personal until the lead character either triumphs or does not triumph. But at the end of the storytelling, there's a level of relief brought to the reader or the viewer because they can relate to that lead character going through such difficult times, making sense of their world. So anyway, the book I'm talking about was written in the 1970's and when I give you the title, you're going to know exactly what I'm talking about. But I think it's really important to actually read this book as opposed to seeing the wonderful movie that was made out of it. It's because the writer was William Goldman and the book is *Marathon Man*.

Marathon Man is just the work of a master watch maker. The craftsmanship in this book is beyond anything that I've read in quite some time. It's about 240 pages, which comes to about 50,000-60,000 words. Now, most thrillers today are in the 80,000-100,000 word variety. So how was Goldman capable of cutting 3,000 words and create a book that is so electrifying, so dark, exciting and so personal? If you haven't read it, it's the story of a young graduate student who gets thrust into a world deep conspiracy. He doesn't know it, but his brother is working for some nefarious people as sort of a spy and his father… I'm giving away the plot. I shouldn't do that. It's just a wonderful book. It's incredibly exciting to read and it's deep. There's some great messages in this book. So that's my number 2.

Steve: Let me throw another one in here and then after this one, Shawn, I'd like to come back to that one about e-publishing versus direct, mainstream publishing and get you to this. Okay, here's one that comes from Claude Knaus.

Q: [Claude Knaus] It seems that the Foolscap method only explains half the story of storytelling. Whenever I write, I observe the following phases. 1: bottom-up writing, 2: Top-down writing. The first phase is the hard part. It starts like brainstorming and organizing thoughts until the structure becomes finally clear; the Foolscap. Only after the Foolscap is found, it becomes easy to write. I can write with confidence and I just have to fill the holes. I wonder if you experience the same or if you always manage to come up with the structure up front before writing a single word.

Steve: I think this opens a really interesting topic, which is kind of basically 'how do you write a book?' and I think which of course, that's what people ask. So I think that what Claude has really hit on here is that it's a 2-pronged deal; the right brain works and then the left brain works. One part of it is instinct and the other part is analysis. The way it works, at least in my experience is, you alternate and you kind of go from… So let's talk about instinct for a second. Well, let's talk about the Foolscap method for a second. The Foolscap method says "Block out your whole story on a single page". That's a great idea and it definitely should be done. But once you've got it and you sort of have the whole concept, let's say you're writing Moby Dick and you've got act 1, act 2, act 3, the ship puts out to sea, act 2 they hunt the whale, act 3 they find the whale and they have the final climax. Then the next question is "Well how do you write this damn thing?"

So in other words, the Foolscap is sort of the basic analysis but once you write it, you have to just plunge in on instinct, put all rational thought aside and just follow your instincts and let it rip as a writer. This is when you're kind of in touch with your muse, when you've accessed your muse and you just go for it. Don't look back. For instance, let's say Herman Melville's got his Foolscap done for Moby Dick. Suddenly, he's in the shower and he comes up with the idea of a scene where Ahab calls the whole crew together and he brings out a Spanish gold ounce, a gold doubloon and he says "The lookout that spots the first white whale gets this Spanish gold ounce worth a fortune". He takes out a hammer, a carpenter's maul and he nails it to the mast. So as

he's thinking of that scene, he thinks "Wow! That is a great scene. I don't know where it goes but I'm just going to write it and I'll put it down someplace and then I'll come back and do the next scene". So that is sort of the instinct side. A scene comes to you in the shower, it comes to you on the subway, or a sequence comes to you. Just write it, get it down. Then analysis comes in and you say "Well that goes right in the middle of act 2. That comes right before the turning point of act 2. I can use my left brain and figure out where that goes. So what Claude is saying, he's calling it 'bottom-up writing' and 'top-down writing'.

I would use the phrase that it's instinctive writing versus the analysis side of it or the right brain versus the left brain. But it's a back and forth between the two that is how any creative project goes forward. Shawn, over to you.

Shawn: Yea, I would absolutely agree with that, Steve. You've written what? 12, 13 books now? That, you've really, really nailed something and this is the myth of writers block. In that, if you get stuck, say as you said, you have an inspiration in the shower and you don't know where the scene goes in your book but you do know it's going to fit in there somewhere, so you write it down. And then you finish with that scene and now it's 9:30 in the morning and you've got another 2 ½ hours to write. What are you going to do now? This is where, as you say, the analysis part comes in.

I would recommend you go back to your Foolscap and you look and you say to yourself "I need to get from point A to point B and I need, I don't know, 12 scenes to get there" and I can go into a lot of detail about that, but let's just say it's 12 scenes. So one of those scenes, you've just written and it's a really good one and it turns because what it says to the audience who's reading it is that it's raising the stakes of this story. So you know that's going to go probably in the middle of say, the chasing the whale part of your Foolscap. So you might say to yourself "Well I'm going to need a scene to set something up for that, so why don't I think of how I can come up with a scene to do that."

So it's an alternation as you say Steve, between your instincts and your analysis. So when you get stuck, I always say this to people. People think they're the problem "Oh, if I wasn't just so lazy and stupid, I could finish this thing' and it's just that you are not the problem. The problem is

the problem. So the reason why you do so much analysis is to learn how to find out what the problems are so that you can attack them and defeat them. You are not the problem. Find out what the problem is and then you'll be able to fix it.

Steve: Very good. Here's another question, it's kind of in the same vein here. It's from Michelle.

Q: [Michele Nelson] I'm currently halfway through writing the first draft of my first novel and my tendency is to want to go back and revise the heck out of the stuff I've written so far before moving forward. Resistance, right? So I'm pushing myself to just keep moving and not look back until the second draft. Do you have any advice on how to keep moving forward and how to keep creating without worrying about what the first draft looks like?

Steve: This is kind of a similar to the question we were just talking before. My rule in the first drafts and I think this is absolutely valid is, don't ever look back and don't ever analyze in the first draft. Just get something down on paper from start to finish. In other words, stay with instinct the whole way. And the reason I say that is because the enemy in the first draft is resistance. What will happen is we'll bog down halfway through the first draft and we'll start saying to ourselves things like "Boy, this has been done before. How am I ever going to do anything as good as Tolstoy did?" etc., etc., etc. We'll come up with all those negative thoughts and we'll stop.

So don't think in the first draft. Just keep going all the way through and what's interesting is, a lot of great stuff comes out when you just let it rip and go all the way through. Then when the first draft is done, then you can put on that left brain side and start to analyze it and look over it and say "Well where's act 1? Where's act 2? Where's act 3?" and the only way to overcome that resistance is just to keep going forward. There's a concept that John Keats had that he called Negative Capability. You can Google this, look it up on Wikipedia. It's from a letter that he wrote to his brother and what he meant by Negative Capability is the ability to keep going forward and be productive, even when you don't know where you are or where you're going. And it's a real skill to learn. You have to just be a little dumb, a little crazy, a little optimistic and just keep plowing through it. In a way, it's like Columbus heading for America. Day after day, you're looking at that blank horizon, you just have to have faith and just keep sailing.

Shawn: I'd agree with that and I would just add one small, little thing. And this is for the people who are fully with Steve on this, and I am too. That first draft, as Steve says, you just have to paint the canvas, you can't worry. Please don't go back and edit. It'll just destroy you. But if you do get stuck, remember where you're going and what generally where you've been. So then, that is going to give you an assignment. So if for example, you're writing Moby Dick and you have just spotted the white whale, where you're going to go next is probably preparing to go out and get that whale. So just that smallest little note. I've got to write a scene where the guys go out and prepare to get the whale. So they got to go and get the boats and they've got to jump in and they've got to make sure they have the right harpoons; it's that kind of thing when I say analysis. I'm not saying deep editorial analysis. I'm saying if you get stuck, boil it down to one sentence and give yourself an assignment and then paint the canvas based on that one note.

Steve: Very good, very good. And I've found sometimes that what helps me is that I'll kind of ask myself a question, looking over the whole book or whatever. Like, say what's missing, missing, missing? And usually, you can fill in a blank that way. You'll say to yourself "Well I don't have a scene between Ahab and Starbuck" or "I don't have a scene between Queequeg and somebody else". Then when you start to think about it, something will come. Let me switch to another question. This is the one that I really wanted to hear your answer about and again, I don't have, on my sheet, I don't know who this is from, so I apologize.

Q: [Mary Doyle] I'd be interested in your thoughts about traditional versus direct e-book publishing. Does it make sense for an unknown author to spend the energy to try to find an agent and publisher or to spend that same energy working to attract and build a reader base through direct e-book publishing like Amazon?

Steve: So Shawn, I'd like to ask you that.

Shawn: Okay. Right now, today is the most exciting time in book publishing history, I think. The reason I say that is because you, today have an option. You, today have the ability to test your work on the reader and whether or not you build an audience, you're going to find out pretty soon. If nobody comes to your work, nobody enjoys it, then you're going to know "I'm going to have to change what I'm writing".

So here's the big fact about big publishing right now. And when I say big publishing, I'm talking about the big, 5 major corporations (there used to be 6) that control, I would say 50%-60% of all sales of trade books per year. Your Random House, Macmillan, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster and Hachette. Only one of those is an American company, by the way.

Steve: Wow, I didn't know that. Wow.

Shawn: Yea, so should you create your own e-book and start to find your own audience or should you try and find an agent and sell to the big publishers? I'm going to tell you this; if you don't have a blockbuster-potential book, and I know everybody thinks they do, you can really find out if you do have a blockbuster-potential book, depending on the genre you're writing at. If you have a novel that you've written that is strictly horror or is strictly mystery or strictly romance. I mean, love story that's directly love story, not any set of plots. You should really, I think find your own audience and build yourself a website, blog and slowly build your audience that way.

The way you can do that is using the resources of Amazon and CreateSpace and Nook and Kobo and Google and iTunes. So right there, you've got pretty much saturated distribution with not having to pay much money to get it. After you write your book, you'll probably have to get it formatted for the Kindle and also for ePub. So right there, you're talking maybe $500 all in and once you have those things done, then you can load them on the major electronic book networks. If however, you've written something akin to The Firm or say The Hunger Games, where you're cross-mixing a lot of different genres, you have a very strong central lead character, then you might want to try to go out and find an agent.

Now what agents want to do today is to find the next James Patterson. So that's what they're going to be looking for and if you're not James Patterson, that's fine. But don't expect people to jump over themselves to want to represent you if you're writing a genre piece. Now I know that a lot of best sellers come out of genre, but what the major publishers are basically doing now, is they're leaving genre to self-publishing. And the people who do come up from self-publishing like Hugh Howey and another number of E.L. James; these are the major blockbuster writers today. They came out of self-publishing.

So what the big publishers do is that they're letting self-publishing be the triple A and the double A baseball sort of minor leagues and once somebody rises from that crop, they try and snatch them up and co-op them to go to the major houses. So it really depends on the book that you're writing. You're going to spend quite a bit of time trying to find an agent and then that agent is going to put you through a lot of editorial rewrites because publishers today really want a book that's just about ready to go. And then the agent will spend some time finding you a publisher and then it's going to be another 12 to 15 months before your book even reaches the marketplace. So that's a good 2 ½ year commitment and if you're going to spend 2 ½ years to try and get published, why not take a chance now, get it out now, create your own website and try and find your audience? And you have 2 ½ years to build one. And then by the time you're done with that, you're going to have another book. That's the way I'm feeling now.

Steve: Let me ask you this, Shawn. What if, first of all it's a 2-part question kind of on that same thought. First is, how has publishing changed, let's say over 20 years? I mean, it was possible 20 years ago for a writer of high aspirations to find a real editor and a real house that would really back him and so on and so forth. And the second part of it is, what if you're a writer like a really crack fiction writer, really aiming high and you think that your work is really good? Does e-publishing still make sense or does that kind of bring it down market a little bit?

Shawn: That's a good question and what's changed in 20 years is fundamentally this; books are now no longer being sold to middlemen. 20 years ago, the major publishers had a lock on distribution, meaning the only way that you could get your book in front of other people, a mass of other people, millions of people, was to go through a major publisher. And what the major publisher did is they would sort of select people that they would want to build, as you say, 20 years ago you could go in as what they call a midlist writer, say a crime writer who has potential to become say James Patterson. James Patterson started this way in 1977 and I think he won the Edgar for paperback's very first original. So what they did is, they would bring you on and then they would pitch you to the major book sellers and the independent book sellers because if they weren't behind the new, new thing, then those people would not try and get the audience, readers, to get that person a try.

But today, readers go directly to authors. So that begs the question "Where does the major publisher fit in in that equation? What value do they provide?" and there's a lot of answers to that question and in many instances, if you're a literary writer, when I say literary, I mean you're writing large family sagas like The Corrections, Jonathan Francis' novel or other really sort of intense, interior, internal kind of storytelling. I do think the major publishers are probably a good place to start. It doesn't mean that if they say "No, we don't want to have you" that there's no way that you'll ever get in an audience.

But I do think that having the patina of a certain imprint on the spine of your book does signal to the intelligentsia in New York and Los Angeles, the people who are in the media that you have reached a level of expertise. Those kind of imprints are like Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Knopf, Scribner.

But say those publishers don't bite or you can't find an agent to get there, I still think that if you know who your audience is or you suspect who your audience is, you can build a relationship with people who actually want to read your books. That is gold. That is what makes sense because publishers don't have a relationship with readers. Zero. They don't have any lists, they don't know who's buying their books. Amazon does, but again, these are major corporations and major corporations are not people, and people who read, they want to have a connection with a real human being. That's why they read. So I think authors and writers are getting closer and closer together and I think it's a great thing.

Steve: Okay, great answer. Here's another question I'm going to read that's on a different topic and again, I don't know who sent it. I'm sorry.

Q: [Matt White] I have been trying to be a professional screenwriter for a few years now. I've been close to getting my work produced/sold but have come up short. The advice I've consistently received has been: 1) Move to LA (I live in Las Vegas) and 2) Make your own movies on YouTube with a video camera and get your work noticed. Honestly, I'm not thrilled about either of these options but I'm beginning to think there's really no other way. My question is; is there another way? I'm considering writing a novel but before I start on that path, I want to be at peace with that decision to leave screenwriting behind.

Steve: I think this is a very good question unintentionally because it's about motivation and it's about how much it means to you and right now we're in Silver Lake in Los Angeles and Jeff's assignment is recording this for us and Jeff came out here to LA to be in the movie business and so did I, come out here to be in the movie business. And to say that you want to be a screenwriter and you're not willing to move to Los Angeles is like saying you want to be in government but you're not willing to move to Washington, DC or you want to be in fashion but you're not willing to move to Paris or to New York. Again, it's just a question of commitment. I'm not trying to be a hard case here or anything but here's the way a movie career happens in real life. You move to the place where it's being done. This is the same for a dancer that goes to New York or whatever it is.

You come into town and you're dead broke, you don't know anything about writing and you don't have any contacts. So you kind of worm your way in at the bottom. You start being a gofer, you get coffee for people, you get a job as a production assistant or you get some other job and you just write constantly. You work in wherever you work. What happens is, you start to make friends at the bottom of the food chain. Other people who are broke, other people who are struggling. And maybe somebody says to you "I'm stuck on my script. Will you help me write it over the next two weeks?" so you do it for free for some other bum that knows nothing and has no contacts. And then what happens is, a year or two, three years go by, and suddenly that person, that friend that you helped out, gets a job someplace. They're working on an actual movie.

Suddenly, they phone you and they say "Hey, could you come in here for a few days and help us work on this?" and you do, and the next thing, you're hired on that job. Or that person will say to you "Can you come over right now? I've got 2 scenes that need to be done." And you say "Yea, I'll jump in my Volkswagen, I'll be there in 10 minutes and we'll do it and we'll turn it in tomorrow". And that's the reason why you have to be there. You have to have a seat at the table. You have to be present. And the other thing is that these businesses like the music business or the movie business or the literary business or government or Silicon Valley or anything like that, businesses where people would cut off an arm to be in that business; the people who are in the

business have made the commitment. They've moved their family there, they're in it with both feet. And when somebody comes to them and wants to be hired and wants a job and they're still living in Peoria or Missoula, Montana, the person says "Well, I'm killing myself to be here. Why isn't this person here?" So your stuff goes in the trash with a resounding 'thud'. So I just would say in a situation like that, level of commitment. How much do you want it? That's the question.

Shawn: That's a good point, Steve and it also brings to mind that a pro recognizes another pro.

Steve: Yea, it's true.

Shawn: You're right. Anybody who comes to me and says "Hey, do you need an intern?" I'll say "Well, what are you thinking of doing?" and they'll say "Well, can I telecommute?" I'm like "No. No thank you. Why am I going to teach you a skill that you're going to abandon? Why would I teach you how to throw you a curve ball if you're going to play football tomorrow?" because that's what we think. If somebody says "Well, I don't want to move to New York and I don't want to take a lousy job and I don't want to do that", all those 'I don't want to', that's just saying that 'I don't really want to do what I'm asking'.

Steve: Continuing on that question here, as we're recording, we're recording in Silver Lake and Jeff Simon is recording us and he is our web guru for Black Irish, but he also is writing a screenplay and doing all kinds of other stuff like this, so it's just right appropriate to this question. So Jeff, let me ask you two things. You know, you moved here and here you are in Silver Lake, which is kind of a hot bed of young people, movie people, and also I'd like to ask you about the subject of moving to a place and then also about the YouTube question. Is it a good way to break into the movie business by doing your own YouTube videos? So this is Jeff Simon. Jeff, how old are you, by the way?

Jeff: I'm 27. I moved here in 2008 and when I moved here, was right after the economy crashed and during the writers' strike. So I got here and everybody was out of work, everybody had no money and I have a degree in art in production design. I came out here to work, to make movies and there weren't any being made. But it was through being here and everybody in the city of Los Angeles was out of work at the same time and you saw all sorts of new independent projects

showing up, if you will. So the big time people started sort of a double, answering both questions, but the big time writers and directors started doing stuff for the internet for the first time because that was the only market that they didn't have rules and regulations on. So Joss Whedon, of course the director/creator of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel and Firefly and many amazing things. He created a web series during that time called Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog and the idea there was that he could make a low-budget, high-production value product and distribute it on the internet. And so that's what I'm trying to do, I guess now as I work for Black Irish and they're amazing and it's a flexible job. So I can then spend the bulk of my time doing writing.

Steve: So how do you structure your day, Jeff, to get your screenwriting stuff done?

Jeff: I'm working on a web series, so there are 3 of us writing and 7 episodes at the moment and one guy lives right here with me and so that's easy. He comes over and we work between each other's' jobs, so he sometimes goes and works on a film or I'm working on a film and it's not really a fixed schedule. It's whenever the two of us can get in the same room, we do it. And this other girl is actually working in television but she's in Chicago, so we Skype with her and that's definitely more scheduled. It's like we set aside 2 hours and we write with her for those 2 hours over Skype and all simultaneously editing the same script at the same time.

Steve: See, this is like the real world of how it's done and I can also tell you guys that are listening that Jeff had a job on a Doug Liman film in London and he was gone for 15 months last year, but that all fits into your other time. You're moving on your own dream career. Correct?

Jeff: Yes, exactly. And so when you're working on a big movie, you end up only having a little bit of time in the evenings and luckily in London, the evening is the middle of the day here, so I was able to keep going. But it's all about trying to put in a little bit of time.

Steve: What about the YouTube concept?

Jeff: Oh, and YouTube. I think that that's where, I don't know if it'll be YouTube or Vimeo specifically or what service will come into play, but I think television is dying. Nobody my age

has a television subscription. You either watch a service that you can get for a good price, like Netflix. Or if the company is not smart enough to put it up, then it gets pirated. That's sort of the way it works.

Steve: So does it make sense to make your own movies if you're trying to do that? I mean, that's basically what you're trying to do in a sense. Right?

Jeff: Well that's what I'm doing. I hope it makes sense. I have production skills and I have a group of friends that want to do the production part of it also and I know I'm going to direct it. So for me, it makes absolute sense. I think if you want to go the directing route and production, then yes, absolutely. Make your own short film or make your own web series as I'm doing. If you want to just be a screenwriter, maybe find somebody else that wants to make a web series but doesn't have the thing written. Or you can always try to do the writers assistant approach, which I guess both paths still exist.

Steve: So this is really interesting to me. We haven't even talked about this before because in my day, which was not that long ago, it was about 15 years ago, there was no such thing as any of this stuff. The idea that you as a writer or director could produce your own stuff was impossible because it was so expensive. So you were sort of a slave to the studios or to the big financiers and everybody was tech-ignorant to the max and it's a whole new world for you guys coming up. I know Jeff, he could do anything as far as I can tell.

Jeff: Well, that's sort of where the problem comes in though because you then become expected to know how everything. So if I write it and then I direct it and produce it, do I also have to make the website for it and promote it and where do you draw the line between hiring a professional to do certain things and where do you do everything yourself?

Steve: Let me ask you this, Jeff. In your best case scenario, as your career would unfold over the next few years, what would happen?

Jeff: That's a tough question, I guess. For me, I'm trying to write and direct, so ideally I would do this first web series, and the great thing about a web series is you can get better as you go. So I can start with season one and it can be as good as I can possibly make it with the skills and the

money that I have now. And then as I continue to make episodes, hopefully they'll continue to get better and better and better. And then in theory, someone will see it and someone will like it and maybe give me money to make another one. Or the other way to go, is people will like it and I'll just have an immediate audience and I can raise money for the next thing on Kickstarter or on Indiegogo or whatever and just keep ideally producing through my own company and then you don't even have to worry about the big producers and all of that.

Steve: Can you make money doing that?

Jeff: It's such a young thing, it's hard to know. There are certainly people that do. Rocketjump is a company that comes to mind. They make Video Game High School, which is in its second season and they made like $300,000 on Kickstarter, paid everybody what they were worth and now through YouTube ads and other things, they I think, are a fully functioning, profitable company.

Steve: Now here's a question that's sort of related to that.

Q: [Stephanie Kelcey] I have a young family and a day job. Before writing was your full-time profession, how did you manage your time to be able to write, work, deal with other obligations, i.e.: family and get a decent night's sleep? Or is sleeping asking too much?

Steve: And that's another very good question because this is a real world question that everybody's dealing with and again, it comes down to commitment. But in this case, I don't think you need to move to the other city and do it full time. You can carve out an hour or two a day and just do that. But you must do that. You must do it as a priority. Shawn, didn't James Patterson, he used to come into J. Walter Thompson at 7:00 in the morning and put in 2 hours. Right? And that's how he wrote his books. And you know, when I was working in an office, I would come in on the weekend and I would just work on the weekend on my own stuff. Or when I was driving a cab or tending bar, doing something like that, I would just block out a certain amount of time, even if it was only 2 hours and just do it. And remember that if you can do even an hour a day, 5 days a week, what does that come out to over the course of the year?

250 hours or something. And if you could do a page a day, that's 250 pages at the end of the year, even with a family, even with a full-time job.

I remember when Steven Soderbergh won his Oscar for traffic, he held up the statue and he said "This is for everybody who spends just one hour a day pursuing their dream" and he was right on. Now what I actually used to do, is I would work for like a year and a half, 2 years, save my money, quit, go someplace cheap, write a novel for another 18 months, which would not be published, then I'd go back and work again. That's one way to do it. But the other way is just to prioritize your day, and just like people go to the gym and they won't miss going to the gum or they run and they won't miss running; whatever it is that you're working on, you can do it if you just put that time in each day.

Shawn: I absolutely agree with that Steve.

Steve: I mean Shawn, let me interrupt you. The book that you're working now, you've got 3 young kids, you've got all kinds of work that you with Black Irish, you're an agent, you do freelance editing and you're writing this book called The Story Grid, which we're going to bring on Black Irish before too long. How do you do it?

Shawn: I do it exactly the way you described. It's not about working yourself to the bone. I've done that before and what that leads to is blaming other people. So what you end up doing is "Oh, jeez. If my kid didn't need those braces and I didn't have to go to the orthodontist and do this or that, then I could have finished that thing". First of all, you should do it in the morning. I think that's a really big, great secret that everybody should listen to because you get stuff done early in the morning. I do, at least. So what I have been doing over the past 15 months, is getting up at 5:00 and doing my 2 hours before the family arises. And do sometimes my youngest wake up at 6 and come out and interrupt me? Yea, that happens. But as you said, even if it's an hour, those hours build up and if you give yourself assignments every single day, I've got to do this, I've got to do that, this block of time is for that; that's the way to get it done. There's no real magic to it, it's just a commitment.

Steve: And the other thing is, that the muse likes to see you. You get credit for it. Even an hour a day goes in the books. It really does, she notices. Maybe this will be the last question, I think. We're probably running out of time here. And by the way, there are just so many great questions. We had like what? 230 questions and I mean you can just go on forever and ever.

Q: [Chloe Okoli] In all the time you were writing, before you published your first book, what made you keep going day after day, in the face of uncertainty?

Steve: And again, I think that's a great question. For me, I just couldn't do anything else. I remember my friends used to make fun of me. They'd call me the man who has written more words for less money than anybody in the world. I can remember driving home and a friend of mine was giving me a ride home and we saw some poor, homeless guy sleeping in the rain and he said to me "That's you, Steve, in the next year as soon as you're out of here". And of course, he was right. When I was working in advertising, I would come home at the end of the day and even if I'd done some good stuff during the day, I was so freaking depressed, I was ready to slit my throat. And the only thing that would cheer me up was trying to do something good. You know, we all have a gift; I'm convinced of it. And it's sitting in our guts like a rock and it will kill us unless we try to do something with it. I joke sometimes that I've tried to sell out many times but nobody will let me do it. And there's a lot of truth to that, but when I was working in advertising for various things, I would save my money and I would quit.

There would always be that moment as I was walking out the door when my boss, who was usually a good friend of mine, would kind of call me in and say "Make me an offer. We'll make you a VP. We'll give you a $20,000 bonus" or whatever it is, things like that. And with true care, they'd say to me "Steve, what are you doing? You're going to go out there, you're just going into the toilet. Don't do it. Stay here. The time you're wasting is going down the drain" and I would agonize and I would go home for days and say "Are they right? Are they right? Should I stay here where I have a real job?" but in the end, I just couldn't do it. I had to keep trying and I can't necessarily recommend the life that I live but it was right for me. So although I have, in these question and answer session or the blogs that I write, I'm trying to encourage young people to keep going. My bottom line is that I don't have very much compassion for anybody that's

whining and sniveling and coming up with reasons why they shouldn't do it. If you care, then do it. If you don't, then let it go. You've got to be crazy to want to do this stuff, but if you are, you'll know it in your gut. You just won't be able to do anything else.

Shawn: That's it. That's a good way to end.

Steve: Yea, thanks to everybody who's listening to this thing. Thanks for writing in these wonderful questions. I'm sorry if I ended on kind of a hardcore note there. But write in, let us know if this works. We've got a million other questions here that we could do again. Take a crack at some of these other things and I'm sorry for those that we missed; there's so many great ones. I hope it's been helpful. If you want us to do more, let us know. We'll try to do some more. And last note from Jeff; for those names that we missed when I was reading questions and I didn't have the names, it was just because of the way the computer printed it out. But Jeff's looking everybody's name up and they'll be at the bottom of the page, so thank you very much once again.