“JJ: My feeling about writer’s block is that it’s a myth and people always sort of respond negatively because they say, “Well, I’ve had it, so I know what it is. Maybe you haven’t.” I know what it means to not feel like writing or to feel like your well is dry, but I always say, “Look, we are the only profession in the world who allows ourselves this conceit.”

[IntRODUCTION]

[0:00:32.4] JG: Welcome to The Portfolio Life. I’m Jeff Goins, and this is the show that helps you pursue works that matters, make a difference with your art and discover your true voice. I’m your host, and on the show I interview creative people from all fields in hopes of answering one important question, “What does the creative life actually like?” Of course, there’s no one size fits all, but the goal here is to help you figure out how to live your own portfolio life.

Let’s get started.

[Interview]

[0:00:32.4] JG: Here we are Jerry, welcome to the show.

[0:01:03.0] JJ: Thanks. Good to be with you.

[0:01:04.9] GJ: Jerry, how many books — This is embarrassing to talk about. I don’t know. How many books have you sold in your career as an author?

[0:01:15.2] JJ: Do you mean number of titles or number of copies?

[0:01:17.4] GJ: That’s a good question, because both numbers are pretty impressive. Let’s start with how many books you’ve written and published.

[0:01:25.2] JJ: Yeah. The reason that that’s funny, and sometimes embarrassing, is that my grown — I have three grown sons and they always say, “Dad, we know the truth that you’ve
written more books than you've ever read.” The one that just came out from Worthy recently was my 131st novel and 189th book.

[0:01:49.6] GJ: That’s crazy. That’s like — You’re getting up with Isaac Asimov who wrote hundreds of novels in his lifetimes.

[0:01:57.9] JJ: Yeah, and I think he had around 400. I’m not going to try to catch him. I always say, and this might sound like false modesty, and it really isn’t, but I feel mono-gifted. I have friends that sing, and dance, and preach, and I don’t do any of that. I’m a writer and I feel called to do it, and so I kind of feel obligated, and people have said, “Well, do you still need to write?” I said, “Well, I never wrote because I needed to write.” There were times when it was very helpful to add to the family income when I was working and writing and stuff like that. It’s nice to not have to do that. I wasn’t writing so that at a certain age I could stop doing that and go play golf or just lie on the beach. It’s what motivates me and I want to keep doing it.

[0:02:42.7] GJ: Yeah, that’s interesting when people say, “Do you need to do that.” It’s fascinating, because so many people write not because they’re trying to make a living. In fact, a vast majority of people who are writers aren’t necessarily making a full-time living off of it or doing it because they love it.

[0:03:00.3] JJ: Right. Yeah.

[0:03:01.2] GJ: Once you get to this point where you are making a living, I guess you just keep doing it because you love it. That’s how I feel about it.

[0:03:08.3] JJ: Yeah, it’s a different pace. I can remember the years when I wrote, I wouldn’t say no. If an assignment came, I wanted to jump on it and do it and a lot of it did have to do with income, because I was working full-time and trying to raise a family and put away money for kids’ college and hopefully pay the house off and stuff like that.

Of course, I did have the big hit, with Left Behind Series and that made things different, but now that I’m a senior citizen, I don’t want to retire and I don’t even really want to semi-retire, because I’m only writing maybe one book or one and a half books a year, which is a really slow pace for
me. I love that pace, because, then, as you know, I teach writers on the side as well and so that gives me time to do that and I really enjoy that.

[0:03:57.0] GJ: Okay. What did you say? 192? What was that?

[0:04:01.2] JJ: 189.

[0:04:02.6] GJ: Okay.

[0:04:03.8] JJ: Yeah, the next one would be kind of a milestone.

[0:04:06.0] GJ: Yeah. That's how many books you've written. *Left Behind* series is a huge megahit and lots of spinoff titles from that as well. How many total books of yours have sold? How many copies sold?

[0:04:22.0] JJ: Sold with — Recently, pushed over the 70 million mark. Admittedly, about 90% of those *are Left Behind*, which that just shows how phenomenal that thing was and still is. The first *Left Behind* book came out — This fall, it'd be 21 years. That series is still in print and still selling as a series in the six-figures every year. It just doesn't end.

[0:04:50.4] GJ: Yeah. I want to come back to that, because there’s an interesting thing that happens when a writer “peaks” and hits a certain level of success that they may not ever match again, at least, in terms of the way we traditionally measure success. I want to talk about this thing that you said earlier, which was writing for you as a calling. How did that begin? Tell me about how you felt called to be a writer and what do that mean?

[0:05:15.7] JJ: It’s really interesting. I don’t know how much of your audience are people of faith, but I come from a deep faith background. As a teenager, I felt called at one point. I was a professional writer — This sounds silly. I was a professional writer at age 14, because I started sports writing for a local paper and they would pay me a dollar per inch that appeared in the paper. I would try to write long and they would edit me back. That’s where I kind of learned my chops and everything, and I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be a sports writer.
Then, a couple of years later, I felt called to full-time Christian work and I felt, “Well, that’s the end of the writing career.” I guess I needed to learn how to become a pastor, or a missionary, or whatever you do there. I didn’t feel — It didn’t feel natural to me, but I got some really counsel me from an older mentor who said, “Look, sometimes God will equip you before he calls you. If you’re writing maybe the vehicle you use to answer this call, the full-time Christian work.”

I took that as a sort of an interesting view, because — Maybe I stated it wrong earlier when I said I feel called to write. I really feel called to full-time Christian work. In other words, getting the message out, that’s what we Christians are supposed to do. That’s my calling, and so when I took up that challenge and said, “All right. Maybe I’ll use the writing to do that,” not be a sports writer per se, although I’ve written a lot of sports book. I’ll use the writing to fulfill the call, and then when people start talking about striving to write bestsellers, or make bestseller lists, or get awards, or prices, or big royalty checks, or whatever, that’s not how I measure success, because that’s not what I’m about.

Success, to me, is not sales and accolades its obedience. For me to succeed is to obey the call. Then, if somebody says naturally, they say, “So what happens if you feel led to not write, but follow this call some other way, or God makes it clear to you that that part is over.” I’d have to say I’d have to be willing to give that up now. He hasn’t, and I think because it’s been blessed so much. I guess I found my wheelhouse.

It really takes a lot of the pressure off, because I see so many writers saying, “How do you write a bestseller? How do you get noticed? How do you make this list,” of blah-blah-blah. I kind of say, “Well, you don’t do it by trying to do that. You have a passion. You have something to say.” I like to say, “Writers aren’t writers — Writers don’t write because they’re writers, they write because they have something to say. That’s where it will make a difference.”

People, they’re looking for ideas. They’re looking for what I can write about? I say, “You should know what you want to write about. What’s your passion? What gets you up in the morning? Write about that, and you’ll always find a market.”

[0:08:17.6] GJ: Out of those two numbers, obviously, 70 million is a big number. I’m more impressed by the 190, because I think most people understand that commercial success as a
writer to a certain degree is out of your control. I think there are some things that we can take responsibility for and other things that are clearly not in our control. At a certain point, it seems when something becomes phenomenal. Bestseller, *Left Behind* series, it just keeps going as you noted.

That 190 — You keep doing it. You keep writing books, and I’m in a middle of a book right now and part of me just — Not part — All of me just wants to kind of rollover and go, “I’m done with this. This is hard.” It’s a hard process. My first question is, does it get easier after, say, the 97th book, or is the level of difficulty for putting out a book just as difficult for you today as it was 20 years ago?

[0:09:21.7] JJ: Hey, about those cups? I hate to tell you, the reason it’s harder and it gets harder —

[0:09:30.0] GJ: It gets harder.

[0:09:31.0] JJ: It does, and the reason is because — I have found this true, and I like dropping names occasionally, and I’m happy to be a friend of Philip Yancey, who is on the nonfiction side. It’s quite odd. He said the same thing. He said, “Why am I writing slower today than I ever have?” Because I know how to do this, I do this every day and I’ve got my tool belt. I know the things to use. That part is nice. It’s nice to sit down and say, “I’ve done this before. I know how to do it. I don’t have to look up how to format a page, or how to avoid redundancies, or whatever.” I have a goal, and I’m sure you do too, and I know Philip does. You want everything you do to be better than the last time you did it. The more you write, the more that challenge comes in.

I have people, often times they’ll say, “Why you’ve written so many books?” “That’s what I want to do.” They say, “When did you know you loved writing?” I go, “Wait, slow down. There are a lots of things I love about being a writer and being known as a writer and getting to do what I like to do and all that.” Asking a writer if you just loved it, it’s sort of like asking a marathon runner at about a 20 mile mark, “Don’t you just love running?” You’re going to a get a reaction you didn’t expect to get.
That’s what you’re going through now, you’re in a middle of a book. I call it the marathon of the middle, because we have great ideas, we start well, we know our finish is going to be good. It’s going to be a good resounding end and we’re going to be happy. That marathon of the middle, every time I get there, I think, “Who told me I could do this? Why did I think I was a writer?”

I’ve got this bookshelf in front of me, I look up, and it’s all my published books and I don’t let too many people in here where I write. If they see it, they might think I’m egotistic with all my books. They’re only there to remind me, “You have done this before. You can finish.”

[0:11:25.2] GJ: Wow! I love that. Have you ever given up on a book? Have you ever started a book and then had to throw it out because it just wasn’t working?

[0:11:33.6] JJ: I don’t think I have. There are some that critiques think I should have given up, or editors that I should give up on. There are some — I mentioned about there was a time in my career where I wouldn’t say no. There are things I should have said no to and think I would say no to today.

It turned out that the book turned out okay. It was called Light on the Heavy, and it was a book about making bible doctrine easy for teenagers to understand, because the publisher was — Something called Publisher Ted Place. They said, “We want kids to realize how important doctrine is, because they don’t even know what it means. Why is it important then?”

I took the major doctrines of the Christian faith and tried to explain ‘em. I had to consult commentaries and experts and stuff. It was so far out of my wheelhouse. In a way, it was good for the project, because I was the typical reader. I needed to make it easy for me to make it easy for them. It was just a little paperback book, and it took me forever. It was work. Sometimes you’re writing a novel and you kind of get deep into it and it starts coming and you can’t get back, you can’t wait to get back to the keyboard. This was just drudgery. I thought, “Why did I think I could write this thing?”

It wasn’t a huge success, but I remember one night when we lived in Deerfield, I mentioned I’d lived in Deerfield, Illinois at one point. That’s where Trinity Seminary is. One night, I got somebody actually come to my door and say he was a seminarian and he said, “You know that
book you wrote several years ago on bible [inaudible] for kids. He said, “I still use that at
seminary, because sometimes it’s so far over my heard I just want to know, “What does this
mean?” I felt, “That alone makes it worth it.”

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:13:23.0] GJ: Hey guys, Jeff here. This podcast is brought to you in part by Notable Themes.
I want to say a quick word about this, because I don’t typically promote anything on this
podcast. So why am I sharing this with you today? Because I think this is going to help a lot of
people. Notable Themes is the only place that you can find premium WordPress themes,
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All right. That’s that. Now, let’s get into the show.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:14:20.1] JG: Yeah, it is really interesting. I don’t know if you feel this way. I feel this way,
Jerry. I don’t really think — Obviously, I’m writing, hoping somebody will read it. At the same
time, I don’t really think people are paying attention to these things. It’s surprising sometimes. I
go, “Whoa! You saw that? You saw that thing that I did? That’s really interesting.”

[0:14:41.0] JJ: Yeah, it's a very lonely profession. I’m kind of an introvert. A lot of writers. I have
to become an actor to speak in public and to do their autographs, and that type of thing, which I
enjoy. I love to meet readers, because that's so rare. Then, you have a phenomenon like Left
Behind and the publisher was asking for one every six months, because they wanted that big
sales thing.
It was really funny, because at that point, I was aware that there were millions of people looking over my shoulder saying, “All right. Step it up, boy. Let’s go. We want the next thing.” It’s a tough way to write, because I like to think, “I’m a typical reader, I’ll write for myself. What I like to read, they’ll like to read, and we’ll all be happy.” Here, I’ve got people that are living and dying waiting for this next addition and I’m thinking, “Is it going to be good enough? Is it exciting enough? Does it hold up?” It was a lot of pressure.

[0:15:37.3] GJ: Yeah, I can imagine. I think a lot of writers — I was certainly this way and probably am in some respect still. You’re rushing to get to that place where, now, you’re a pro. Now, you can be taken seriously. What did you say? I like being thought off as a writer. If I’m being honest, the ego-driven part of me that I try to burry. I like whatever positive connotations people have or impressed by when they think writer. You’re rushes to get to that point without realizing that there are expectations and maybe even burdens associated with that, which is, like you said, you don’t want to mess it up.

[0:16:17.7] JJ: Yeah, there is that. I can remember those days too where you want to be — I’ve got a list of things. It’s like I like being a writer, being known as a writer. I like have being written. That’s the best part. The writing itself is what’s grueling. I tell people, they say, “I don’t know how you can say that I love to write.” I say, “Frankly, I need to know, are you published, are you successful?” They go, “Not yet.” I say, “Well, it could be, if you love it that much, you’re not doing all right, because it’s not fun. It’s hard. It’s grueling, and you got to do it right.”

Then, when the payoff comes, it’s worth. I guess it’s closest that we males can come to having baby, because I hear my wife and my mother talk about these things all the time, that there’s nothing more painful than giving birth, but then it’s all okay, because you’ve got this product. You’ve got this baby and it’s where life is all about. That’s kind of how I feel when the book comes in, it’s just like, “Boy, I thought it was a grueling when I was working on it, but this is worth it. It’s worth the effort.”

When you talked about wanting to get to that point where people take you seriously, I remember well when people would say, “So, what do you do?” I’d say, “I’m writer.” They’d go, “Oh. Anything I would have ever read?” I’d say, “Probably not. I’ve only written several dozen books that
you’ve never heard of.” Then, I would list a few, and unless it was one of the professional athletes that I’ve written their biography form or some, people would go, “No. No. Don’t rem — No, I haven’t seen that.” Then, *Left Behind* comes, and I see it everywhere. Here, I’d never seen anybody reading my books, and I see everybody reading them all at the same time.

I had so much fun with that. In fact, just the other day — This hasn’t happened for a few years now. I was in the line at the airport and the guy ahead of me had a *Left Behind* book. I said — I did something that I used to do all during the heyday of this that I said, “What’s that you’re reading?” he goes, “Oh, this is one of the books of the *Left Behind* series. It’s a really famous series. I said, “Oh, yes. People tell me I look like the guy in the back.” He turns it over and he goes, “Yeah, you really do.” His wife goes, “It’s no you, is it?” I had fun with that, but it really is rare for most writers, if you don’t have a big hit like that, people either think you’re starving or that you’re a multimillionaire, and they’re usually right on the other end.

[0:18:38.1] GJ: Speaking of the multimillionaire, but, “Oh, you look like that guy.” Do you, or have you struggled with ego at any point in your career? Do you have achieved what so few writers have achieved, which is to have — Be able to make a full-time living off of your writing and to sell lots and lots of copies of your books?

[0:18:56.4] JJ: I think the advantage I had was that the luck behind phenomenon came when I was past the age where that could have been a bigger problem. The first *Left Behind* book came out in the fall of ’95, so I was 35 years old — No. I was 45 years old. Sorry. Yeah, 45.

[0:19:18.3] GJ: That’s a big difference.

[0:19:19.3] JJ: It’s a big difference, yeah. Had it happen when I was 25, I hate to think what might have happened. I’d like to not think that. I like to think that — And my dad — My late father always used to say this, that a great success or means will not make you a different person. It will show you who you are. If you’re stingy, you’ll be stingy on a large scale. If you’re a rotten — A nasty person, you’ll be a rotten — Just written more large.

I do remember when Tyndale House, the publisher of *Left Behind*, when the first three titles totaled a million copies. I can remember that day, hearing that and thinking, “I really pulled
something off there. I’ve really — ” because I did all the writing. This was my baby. They sent me a framed picture that had all three of the covers on it and a little thing that said, “One million copies sold.” I’m feeling pretty good about myself.

Then, the thing just absolutely goes nuts and it’s selling — The first title for a couple of years, two or three years, there were — Where the new ones would come out and they’d be number on Amazon before they were even released. The first title was averaging 275,000 sales a month. I found myself having the opposite reaction. I was overwhelmed, and it was like, “How did I dare ever think to take any human credit for this? This is clearly a God thing. Nobody can write something successfully enough that it’s going to take off on its own like that.” It kind of really did — It had the opposite effect than you might expect.

Then, when I wrote my next books, I always still had that same fear that most writers have that someday — You’re going to be found out, you’re not good enough. You’re not going to finish. You can’t make this work.” I realized that that’s a good motivator. I think fear is a good motivator, because it kept me from mailing it in, doing it in my sleep, because I have the skills to do it. I know that, because you have practiced enough.

If I do that, I’m going to start cutting corners and people are going to read and go, “This is the person that had a bestseller? I can’t believe that.” I try to give myself to every project, and I think that helps to keep your ego in check too.

[0:21:42.0] GJ: I love that. Let’s talk productivity. You said as you write more books, it becomes harder, which I believe, and I wasn’t expecting that, and we’ll thank you later. You’re right. You’re right, because — What is that? Socrates, he says, “The smarter I get, the less I know.” I think writing is that way. When you go, “Oh, I could write a book, or whatever,” and you write a book and you’re like, “Gosh! I survived that. That’s great.”

The more you get into the craft, I think the harder you realize it is. I think it was Hemmingway who said, “We are all apprentices in a craft nobody masters.” I know that feeling.

[0:22:23.2] JJ: Yeah. I think, too, that as you become proficient — I can’t deny that I’ve got this pedigree of success in the background. Now, I’m at a place where the publishing world has had
such a sea change. You hear some people say, “Well, nobody reads books anymore anyway. They’re all reading everything on their phone. They’re all texting with abbreviations and emojis and stuff.” I’m like, “Am I really that much of a dinosaur already?” I think, “I’m afraid I am.”

[0:22:55.1] GJ: Oh, yeah. Do you procrastinate? To write almost 200 books seems like you just don’t have time for that. Do you deal with any of these issues that so many people I talk to, Jerry, and I’m sure many of your community members and students deal with as well, it’s just about, “How do I find time? How do I even get words down on a page?” Do you deal with any of that?

[0:23:18.8] JJ: I do, and people do find it surprising, and it’s probably the biggest source of relieve. When writers get together and want to talk to me, they say, “Well, you don’t have to worry about this, because you’re disciplined clearly, because you’ve written all these works.” I say procrastination may be a prerequisite to be a writer, because almost every writer I know — Every once in a while. I interviewed, I think it was Brandilyn Collins and maybe DiAnn Mills, recently. Both of them said, “No. I don’t deal with procrastination. I have my schedule. I get it done.” There might have been one other one who had said that, and I just hated him for a little half a day.

I am a professional procrastinator, and there were some times, in fact, some years where it really bothered me, because I thought I’ve got all these contracts and all these people counting on me, and these deadlines to meet, and I can’t get started. One of my jokes is, but it’s true, I have a pencil holder that’s in the shape of a typewriter with a cool little pencil holder. I’ve got 18 pencils in it. I can write a word if all those pencils aren’t sharpened. The thing is I don’t write with pencils. I haven’t written with a pencil since I was in sixth grade.

[0:24:35.1] GJ: You’re just sitting there.

[0:24:36.2] JJ: Yeah. In my desk — I’m not a neatnik by nature, but before I write, everything has to be just so. Then, of course, you have to make sure all your email is answered and you’ve seen the list of the ugliest sea creatures ever born and the actors who married ugly actresses and things. You know, you’ve got to be up on all of that.
I remember losing sleep over this, and then by the time you talk yourself into doing something, it’s noon. By then, “The half of the day is gone. We’ll start tomorrow.” I have finally figured out — And I don’t even remember how it came to me or if somebody just told me. I think I realized at some point that while you’re procrastinating, your subconscious is working on a project, because things come out when I finally get to the keyword that I was not aware of thinking, even in my research, or my planning, or whatever.

When I finally allowed myself that truth and said, “Let’s schedule procrastination. Let’s decide that this is all part of the process. When I schedule my days and my pages per day that I have to write, just assume that I’m not going to live up to that at first and I’m going to have to go back to the calendar and change the number of pages per day that I write to make the deadline.”

As long as I keep the deadline sacrosanct, because I was a publisher for several years and I’ve realized that only about 1 in 100 authors literally make their deadline.

[0:26:03.2] GJ: It’s really surprising. Isn’t it?

[0:26:04.1] JJ: Yeah, it is. I thought, “If I can be that one,” — Because you hear that it’s a thousand to one odds to get a book published. Well if you can cut your odds down by 10 times just by making your deadline. I keep the deadline absolutely sacred.

If I have gone a week and I’ve got my pages per day I need to write and I haven’t done anything, I just say, “Well, that’s me. That’s how I work. In my subconscious, it’s still working, but I’m going to change the number of pages per day I need to write now to make my deadline.” If I get to where the number of pages per day is giving to my limit — I’m a pretty fast writer, but I can’t write 50 pages a day and I certainly can’t write more than that.

When it gets down to that point, I say, “All right. Time to quit screwing around. Time to quit playing and using excuses, whatever. Get your pages per day done and make your deadline.” That’s the difference. That’s what will keep somebody on track.

[0:26:59.6] GJ: Do you deal with writer’s block ever?
JJ: My feeling about writer’s block is that it’s a myth and people always sort of respond negatively because they say, “Well, I’ve had it, so I know what it is.” Maybe you haven’t. I know what it means to not feel like writing or to feel like your well is dry, but I always say, “Look. We are the only profession in the world who allows ourselves this conceit.

Imagine yourself in any other job, you can name it; factory worker, doctor, actor, whatever. You get up in the morning and you call your boss and you say, “I can’t come in today because I have worker’s block.” They would just laugh at you off the face of the earth, or tell you, “Why don’t you just not come in ever again?”

I say, “It’s a job.” If you don’t feel like writing, there’s plenty of other things to do. Get your seat in that chair, get in front of the keyboard, do some research, catch up on your correspondence. Do something writerly that’s your job, and make sure you’re keeping your deadline sacred.

To say, “Well, I just haven’t done anything for three weeks —” I’ve heard people say they had writer’s block for six months. To me, that’s an excuse for laziness.

GJ: Yeah, you just write something. It doesn’t have to be pretty.

JJ: Yeah.

GJ: I feel like when I’m dealing with writer’s block, and I don’t really like using that term either, because it is my job, and my wife doesn’t work anymore, and this is how we eat. I can let go of something that isn’t perfect now. What I’m dealing with — I feel a lot of what’s guiding it, the feeling of — It’s like I can’t finish this, or this is really hard, or really feeling stuck. I feel like a lot of that is perfectionism.

JJ: I think it can be, and that’s really fear, because if you’re like me, the reason you wanted to be a writer and want to write a book is because you have a message, something to say, something you want to communicate, and you want to make a difference. We want to touch people and touch their hearts and lives. In a way, therein lies the problem. It’s sort of a catch-22.
Because we care so much, we feel this pressure to write the perfect book. As you say, the perfectionism.

That pressure leads to fear that our writing won’t be good enough, will be found out, or rejected, or worse, that we will be published and then the world finds out we can’t write. That fear is what keeps us frustrated. I think that turns into procrastination. Then, comes that sort of ultimate boogeyman, it’s writer’s block.

When you’re talking about your wife not working anymore, that’s a nice goal to achieve and a place to get, but how it would work if you said to her, “We really haven’t had any income for about four months, because I’ve had writer’s block.” She’d be like, “How’s that writer’s block working out for you?”

[0:29:58.9] GJ: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. I love what you said about the deadline moving you. For me, I am pretty lazy, but once I’ve got a deadline, there’s just something in me. Maybe it’s that Midwestern work ethic. I don’t know. I can’t not show up for work. I can’t turn in the thing that I promised I’d turn it until somebody paid me to write something.

[0:30:19.0] JJ: Yeah, the best motivator is deadline, I think.

[0:30:24.0] GJ: Is it safe to say that when Left Behind came out — Then, you said it started to really take off and over a million copies sold. Then, it really started to take off. What year was that?

[0:30:37.6] JJ: It was a fourth book, and I’m guessing that was probably as early as ’97, because the first ones were coming pretty fast. I can remember when the vice president for publishing or vice president for editorial in Tyndale call me and he said, “Have you looked at Amazon today?” because they had had the fourth book in the house. They’ve redone the editing and getting ready to roll it out. It’s probably two and a half weeks before it was — They had hard released it. They’d say, “Don’t open these boxes until then. We don’t want anybody getting it early,” et cetera.
I said, “No.” I said, “Just check. See what it says there for book four,” which was *Soul Harvest*. I looked it up and it was number one on Amazon. It just kind of overwhelmed me, because like I say, this is 97 now and the thing is already presold close to seven-figures and it hasn’t been released yet. Then, it was like, “You’re going to have a job for a quite a longtime.” It was a good news and it was also a pressure. It was really quite a season to go through.

**[0:31:50.5] GJ:** What I was going to say is it is safe to say — This was 20 years ago? Is it safe to say that your greatest success in terms of commercial sales of a book is behind you? If so, what do you with that?

**[0:32:08.3] JJ:** Yeah. There was no question even at that time, because I’d been in publishing for so long. *Left Behind* was my 125th book.

**[0:32:15.6] GJ:** It only takes — If you haven’t succeeded, just keep writing.

**[0:32:19.7] JJ:** I’m an overnight success. What’s really funny is that the second approach, especially people that are not in the inspirational market, where I usually plan my trade. I would get interviewed on big network shows and stuff and they’d say, “Have you ever written anything other than *Left Behind*?” I got, “Yeah, I have actually. I’ve written several —”

My first New York Times bestseller was Oral Hershiser’s autobiography which I think was my 75th book. You’re doing your think and in the middle of that I listed Billy Graham with his memoirs, which was a pretty big seller, but we’re talking about a million, not 10 million or something like that.

There was a lot of success, but I knew in the middle of the *Left Behind* thing, this is a season, and you don’t get used to this and start saying, “Every year now for the rest of my life, I’m going to have a book that sells 10 million, or 8 million, or whatever it is, per copy.” I think that helped.

Again, because I was in my 40s by then and not in my 20s, you’ve heard about people that will have an initial success and they think, “This is what life is. They buy a mansion. They buy several fancy cars and all of a sudden the next book is like — The public goes, “Meh —” All of a sudden nobody answers their calls and they’ve got a mansion to sell. You just can’t do that.
I did have to deal with the fact, and it was kind of funny, because I had my own books I wanted to do. In between Left Behind books I wrote some novels and some sports biographies and things like that. The publishers would say things to me that I just never thought I would hear. They'd go, “Well, it did 800,000. It’s all right.” I’d go, “Oh, that’s okay. We can live with 800 —”

You have to be careful too, because publishers get in there in their eyes and in their minds, “If we get this Left Behind guy, we’re going to get multimillion sales.” You don’t want to downplay yourself and say, “Let’ be realistic here.”

If you think it’s going to be — I don’t have any illusions that we’re going to see another Left Behind in my lifetime. Not for me. Other people who’ve had success just like that, the Purpose Driven Life, and The Shack, and books like that, they explode. It happens, but it doesn’t often happen twice to the same person and I’d never expected it too.

Again, I think because of my original thing was I wasn’t called to be a bestselling writer. I was called to full-time Christian work and writing was the vehicle. My success was obeying, writing the books that I’m called to write. As you said, we don’t have control over ourselves. At that point, I can’t fret over it and keep looking at the bestseller list or looking at any numbers. I just say, “That’s not in my control.” The only thing I can control is how much of myself I’d give to the quality of the writing, and I want to do all I can there and then leave the rest to the marketplace. The market will decide.

[0:35:32.7] GJ: Jerry, so much of what writers struggle with today is marketing themselves and marketing their work. It seems that there’s kind of two camps and that’s probably an oversimplification, but one camp is you’ve got to do everything. You’ve got to build your platform and tell everybody about your work and you’re in charge of selling the book. The other camp is kind of write it and forget about it. Do you lean towards one of those over the other?

[0:35:59.3] JJ: I’ve kind of come a funny journey with that. On the one, I see where publishers are — They mean it when they say they’re looking for people with platforms. They want people to be willing to help with the marketing. Of course, I’m always willing. When you write dozens of books the way I did and the most you might get is a half a dozen radio phoners from home and all of a sudden you have a monstrous hit and you’ve got, “Can you be in New York by tomorrow
and do two morning shows, and can you be on Larry King and this and that.” You start thinking, “This is fun. I could do this.”

[0:36:32.3] GJ: Did that happen? Is that what happened with —

[0:36:33.5] JJ: It did.

[0:36:34.1] GJ: With Left Behind, you wrote it and you had dozen phone interviews and it just took off.

[0:36:38.6] JJ: Yeah. Once it took off, we were on all of the networks, all that stuff. Most writers, I realize, don’t. What they get is a local newspaper interview, or a few phoners, or maybe the publisher arranges with a PR firm to get them a few dozen interviews by phone and they’re on the radio. When it comes, you’re happy to do it.

Now, being a writing coach, I have people tell me all the time, “Well, publishers are scaring me, because I hear that you have to do all your own marketing.” That’s a bit of an exaggeration. They don’t expect you to have a marketing plan. You’re not supposed to design a campaign yourself, but they do want you to be thinking, “Who knows me?” “What is my orbit?” “Where will I see these books?” “Am I available to be speaking and being interviewed and write blogs about it?” You do all you can.

I found two that it wasn’t our being out there in the media that sold Left Behind. It was the selling of Left Behind that got us out into the media. Same thing with advertising, the publisher — Every writer would love to say, “They never advertise my book that much. If I had a million dollar advertising campaign, we could have sold books.” It’s the other way around.

Left Behind didn’t have a budget like that until it sold like that. It gave them the money to do it and to keep it going. It was managed well. I don’t believe you can just throw a million dollars, or even $100,000 campaign at something and have that automatically result in a certain number of sales. The book has to be right and the market has to talk about it. Word of mouth is the best promotion you’re ever going to get, and you can’t force that. People either like it or they don’t.
GJ: Have you ever wanted to quit.

JJ: Only after every manuscript.

GJ: This place that I’m at right now, wallowing. I was talking to my editor and I go, “I’m lying on the ground.” They go, “Oh, Jeff. Don’t be dramatic.” I go, “No. I’m literally lying on the ground.”

JJ: Yeah, I know the feeling well. Speaking of name dropping, it happens that Stephen King and I had the same audio reader for — Once I had *Left Behind*. The guy had a horrible motorcycle accident and he would never read again and it took him several years to die, but he did die from it. He had incredible bills to pay. Somehow, Stephen found out that I was helping contribute to that and he was too. He called one day and it was so bizarre because my secretary said, “Stephen King is on the line for you.” I said, “Right.” I’m thinking, “What friend would do this?” I almost picked up the phone and said, “Yeah, this is Jim Grisham.” I felt, “Well, maybe.” I just said, “Hello.” He said, “This is Stephen King.” I thought, “Only Stephen King would call himself Steve,” and it really was him. He said, “We need to work together and help this guy’s family,” and blah-blah-blah.

We get to meet and we visited the guy in rehab and all of that. I’ll have to say this, every time I turn around, Stephen King is retiring. He’ll say, “I’m done. I’m done. It’s over. I’ve written my last book. I’m going to just do columns for magazines and speak on T.V. and all of that.”

We become email buddies. When I wrote what I considered my magnum opus, *Riven* was my favorite novel. I really felt spent and I thought, “I don’t think I have any more to say. I don’t think I can do it better, and I don’t think I can do more.” I emailed Stephen King and said to him, I said, “I noticed that you retire a lot.” I said, “I’m feeling that right now.” He said, “Yeah.” He said, “Then, about six weeks, a little idea will hit me and I’ll think, “What am I doing? I’m kind of underfoot. My wife is wondering what I am doing around here.” He says, “Then, I just get the itch and I have a story that needs to be written.” He said, “Just don’t make any rash decisions, and don’t announce it.” He said, “That’s my mistake is that I feel it so strongly, I announce it.”
I just kind of let it sit. Yeah, I do — I’ll finish a particularly hard project. Even this last one, I did, *The Valley of the Dry Bones*, I remember I said to Dianna, “Boy! Retirement does sound attractive sometimes, where it’s just, “Do I want to go through this grueling marathon again?” She goes, “Yeah, you will. Right now you don’t’ feel like it.” That’s where I am right now, it’s like I’m between. I’m enjoying the teaching and I’m enjoying the thinking about future stuff but not doing it yet.

**[0:41:23.2]** GJ: I always think of this story that I read in one of John Eldredge’s books where he was talking about ministry and just working with people and he was saying, “Man!” He and his wife are burnt out on people, on needy people taking care of him. He’s like, “Let’s just go. Let’s not deal with people anymore. Let’s go live in a cabin somewhere and let’s be done.”

They went on a cruise to Alaska, or something, and came back and were just totally reenergized to just go hear on people again. I totally get that. I get the exhaustion and just really feeling, “No. I’m totally done with this.”

**[0:42:01.7]** JJ: Yeah, it comes and it feels so real. It’s like you’ve just spent yourself and you’re lucky you survived. It is fun to get that itch again, because it’s ideas and it’s things that kind of fit together and you go, “Well, what if this happen and that happen and a story starts to grow?”

**[0:42:20.6]** GJ: Yeah, I love that. I was going to ask what your favorite book that you’ve written was and you said it was *Riven*.

**[0:42:25.8]** JJ: Yeah. It was bizarre how that one came about. I was at a Catholic retreat center, and not being Catholic, I had never really studied The Crucifix before. There was one on the wall in my room. I thought, “We Protestants sort of beautify The Crucifixion in our artwork. The Catholics don’t. It’s horrible. It looked as agonizing as it was.” You could see the blood and the riven side. That’s where the title came from — And the agony.

Then, while I was thinking about that, I read a story about Gary Gilmore, that old murderer that wanted to be executed and it took them so long to accede to his wishes. He got to choose his own execution style. There were four he could choose from. I think it was lethal injection, hanging, electrocution, or firing squad. Of all things, he chose firing squad. Somehow, those two
images rattle around my head and I felt, “What would it be like if a prisoners could choose and he chose crucifixion in this day and age, because he’d come to faith and he just wanted to show people what Christ went through on a cross. Not to atone for his own sins. Not to resurrect after three days. Not anything weird.” I had that idea for almost 20 years before I could ever find a publisher or the time to do it.

When I finally did it, it just gushed from me. I had the characters, I had the plot and everything and it was — I made a mistake though. On the back, I let them say what I’d been saying to them. I said, “This is the novel I’ve always wanted to write.” What has that done for my future? It’s like, “Here’s another one I kind of wanted to write.” Yeah, I was really happy with Riven and it hasn’t been a multimillion sell or anything, but it’s got a very loyal audience.

[0:44:14.5] GJ: How much time do you spend writing versus thinking about writing, plotting, planning, kind of like the non-writing writing stuff? Do you know what I’m saying?

[0:44:26.6] JJ: Yeah, and I’m not sure I’ve ever analyzed that too closely. I only write when I’m on deadline. Some people write every day. Stephen King writes virtually every day. I do lots of other stuff. When it comes time to write, I get away and I only write. I’m not a plotter. I’m sort of in the Stephen King school of writing. He says, “Put interesting characters in difficult situations and write to find out what happens.” That’s what we call — It has become known as pants, or somebody who writes by the seat of their pants. Sort of the opposite of a Randy Ingermanson who has it so outlined, all you have to do is fill in the blanks when you’re down with your outline. You’re either one of the other usually. There are few hybrids, but people are one or the other.

I think I think about a book a long time before I start, and then when I sit down and try to put those interesting characters in difficult situations, a lot it is subconsciously. I think being raised on television and movies, I’m sort of an intuitive plotter, or at least organizer, so it works out that way.

[0:45:34.1] GJ: We talked a lot about Left Behind, but you’re a working writer long before that phenomenal success, right?

[0:45:41.9] JJ: Yeah.
**[0:45:42.4] GJ:** How did you — I mean that book came out in your 40s. You have a family. How did you manage the demands of being a father, being a husband, being present to your family, and the demands of being a writer, which can kind of feel like you could give your two lifetimes to the work of writing and it’s still not feel enough. At least that’s how I feel sometimes. How do you manage those tensions? For a lot of people, it’s kind of a nontraditional career. There is no set schedule that if you follow, this is what you’re supposed to do.

**[0:46:19.4] JJ:** This is one thing where I have to say if somebody pressed me, “What have you done right?” I have to say I did this part right, and I don’t mean to sound like I’m boasting, but when I was in my early 20s, Dianna and I had been married a year or so. We didn’t have kids till our first son came along about four and a half years into our marriage. I was editing a Christian magazine. I was editing *Men for Stories* and it just happened to be men, by they’re all middle aged men, about twice my age at the time and they were all totally different stories.

At some point, in each of those interviews, I asked each of those guys the same question. I said, “What regrets do you have at this stage of your life.” I’m 23, they’re about 45 or a little older. Every one of them said the same thing. They said, “I wished I had spent more time with my kids when they were growing up. I remember going home that night and saying to Dianna, “Somebody is trying to tell me something. I got the message from five people in one day.”

We set a policy that — And I was working full-time in Chicago, living in the suburbs and writing on the side. We set a policy. I said, “I will not do any work from the office or any writing from the time I get home from work until the time the kids go to bed once we have kids.”

When our first son came along, I just followed that religiously. When I got home from work, when he was a baby, I helped with changing the diaper, and feeding, and putting him to bed, and the whole thing, so Dianna could have her time. When we eventually had three sons, they were all different personalities, one was a talker, and we talked all the time. The other one was quiet and like to play games. We played sports all the time. Third one was kind of a combination. The neighborhood kids were fascinated by this man that was outside playing with the kids all the time or doing stuff, so they would come over and they would — Dianna said during the day they would come over and ask if I was home. So kids are [inaudible].
You tell your kids that they are a priority. I always say kids hear what you say, but they believe what you do. There was this myth going through the church at that time that if you didn’t have much time to spend to spend with your family, make sure the time you do spend is quality time. Kids don’t know the difference. To them, quality time is quantity time, and love is spelled time.

I can’t make this as a guarantee, but our kids didn’t go through the big rebellious stage. We didn’t have prodigal. They all grew up to be our best friends and the oldest two are married with beautiful wives and four kids each and they’ve got three adoptees as grandchildren too. I think it’s because they — We didn’t agree on everything, and everything wasn’t sweet sunlight all the time, but they knew our priorities right. They knew we cared. For me, I never wrote with guilt that I was shutting out my family when they were awake and at home. That was the rule. Sometimes you put them at bed at 4:30. It was just the idea that — I’m a morning person, so I couldn’t wait until I could go full-time freelance and work in the morning.

Back then, I’d work all day, come home, spend the time until about nine with the kids and then with Dianna, and then I had to write from nine to midnight because it’s the only time I had. I was more productive then than probably ever, because I wasn’t writing with guilt and I was redeeming the time.

[0:49:47.7] GJ: Yeah, I love that. If you’re feeling guilty all the time, it’s going to make a worst writer. That’s true. My son, yesterday — We got a slip slide out in the backyard, and full-time now. I have kind of this rigid schedule, because I know that I don’t have a schedule, I’m not going to ever do it. When my wife came home — I worked from home for nearly a decade. When my wife came home to take care of the kids, that became her place. This was kind of my space for 10 years. She’s like, “Yeah, there’s no room for you here anymore. You got to go somewhere else. We got to do our thing.”

It’s after breakfast, and I had an appointment at 9:30 in the morning my son Aden said, “Can we go slip and sliding,” and it’s breakfast time. He came downstairs for breakfast, which I get up and make for him every morning, in his swimsuit, ready to go. I was just like, “Well, logistically, I don’t —” I was, “Man! If I can’t do this, if I can’t make room in my life for morning slip and slide, then what’s the point?”
[0:50:56.0] JJ: Exactly. What are the priorities. I can remember coming home from work in
downtown and I’m in a suit and tie with expensive shoes on and the kids were in the kiddie pool
in the backyard. They said, “Dad, can you come in with us?” I’m like, “I got to change our of my
fancy clothes.” I kicked my shoes off and just jumped in that pool. Just sat there with my suit. It’s
a memory they’ll never forget.

[0:51:16.7] GJ: Yeah. When you went full-time, Jerry, I’m curious, what did you schedule looked
like then, and we can kind of wrap up here. What did your schedule look like then, and now
what is your daily schedule look like? Because I think it’s fascinating for people to understand
that the life of a writer, it looks different for everybody and it’s not necessarily what you expect.

[0:51:36.8] JJ: it was hard for me when I first went full-time freelance, because I had so much
time then. I would get up in the morning and think, “I don’t have to start writing right away,
because I’ve got all these hours before the kids come home from school.” I found that
procrastination would really kick in then.

Here, I’ve been so productive from nine to midnight. Now, I’ve got all day. I had to really work on
that and get that straight. Then, my goal became to write only when the kids were — I would not
write if the kids were at home and awake. I had to write when they were at school, or in the
summer time, if they were out playing, I might play with them. I’d say, “All right. I’m going to go
to your games tonight, little league of whatever, and we’re going to take this break at this time to
play.” I did have a workday, and they understood that.

You do have to schedule your day just like you would if you were in an office. If you don’t, you
can find yourself — I’ve talked to people that have procrastinated years away getting very little
done.

[0:52:36.6] GJ: This has been an honor. You’ve been generous with your time. Thanks for
taking some time to chat with me.

[0:52:42.6] JJ: My pleasure, Jeff. Thanks for having me on.
Hey guys, thanks for listening to the Portfolio Life. You can find the show notes for this episode and others at goinswriter.com. If you enjoyed the show, you can leave a review at iTunes so more people can find it and my ego doesn’t die a slow tragic death. I appreciate the time you take to listen to the show. I’d love to connect with you on Twitter, you can find me @jeffgoins. You can also email me at jeff@goinswriter.com with tips, ideas, feedback, compliments on my hair.

Anyway, thanks for listening. I look forward to talking to you in the next episode. Now go build your portfolio.

“JJ: Writers don’t write because they’re writers. They write because they have something to say.”