

Why the Best Authors Never Write Books Alone: Interview with Steven Pressfield and Shawn Coyne

SP = Stephen Pressfield

SC = Shawn Coyne

SC To learn your craft requires a lot of intense effort. If you want to be a great carpenter, you better learn how to dovetail, right? Nobody is just going to say, “I’m going to be a carpenter and bang out a beautiful chest of drawers.” They have to apprentice, learn the craft.

[Music playing]

A Welcome to *The Portfolio Life* with Jeff Goins. I’m your host, Andy Traub, and this is the show that helps you pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice. This episode of *The Portfolio Life* – this episode – this episode is epic. Today, you’re going to experience a conversation with Steven Pressfield and his editor, Shawn Coyne, and our friend, Jeff Goins. Jeff, Shawn, and Steve discuss *The Resistance*, what it’s like to write a *New York Times* bestseller, why rejection is healthy, and how we can find meaning and direction in our work as authors. Here’s Jeff, Shawn, and Steve.

[Music playing]

J Steve, Shawn, welcome to the show. Great to have you guys.

SC Thank you Jeff.

SP Thanks.

J So, I’m just going to tell you this kind of came together. I was reading your book, Shawn, *The Story Grid*. Do you call it a book? It was more like a textbook really.

SC Yeah, it really is.

J Yeah, I was – I was like, “Why is this thing \$35?” And, then, I was like, “Oh, it’s like 500 pages or something.” And I was reading it, and I was reading Steve’s forward. And he talked about Max



Perkins, a name that I know that a lot of people, unfortunately, don't know. For those who don't know who Max Perkins is, Steve, could you enlighten us?

SP Oh, I mean, he is like from the old school that every writer dreams of, an editor that kind of takes a massive pile of pages and turns them into solid gold, you know? The kind of editor that they don't have any more except for Shawn, of course.

J Yeah. So, this was interesting. I was reading this, and I've been reading this five-part biography of Hemingway that is just sort of blowing my mind. And I'm reading about this relationship that Hemingway had with Max Perkins. And if he needed money, or a bailout, or he needed like money for his family for something, he would just wire his editor, and he would take care of it. And I was like, "What would happen if I did that with my publisher today?" I'm pretty sure they would go, "Look, Buddy, we can't help you."

SP I do that with Shawn all the time. Just send me 10 grand. No problem.

J In *The Story Grid*, Steve, you said, "We don't have editors like any more." And the immediate thought that I had is, you and Shawn have a unique relationship. And I go, "Well, this looks like that relationship that I read about, the relationship that Max Perkins, who I think one editor called "the editor of genius" that he had with people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and so many great 20th Century authors. So, I think, to begin I'd love to talk about the relationship between an author and an editor and why we need to reclaim some of that, but also how in many cases the writer has to do that for himself now which is in large part what *The Story Grid* is about.

Before we get into that, how did you guys meet?

SC Yeah, we met when I acquired *Gates of Fire* which is Steve's second novel back in 1996. And I was working at Doubleday at the time as a senior editor. And part of my job was to bring in big commercial fiction that would have the potential of being a bestseller but also having the potential to become a backlist best seller year after year after year. And when I read the draft of *Gates of Fire* from Steve's agent who was Sterling Wood at the time, a fantastic agent, legendary, I just fell in love with the book. And I went to try to acquire the book when I was at Doubleday. And they said, "Yeah, this is really a terrific book, but we need to have a longterm commitment from the writer." So, I was tasked with calling up Steve cold and, basically, saying to him, "Hey, I really want to publish your book, but you've got to commit to two novels" which short of threw Steve in a whirlwind sort of panic attack, I think. Is that right, Steve?

SP That's true. Yeah.

J Right. So, what happened after that?

SC Well, Steve basically said to me, "Look, I don't work that way. I can't commit to" – basically what I needed him to do was to commit to doing another epic war story, because at the time we

wanted to establish Steve as sort of the next-generation James Cabell or one of the big major historical novelists of the time. And Steve, at that point in his career, was a very successful screenwriter, and he would go from project to project based upon sort of his own inner compass. So, for me to come to him and say, “Hey, look, I need you to deliver something that you really haven’t thought through, and I want you to do it within 15 months.” It probably threw him for a big loop.

SP I was terrified, absolutely, yeah.

SC So, the first thing he did was, he said, “You know, I don’t work that way. You seem like a nice guy, but I just can’t do this.” And, then, luckily, I think he let it sit for a couple of days. And he called me back – I think it was on a Friday and said, “You know what? I thought about it, and I have this file in my drawer of ideas. And there’s this idea that I have about Alcibiades, and I think I can write a novel about that. How would that work?” And that turned out to be *Tides of War*, which is probably my favorite novel that Steve’s ever written. So, I think we got a good deal out of that one.

SP Jeff, this kind of plugs into, I think, a really interesting aspect of the writer-editor relationship which in Shawn you can follow up on this, it plugs into the kind of the self-destructive nature of writers sometimes where I’m sure you know what I’m talking about, Jeff. Where—

J Oh, sure.

SP —an editor gives you notes, you know, gives you in essence kind of challenges you, kinds of throws down a gauntlet to you. And sometimes it will be about the book that you’ve just handed in and it’ll say, “Hey, you got to go back to square one,” or, “You’ve got to tear up the second act,” or whatever it is. And a lot of writers, including me, will kind of panic at that point. Or they’ll just be overwhelmed with the amount of work, or they’re so committed to their own baby exactly the way it is that they refuse to let anybody change it on them, you know? So, then, they’ll basically self-destruct. They’ll just say, “Hey, I can’t deal with it. I don’t work that way. Forget it,” and they won’t go any further. And I know Shawn has told me various horror stories of working with other writers where that kind of thing happens where the editor will put in a year, or two years of work with a writer. If you get a book to a certain place, and have that kind of moment of truth, the writer will panic, and resistance will overcome them, and they’ll blow the deal up.

J This is, I think, the thing that you guys have is an interesting dynamic. And it goes back to that Max Perkins, Hemmingway, Fitzgerald relationship where authors and editors work together for a lifetime, right? It was just the editor’s job to send the author money. Although, Hemingway certainly took advantage of that. It was, we make each other better. And I think we don’t understand that today. I certainly didn’t until I found a really great editor who helped me understand my own ideas so much better. And, also, helped me understand the tension between, “Here’s what I want to write,” and “Here’s what I feel compelled to create.” And, then, “Here’s what the market actually values right now.” And to actually think about that. Is that a tension that

you guys – I mean, you guys are now partners, right? I mean, you work – you’ve continued to work together. I want to talk about that transition in a minute. But is that a tension that you both recognize and respect, or how does that work in your relationship now?

SC Well, for me, that tension is part of the fun.

J OK.

SC And when I say “the fun,” I think there’s a place – and Steve just mentioned earlier about sort of the self-destructive nature of a writer. Now, editors have a similar sensibility, too. The last thing they want to do is freak out a writer. You know, they don’t want them to go over the edge and throw in the towel and say, “Hey, you know, I’m not going to be able to do that.”

So, the delicate balance that the editor has to find with an individual writer is when to push and when to pull back. And with Steve, you know, we work together for about three or four years when I was at Doubleday. And, then, I started my own independent publishing company around the year 2000. And we couldn’t work together anymore, because he was under contract at Doubleday, and I was starting this new thing. And what was really wonderful about that time is that intuitively we kind of knew that we’d worked together really well.

So, Steve at the time he had this thing in the drawer that he would share with people when they would say, “Hey, Steve, how do you do what you do? You know, I want to be a writer. How do you do what you do?”

So, I started this new company called Rugged Land Books and Steve called me – it must have been only like a month or two into the entire new business. And he said, “Look, I’ve got this thing. It’s nonfiction. I don’t really know what it is. People seem to respond to it. I’d really like to work together again. Now Doubleday is going to have to my fiction for now for the next couple of books. Why don’t we turn our eye to this and see what we can come up with?”

So, he sent me this manuscript of nonfiction. And I fell in love with the book. And I thought, “You know, this is really something that can help people, but it’s a little bit too specific to Steve and his life experiences. If we could broaden the idea, and change it, and give it sort of a three-part structure, so that people coming to the book would really start specifically, and then move further and further out into a global kind of philosophy, he’d really have something.”

So, that book actually turned out to be *The War of Art*. And *The War of Art*, I think, really is Steve and I working at our best where he gives me this gold of raw material. And I’m able to just sort of look at him and say, “Hey, if we put this over here, and we put this over here, and we add this,” and then we are able to have a really fun discussion, because neither one of us had – we weren’t going to lose our shirts on this book. We were doing it out of pure love for the process.

And that's actually something that came to us when we started Black Irish Books, you know, ten years after we published *The War of Art* together. So, I forget what the original question was, but the commercial aspects, and the literary aspects when you can get a perfect sort of consilience of ideas, and not get too dug into what you think you should be writing, then you can create something that has a universal appeal and yet it is very specific.

J I forget what the original question was, too, but I'm having a lot of fun.

[Music playing]

J That was the first book – I'm sure you've heard this before, Steve, from people who don't read primarily military fiction which is my impression is a lot of your work certainly was comprised of at the time, and you continue to explore. *The War of Art* was my first interaction with you, and it was one of those books that I mean I encountered it, I don't know, five, six years ago. Maybe it was six years ago when I had this notion of an idea that I might, possibly, could maybe sort of, I don't know, be a writer. And I read this book, and I was like, "I've got to do this. I've got to do this."

And it's interesting as I started to dig into your other work, and came across *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, and I was like, "I know that movie. And now here's the actual book." And it was this interesting process of finding something that I'd never heard of your work before and, then, digging down deeper and finding this goldmine of stuff. But this wasn't primarily what you did at the time. And, so, tell me your side of the story. What was that process like, having this thing in your drawer? I know this was something that you shared with aspiring writers, and it was something that you kind of shared your process with people on. But this wasn't your shtick. And, so, what was that like for you pulling this out of you? You were a novelist, and here's the sort of nonfiction advice book about writing?

SP Well, the thing, Jeff, and I know you know this completely is, when you are professional writer, you're a working writer, your friends come to you and they all say, "I've got a book in me. My grandmother crossed the prairie, you know, with the Piute Indians," or whatever.

J Right. Sure.

SP So, I would wind up in real life sitting with various people until 2 in the morning, or 3 in the morning kind of telling them about the concept of Resistance with a capital R and the self-sabotage of writers trying to psyche them up to do it. You know, "You can do it. You can do it. You can do it." You know? And, of course, nobody ever did, right? Nobody ever listened to me.

J Yeah.

SP So, finally, I was just so tired of that I had like about a two-month break, or a three-month break between books. And, so, I said, "I'm just going to write this down. And, then, when anybody

asked me that again instead of wasting my time till 2 in the morning with them, I'll say, 'Here, read this.'" So, that's how *The War of Art* came about.

But getting back to the writer and the editor relationship, and this goes to show you the contributions that an editor makes, among other things, like the title, *The War of Art* which is a great title, that's Shawn's title completely. When I gave it to him it was called *The Writer's Life*. And it was just totally about writing. And Shawn thought, "Oh, this is much bigger than that." And, then, he, you know, put a three-part structure to it and really kind of took it two or three levels higher than what it was. So, when you're lucky enough to have a great creative editor, it can take something that's really not ready for primetime and make it ready for primetime.

J So, Shawn, talk to me about niching down. So, I think with writing books there's this tension – at least this has been my experience so far where you submit an idea to a publisher if you're working on the traditional side of things, and they go, "OK, who is the target audience?" And I want to go, "Well, everybody. Everybody should read this book. Everybody needs to read this." But, obviously, they don't want to hear that. They want to hear about different kind of target audiences. And here is an example, though, where you took something that was kind of niched down for writers. As a writer this is actually what I love about *The War of Art*, *Turning Pro*, *The Authentic Swing*, you know, this suite of books that are kind of the same length, and same style. They're about the creative process, *Do the Work* is another example of this. But I like that it's not just about writing, because it applies to life, and it applies to all these other creative endeavors that I do.

When do you niche down, and then when do you take an idea that has legs, and kind of spread it out into those other areas of interests so that the average person can pick it up, and read it, and get something out of it without spreading yourself too thin? Is that a tension? I mean, how do you sort through that?

SC Well, of course, you want to think about your target markets whenever you publish anything. And, you know, the thing about the books that Steve and I have published with Black Irish accidentally we sort of thematically found this place to books like *Do the Work*, and *Turning Pro*, and *The War of Art*, and *The Authentic Swing*, and even *The Story Grid*, the return – just every book that we published, they all concern this sort of central thing that every single person on the planet has to deal with every day of their lives; and that is, the internal struggle to take down resistance, and actually do the work that they're supposed to be doing on the planet. You know, you might be the best pipefitter in Chicago, you know? And you might be tempted to not do pipefitting that day. It's really that specific where these are all the internal battles that all of us face.

So, when you say – and publishers wisely, they want to have a target market. And, so, when *The War of Art* came, I'm like, "You know what? The writing community is going to come to this book, absolutely." And if you were able to make it very specific at the very beginning, suck the leadership in, and, then, progressively take it to more global values so that by the end of the book

the reader will say to themselves, “Well, gee, I’m not a writer; but, wow, my brother, Bob, who is going through the 12-Step Program could really benefit from this, because that’s the same internal struggle that he’s facing every day.”

So, you really want to find a very, very specific marketplace that will branch out from there. For example, Steve and I published a book called *The Warrior Ethos*. Now, *The Warrior Ethos* is a collection of about 30 little stories that Steve has collected throughout his career doing deep research into the military ethos. And, so, our core market, of course, are people serving in the military, because it will give them a shot in the arm and say, “This is why I’m a soldier to begin with.” Now, what we discovered is, after we sort of hit that target market, is that it branches out from there. And people who have nothing – who have never served in the military like myself, I read that book and I said, “You know, this is really about me. This is about the stuff that I go through every day, too. What do I fight for every day? What’s really important to me? How am I going to make my day fruitful?”

So, it’s really – of course, you want to have the target market. You want to be able to say – and I always say this to Steve, “You want to find 10,000 people who will be desperate and would love to have this book for free.” They would run to your house to get it for free. And if you can find that kind of core group of people who really would be attracted to a specific title, then it can move beyond that if you have the thematic structures within the actual narrative of the storytelling itself. Then if you have faith in that kind of editorial stance in the book itself, it can branch out.

J Uh-huh (agreeing). I love that. I love the idea that you write the book for the target market, but have enough general themes in there, or different hooks in there that they can pass it on to a friend, and it’s going to be relevant to somebody kind of outside of that core niche. I mean, that makes sense to me.

SP You know, the other thing, Jeff, if I can jump in here for a second is a lot of times you don’t even know who your market is. You don’t even know who’s going to respond to the book. You know? It’s like William Goldman says, “Nobody knows nothing.” You know? Nobody knows anything. And you may think – and this has certainly happened in stuff I’ve done. You may think you write a book, and market X is going to respond to it. And, then, they don’t respond to it at all. And somebody else that you never thought of would respond to it.

So, a lot of it is guesswork. There’s no doubt about it. We’re trying to make it a science, but it isn’t.

J You just wrote about that on the blog, and I loved that post that if you’re writing true, and you’re accessing something deep inside of you, and even beyond and outside of you, something deep and true that will resonate with somebody, hopefully. You don’t know. And I get that. I love that. This is why I’m psyched to do this. Because I love that it’s not about sitting and waiting for the muse to show up. But it’s also not about just sort of perfecting it down to a science and just

having some math equation. It's both. And I loved that you, Steve, embody that ethos. That's fun. It resonates with me for sure.

[Music playing]

J So, let's talk about Black Irish. Shawn, you've dropped that name a couple of times. I saw this happen – I don't know how long, several years ago you guys kind of opened up this small publishing house together to start really seeing these books. Shawn, how did that come together? Was that your idea? Was that Steve's idea? You were in independent publishing at the time. Is that right? I mean, how did this all come together?

S Well, I did have a publishing company about 10 years before its time.

J [Laughing]

S You know, before the eBook revolution. And I went through a lot of growth and learning with The Rugged Land experience. But in 2007 the time had come to shut it down. So, after that I called Steve, and I was working at The Endeavor Agency as a literary agent. And I decided to finally branch out on my own and start my own literary agency. And Steve and I started to work together again. And *The War of Art*, coincidentally, I had sold the paperback rights to a major New York publisher for a nine-year license. And the license was up. And I said to Steve on a lark, I said, "You know what? We should just pull that book back and do it ourselves." Because we don't need to have a big, big five publishing operation to get that into people's hands anymore. Because it's a backlist evergreen book. And people just order it. And most of the sales are online through Amazon, through i-Tunes, etc. And he sort of said, "Well, yeah, you know, let's put a pin in that and think about it some more."

So, at the same time Steve's novel, *The Profession*, was about to be published. And, so, we went into a marketing meeting with the publisher. And, basically, every idea that Steve and I had had was shot down. They just said, "You know, we're not going to do that. That seems kind of ridiculous to be able to go out and give away free copies of the novel in that core market." And we got kind of bummed out at that point.

J Sorry. I want to interrupt. Sorry Shawn.

SC Sure.

J So, was this – you just mentioned this in the blog, too. I've been following all these stories. Was this book where you said, "We want to give away 10,000 copies"? Was that that book?

SC That's correct, yeah.

J Yeah.

SC/J [Both laughing].

J So, here's your idea, Shawn, right? Like if we can just get 10,000 people to get this book, it will go like wildfire, and you pitched that idea of just giving those first 10,000 copies away. And they weren't keen on that?

SC No. And it's understandable. I mean, they had a very heavy investment in the book. And I'm not complaining about the business model of the Big Five. They certainly do better than Steve and I do. But we did have this idea that if we were able to get enough people to come to the party, then share the book, then it would become backlist best seller at the time as opposed to a major crazy *New York Times* bestseller that sells 50,000 copies in a year and, then, falls apart and never sells again.

So, anyway, they said, "No thank you." And Steven and I went across the street and had some lunch. And I said, "You know, we should really do that thing with *The War of Art*." And Steve – at that point I had him in the most-vulnerable place. And he said, "OK. Whatever. Let's just do it."

So, from that point we moved forward and we started with *The War of Art* as Black Irish's first paperback book and electronic book. Then we published *The Warrior Ethos*. And we'd really taken it one step at a time and not really driving ourselves crazy by trying to be hugely successful. But more about the core market and getting word of mouth started so that the books can live for a long time.

J So, one of the things that I think you guys have a unique perspective on – so many people right now are talking about how to have a *New York Times* best-seller, how to game the system, how you can't game the system, how it's not a fair competition. And, I think, from my understanding is you guys have been really intentional about not chasing that instant best-seller status. And instead really trying to build up – create these backlist best sellers, these things that continue to sell year, after year, after year. Why do you do that Shawn?

SC Well, I'll speak for myself here. And I think I can speak for Steve. We both had best sellers. We both experienced the *New York Times* best-seller list. You know? It's a wonderful thing. But it's very ? . And it goes away very quickly. And you're sort of left with this, "Oh, geez, it was number 9 last week, and now it's number 16. Oh, my gosh! What am I going to do?"

J Right.

SC And that's really not why you wrote the book in the first place. I mean, I know that anybody who writes, they want people to read their books. They want people to be changed and moved by what they've written. They've invested their heart and soul in the work. To write a book requires so much energy, and soulful purpose that to just try to get a *New York Times* best-seller and, then, wash your hands of it, it just seems empty. It's an empty experience.

The books that we publish, we don't see them as these monumental things that are going to set the world on fire instantly. They're more of a slow burn. So, we have to have patience when we publish something. If we reach the right people, they'll share the book. They're not going to run down the street and tell everybody to buy it immediately. But when somebody says, "You know, I really need a good book, I'm kind of in the dumps." Somebody is going to say, "You know, you should try this Black Irish book, because it made me feel better.

And that's really far more satisfying than being Number 14 on the *New York Times* best-seller list for three weeks.

SP Also, it's really hard.

J Yes [Laughing].

SP It's not like, you know, it's possible to be a *New York Times* best-seller. So, we just decided we didn't want to do it.

J Yeah.

SP It's like impossible to get on there unless you're like a real marketing machine, and you know how to – you've got whole cabal of fellow travelers that can hype your book while you hype theirs and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And I don't think Shawn and I, neither of us, are really marketers. It's really not in our blood. We don't get off on that at all. And, I think, Shawn had a couple of great guidelines for – Black Irish was his idea. And one of them was, you've heard the term "revenue stream"?

J Sure.

SP Well, he said, "We're looking for revenue trickles.

J [Laughing]

SP So, that was it. We really felt, if we can get a book out there that makes us \$50 bucks a month, we're going to be happy. And the other thing was, we don't want to employ anybody. And we don't want to ever have an office. You know? So, that also, I think, was another kind of a great way of looking at it. And, so, our expectations have been really low. And we've exceeded them.

J/SP [Both laughing]

J That's my secret, too, is I just plan on just doing a little bit better than failure. And if anything goes beyond that, I just feel ecstatic about the experience.

SP Yeah, I mean, it's hard out there, Jeff, isn't it?

J Yeah.

SP I mean, you know, people like to – there's sort of a myth out there that the Internet is a magic tool. And if you have a blog, or you have this or that, you've got a money printing machine. But it's not even remotely true. I mean, it's killer, killer work. And you've got to be – have modest expectations in my opinion.

J Yeah.

SP At least that's what works for us.

J So, let's talk about money, or the lack thereof. Steve, you used in this interview, and you've used many times before the term "Working Writer." And anybody who's read any of your nonfiction, especially, you reference kind of this blue-collar work ethic that you have. I mean, you had first as a screenwriter, and now as a novelist and author. Talk to me a little bit about that. What does it mean to be a working writer, and what does that look like? I mean, how do you balance, again, what I think is – to me feels like a tension between art: "I'm going to write what needs to be written and hope somebody cares about it;" and, then, business: "I've got to make a living"? What does that look like for you, and what does it mean to be a working writer?

SP Well, I've just been lucky, you know, over the years, Jeff. I mean, it took me, I think, 27 years or something like that before I had my first book published which was *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. And, so, I mean I just couldn't get anywhere. You know, I was just starving forever. But, then, again, what I'm going to say is not really going to help any young, aspiring writers, I'm afraid. Because it's just like once I sort of got over the hump just by meeting Shawn who picked up *Gates of Fire* and made that a best-seller. I kind of hit the tipping point where my stuff at least made enough money to keep me alive. And from then on, although I was always a working writer in the sense that I always got up in the morning and I ground it out every day, by day, by day, by day, I still do that. But now enough money comes in, thank goodness, to pay the rent.

So, I don't know. It doesn't seem to be any magic bullet in there. When I say "working writer," I really mean just somebody that can make a living off of their writing. And that's the very small number. I'd be very curious to know how many people there are that can do that and don't have to be a teacher, or something like that.

J Right. I was talking to a big-deal literary agent who has all of these best-selling authors on his list. And I mean probably at least 25 names most people would know. And he said one of those people actually makes a living off of their – just off of their royalties. Everybody else has to have some sort of side gig or something.

Yeah, so that's interesting. But you also have this – you've got a body of work. And you've been at it for decades. And we did an interview a long time ago, a text interview on my blog, and you said something that I was just rereading the other day. And I thought, "This is good." You said that with blogging and the accessibility to publish – everybody talks about the benefits of self-publishing and indie publishing. And I think there are a lot of them.

One of the downsides to it is, it makes it much easier to get your words out there. And I fear that more and more writers are entitled to being heard. And they're not willing to kind of grind it out year, after year, after year. And you said you still have to pay your dues. You still have to go after it.

In fact, in that interview you said two things to me, Steve, that I've never forgotten. One is, I said, "When do you get to call yourself a writer?" And you said, "You are when you say you are." And, so, there is sort of that simplicity to, "You can be a writer today. You just have to get up and write." But in that same interview you said, "You have to pay your dues. People think it's too easy, and it takes years, and years of work to get great." And that was an important piece of advice.

What's the tension between, "OK, I'm a writer, but now I need to master it?" And I wonder what is – with all of these temptations and distractions to make a quick buck, or start a blog and get this sort of egohead of people are paying attention to me, because this is something that I struggle with as, frankly, somebody who has a little bit of marketing savviness. But I want to create great art that endures. I feel like there's distraction there. On the road to mastery I can take all of these shortcuts. How have you avoided that, Steve? I mean, you've just – to me, you're just this guy who just keeps writing. And it started modestly and, now, as you said, you've been lucky enough to make a living off of your writing. But I'm sure there were temptations down the road. Is that right?

SP Not really, Jeff. Not really. Because when I started was long before Internet marketing, or the concept of self-publishing. That was like decades before that. So, you, basically, had no alternative except to you'd write, and you'd fail. You couldn't get published. So, you have to face yourself and say, "Well, how much do I love this? Am I going to keep doing this, banging my head against the wall?" And, for me, the answer was, "Yes, I'm going to keep banging my head against the wall."

So, I just – even though there was no reward at all. You know, nothing published, nothing. So, in a way, that's good for you. 'Cause you have to find out what you can do and what you love. And you have to just grind it out. There was – I don't know where I was reading this in the paper or somewhere where some famous writer was talking to somebody that was a neurosurgeon. And the neurosurgeon was saying, "You know, I'm kind of towards the end of my career. And I think I'm going to retire and I'm going to start writing."

So, the famous writer said, "You know, I'm kind of at the end of my career. I think I'm going to turn to neurosurgery when I retire."

J [Laughing].

SP And it's like everybody thinks they can write.

J Yeah.

SP Right? And, then, that is compounded. Of course, you can't. You've got to pay unbelievable dues even if you have talent, you know? But the problem with this ease of self-publishing today is that young writers can bang out something that is absolutely mediocre, that wouldn't get to first base in Hollywood or anyplace else. The kind of crap that I wrote for years, and years, and years. And nobody would even look at, right?

J Right.

SP But, instead, they can put a cover on it, and they can put it out there. And if they have any marketing savvy, people might actually buy it, you know? Or at least enough people to give them this delusion that they're a writer. And pretty soon they get satisfied with that. They think, "Well, I'm a writer." You know, "I've got it down." And that's another thing, getting back to editors. Nowadays, it's so hard to find a real editor that if, let's say, some of these young mediocre writers actually had to submit their stuff to a real editor, they'd get it torn apart. You know? Torn from limb to limb and thrown in the trash, along with them which would be good for them, because it would show them where they really stand, you know, as far as their abilities, their progress along the path.

But because there are so few editors anymore, I mean editors of talent and of quality, you can delude yourself if you're a young writer. You think, "Well, hell, I just wrote this book, 5,000 people bought it. I guess I'm a writer."

J Uh-huh (yes).

SP And, then, you know five years later, do you still have the fire to do it? So, sometimes it's better, I think, to go through the crucible, getting rejected for years, and years, and years.

[Music playing]

J Steve, what were you doing when you weren't selling your writing? I mean I know you were doing lots of spec writing as a screenwriter. What were you doing to make a living during that time when you weren't good enough to publish a book?

SP I worked a million kind of blue-collar jobs. But really what I would do, I worked in advertising in New York. And I would save – I would work for like a year and a half, save up my money, quit. Go someplace cheap, take two years or whatever it would take. Write a novel which wouldn't sell. And I'd go grovel back to admin.com. They'd hire me again. And I'd work for another 18 months

and quit again. And I did that like three different times before finally coming out to Hollywood and, then, having a kind of B-level career out here for a while. But I did, basically, I was just scuffling around, Jeff, doing everything I could.

And trying. And, by the way, trying to sell out. But nobody would let me.

J So, yeah, if you could have succeeded as a sell-out, you probably would have. And the school—

SP I would have. I would have. But nobody would let me sell out for them.

J Wow. I guess you really were meant to do this?

SP Yeah, I guess so. You know, if the years prove anything, I guess that's true.

J So—

SP But along the way, people, friends, and people who have cared about me, and my family, there were many moments when people would just sort of shake their heads like, "Poor Steve. What's going to happen to the guy?" You know? "He's crazy. Now, he's going down the tubes."

J Yeah. I can imagine. I think you wrote about this in *The Authentic Swing* where you started to have some success as a screenwriter and, then, you walked away from it. And who was it, your literary agent or something, who basically said you were ruining your career?

SP Yeah, right. My screenwriting career. Of course, he was right from his point of view.

J Sure. Yeah. So, Shawn, I want to go back to you really about this question of indie publishing versus traditional publishing. So, when you guys came out with *Black Irish* I thought, "OK, like Steve is going to — he's just going to self-publish for now on. That makes sense. He's got all these fans, and readers, and why does he need a big publishing house anymore. He can keep 100-percent of his royalties now."

So, you guys came out with *Turning Pro*, and *The Authentic Swing*. And, then, *The Lion's Gate* came out — I think that was with Penguin. Talk to me about that. So, you guys have an independent publishing house that you're publishing, I guess, primarily, nonfiction now. Because I get this question all the time, and maybe you guys do, too. And I see benefits to both, you know, working with a big publisher when it makes sense but, then, also doing something on your own when that makes sense.

How do you explore those opportunities, and how do you decipher those decisions?

SP Great question by the way. I want to hear what Shawn has to say.

J Me, too.

SC Well, it's actually a pretty practical and simple answer. I mean, *The Lion's Gate* required Steve to spend – he must have spent nine months, six to nine months and he was interviewing every veteran of the Six-Day War which required – he not only had to spend that time doing interviewing, he had to learn how to connect with these people. You know? He was not a journalist. He had some friends who are journalist who Steve sucked everything he could out of their brains. He went on this very, very large expedition of sorts, a creative expedition, that would require just so much of his energy to even kind of get up in the morning and actually do the work that for him to worry about whether or not he's going to make his rent, just did not make any sense. And it was this very ambitious project that required a lot of funding.

So, when he brought the idea to me, I'm like, "We have to sell this to a major publisher, because it's a major undertaking creatively, and he could not afford, nor could Black Irish, afford to bankroll that job. And thankfully, I mean, it was such a wonderful idea that every publishing house in New York wanted the book. And we were able to get a really nice deal for it so that Steve was not have to worry – and you also have to remember, Jeff, as you know this, you don't get all of your money upfront—

J Right.

SP —for an advance with the majors. So, he had to get a substantial chunk upfront to be able to fund this thing. So, *The Lion's Gate* was a pretty simple decision to make because of the financial requirements of actually getting the work done. From that point forward, from the point forward now, Steve's working on a couple of projects. We don't know right now what the best strategy is to get them to the most people. And that's really – not immediately, but sometimes a major publisher, the can get you a review in the *New York Times*. And we don't get our books reviewed in the *New York Times*. I mean there is only four or five places you can get a book review today. So, those are the major sort of considerations we have to take into account for each project that Steve does.

Now, when it comes to *The Story Grid*, I never considered going to a major publisher with that book, because it is in essence a textbook. It's a backlist book. It's a thing that's going to trickle along, hopefully, from the day we publish it until the day I die. And just to go quickly back to the idea of paying your dues, I think what a good and important point is for those 20-odd years that it took Steve to find a place in the publishing world and having his first book published, what are you doing that time?

It's not making the same mistake over and over again. He was learning his craft. He was learning the craft of structural storytelling. He's learning genre, and he was learning all kinds of things. And nobody really considers when they say, "I want to be a writer." Even nonfiction writers. There are genres of nonfiction, too, that if you're just a newbie you just think, "Oh, I'm

just going to bang out a book.” I mean, I’ll be the first one to say when I said to Steve, “I want to write *The Story Grid*. Oh, it will take me three months.” You know? It took three and a half years. To learn your craft requires a lot of intense effort.

And if you want to be a great carpenter, you better learn how to dovetail, right? Nobody is just going to say, “I’m going to be a carpenter and bang out a beautiful chest of drawers.” They have to apprentice, learn the craft. So, that’s one of the things that really inspired me to write *The Story Grid*, because it’s a book about craft. It’s a book about writing craft. It’s about the left brain, very analytical side of you; and, also, the very creative side of you. How you can make those two things work together.

[Music playing]

J Yeah. I think it’s also a book about the business of writing, and even understanding the complexities of the industry, and how to find your place. I mean, you talked about genre, and I’ve read this section in *The Story Grid* sort of towards the beginning. And you talk about – I think you admit this is sort of an oversimplification, but in fiction there’s literary fiction, like Cormac McCarthy, and, then, there’s genre fiction like JK Rowling or something. And nonfiction was like journalism, and maybe like memoir, or narrative nonfiction, or self-help. You can correct me in my misremembering of it.

But I remember reading that going, I have no idea what my place in literature is right now. How important is genre? And we were talking about craft. And I love that. I love that you said, one of the things that gets you to really hone your craft is failure, trying and it not working, and trying again and not working. So, talk to me about genre Shawn. I’d love to hear, first, what your thoughts on how much does that matter today where on the bookshelf you are, and once you write a book and it’s a best-selling in a certain genre, are you stuck there? How much freedom do you actually have to move around without being irrelevant? Then I would love to hear Steve’s take on it as well.

SC Well, I think genre is like a place to start. Because genres are wonderful things. Basically what a genre is it manages your audiences’ expectations right? That’s all it does.

J Sure.

SC So, if I say to you, “Jeff, I wrote a mystery,” you’re going to say, “Oh, great, I want to read a mystery. So, there better be a dead body on page 2 or 3, right? Because you are going to expect, you’re going to find a dead body, and then somebody is going to investigate it. Somebody is going to solve the crime.

So, what genres do is they manage our expectations. If people know what genre you’re writing in, you’re going to know how to deliver what people are expecting from you. And that’s not saying you’re writing by formula, but conventions in the obligatory scene in each and every

one of the genres, those are actually great things to grab on to. Because you will know, say if I'm writing a thriller, I've got to have a scene where the bad guy is at the mercy – or the good guy is at the mercy of the bad guy. The hero is at the mercy of the villain. And how am I going to create that? And where am I going to put it in my book? And these are ways for you to organize how you're going to write your story. So, genres, to me, are if you are a nonfiction writer, if you say to yourself, "Gee, I would really love to write a book about those guys at the University of Washington who won the crew race in the 1936 Olympics, or whatever it was which became *The Boys in the Boat*. That's a narrative nonfiction story. And we know it's going to be within sort of a performance genre. A performance genre has that big moment at the end like *Rocky*, the movie. You know he's going to fight at the end. That's going to be the climax of the movie. So, if you don't know your genres, you might not even put that scene in. And, then, you're going to be like, "Why didn't anybody want to buy more or publish my book?" Because you did not do your research. You did not pay your dues. You did not do your reading.

So, if you know, "I want to write a book like *The Tipping Point*, you better go out and read everything Malcolm Gladwell has written. You better read *Chaos*. You better read all the major big-idea nonfiction books that really, really spoke to you. And look at those things and say to yourself, what do these groups of things have in common? And how can I apply those rules, and those structures that these books all share? And it's a wonderful way to teach yourself craft, and to teach yourself what a brilliant writer does. Because there's a lot of creativity involved, and there's a lot of wonderful moments when you're sitting at the keyboard and things are flying. But you need to know what your purpose is for each scene that you're writing.

So, that's why I begin *The Story Grid* with genre, because that's really, for me, that's the place to start when you want to write a book.

J Steve, you've written a lot of war novels, but you've also written this suite of books that are – I don't know what the genre is. Sort of self-help with a creative bent to them. Well, how does that feel to you, and what kind of writer do you think of yourself today?

SP That's a great question, Jeff. Because I think one of the things that works against me is I kind of switch genres too much. And people don't know exactly what it means to pick up a book with my name on it.

J Yeah.

SP I'm not even sure how to answer that. I just kind of have to follow what's interesting to me. And a lot of times that changes, you know? So, I'm sort of tired of a certain kind of book that I used to write a few years ago. And I don't think I'll do that anymore. And I'm not sure where the muse is going to take me from there. But wherever it is, it will be a genre, and I will educate myself in what the conventions of that genre are. Or if I'm mixing genres, which is what you always want to do, I think. You want to mix two or three together. Then I'll study that.

Like we were talking about the neurosurgeon a few minutes ago? A lot of like what Shawn was just saying is like a function of the fact that there really is no curriculum that teaches people how to be a writer. Like if you're going to be a brain surgeon, you start with pre-med, study organic chemistry, and they have a whole however long it takes, seven or eight years, where they teach you this, and that, and the other thing, right? And by the time you're done you actually know what you're doing. But for writing there is no such thing at all. It's like they just throw you into the pool. That's why everybody thinks they're a writer.

J Yep.

SP And it's also why so much crap gets out there, you know? That ? stuff that I, myself, are guilty of.

J [Laughing]

SP But it's true. That's why Shawn writing *The Story Grid* is – it's like totally unexplored territory. This is – there should be 20 textbooks like that. There aren't. There just aren't.

J Yeah, and I think you guys can speak to this better than I can. But it seems even today, somebody who is sort of proven themselves as a writer, or an editor, or they've been in publishing for a long, established career which I'm seeing less and less of. They don't really want to share their secrets. You're seeing more of this today. But I know so many writers who couldn't get some established author to tell them how to do it, how to make it happen, how to succeed, even what to do in regards how do you sit down and write a book, and what is research look like, and what is figuring out how the book should be structured which is one of the things that I really appreciated about your book, Shawn, was you just kind of told it all, years and years of experience.

And you said that at the beginning. You said, "When I became an editor nobody told me how to do this, and there is still not really – there's still not much out there." And it's sort of a roadmap and a textbook for those who are – want to be editors but also who are writers who have to be their own editors.

SC Yeah, I think that's a real tragedy. Now, there is one of two things that are going on here. Either the people who are asking the professionals who aren't giving up the secrets, maybe the professionals really don't – they might be flying a little blind themselves. Because a lot of this stuff, Jeff, is really intuitive. And it's kind of in our DNA storytelling. And, so, a lot of people get afraid of talking about the process, and talking about structures, and genres, and obligatory scenes and conventions, because they think it devalues the art. And I think the exact opposite. I think the more we can teach each other and learn from each other about how individual masters solve very difficult problems in their writing, the better we're going to be inspired to innovate and make better stories.

So, a lot of editors like when I started no editor was going to sit down and give me a five-hour course on the principles of editing, because that was kind of their competitive advantage to keep their job.

J Yeah.

SC Why are they going to teach some ambitious young guy who's angling for their job what they know? Now if I'm the editor and chief, and a young pup comes up and goes, "Teach me everything you know," the last thing I want to do is do that, because they're going to take my job. So, there is a level of fear, of giving away their secrets. And, I think, there is also a level of being afraid of messing with the collective unconscious and giving away the secrets of storytelling.

And I think it's exactly the opposite. I think the more people that think about structures, the more about genres, the more they read, the more they share, *The Story Grid* of the classics, that's one of my goals is to sort of dive deeply into each of these genres as best as I can and tell people what I think the structures are inherent in them. I think the better writing will be.

J I agree. No, this was great guys. Thanks for your time and your generosity of sharing. You did just that, the thing that nobody would do with you, Shawn. You guys are doing that here. And I so appreciate it. I know others listening will as well. So, thanks, and have a great day the both of you.

SC Hey, Jeff, thanks.

SP Great questions. Thanks for being so informed and for – it's a real pleasure to do an interview with you, because you've really done your homework and you know exactly – you're asking great questions and right on-target questions. So, thanks a lot. It's our pleasure.

SC Yeah. Absolutely.

J Totally my pleasure guys. Thanks so much. Have a great day.

SP OK.

SC OK. Bye-bye.

[Music playing]

A So, what did you learn today from these great men? What message did Shawn, or Jeff, or Steve share that you're going to take to heart, and then take action on? Let us know by finding this post on <http://GoinsWriter.com>, or message Jeff on Twitter @JeffGoins. Make sure you use the hashtag #PortfolioLife. I am Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us. Now, go build your portfolio.

[Music playing]

SP You want to find 10,000 people who would be desperate and would love to have this book for free. They would run to your house to get it for free. And if you can find that kind of core group of people who really would be attracted to a specific title, then you move beyond that.

Resources

- [The Story Grid: What Good Editors Know](#) by Shawn Coyne
- [The War of Art](#) by Steven Pressfield
- [The Authentic Swing](#) by Steven Pressfield
- [The Lion's Gate](#) by Steven Pressfield
- [The Art of Work](#) by Jeff Goins

Who is your creative partner in crime? How would an editor challenge you in your craft? Share in the [comments](#)