

**TRANSCRIPT FROM SHAWN COYNE'S
NOVEMBER 17, 2014 INTERVIEW
WITH STEPHEN CAMPBELL**

Greetings and welcome to The Author Biz—the Monday podcast focused on delivering actionable information to help you run your business as an author. Where ever you are, however you listen, thanks for spending some of your time with me today. My guest in this episode is editor, publisher, literary agent, and writer Shawn Coyne. Shawn spent several years of his life working as a senior editor at one of the big New York City publishing companies, and he's worked with some of the biggest names in the publishing business. In this episode Shawn shares what life is like for a senior editor at a big publisher, what his responsibilities were, and some of what goes into creating a breakout book. There are some fun looks behind the curtain of big time publishing, and then we get into the world of publishing today.

As you'll hear in the interview, Shawn practices what he preaches. He's helped to build the online platforms for his business partner, Steven Pressfield, and now he's doing it for himself. With his new internet home, TheStoryGrid.com, he's distilling his years of experience editing stories into a process we all can use to improve our own storytelling skills.

My guest today is editor, publisher, literary agent, and writer Shawn Coyne. Over the course of his publishing career, Shawn has edited and published books with gross revenues in excess of \$150 million in North America alone. Some of you may have learned of Shawn the way I did, through his long collaboration with Steven Pressfield. Shawn is also Steven's literary agent and manager, and the two of them partnered to form Black Irish Books. But today we're going to talk about Shawn's newest project, where he's sharing his analytical method of editing stories of every genre. He calls this method The Story Grid. Shawn, welcome to The Author Biz.

Shawn: Thanks so much, Steve. It's great to be here. It's great to finally meet.

Steve: Tell us the story behind The Story Grid.

Shawn: Well, The Story Grid is essentially like a twenty-year process of being an editor in mainstream book publishing as well as independent book publishing. And essentially it came about because when I started out in the business back in the early 1990s—now this is when we had typewriters on the table instead of computers—there was no real systematic approach to teaching somebody how to edit a book. So the way it worked was if you were lucky, and I was lucky, you would get a job with a very talented editor who would, over time, teach you the craft of how they did it.

The editor I worked with, who was the most influential when I was younger, was a woman named Jackie Farber. And Jackie edited some of the best books that Elmore Leonard ever published. One was called *Rum Punch*, which turned out to be *Jackie Brown*, the Tarantino movie. She also edited *Pronto*, which was the introduction of Raylan Givens, which ended up being a television series called *Justify*. And at that time, I was assistant editor to Jackie. Jackie brought me in and she would hand me these pieces of gold from Elmore Leonard and say, "Read it and tell me what you think. And we can get notes to Dutch (he used to call himself Dutch) ourselves." So she'd bring me in and we'd go through it.

And over time, I would learn those sorts of skills from individual editors. But after I got away and I became my own editor, what I found was in the industry, there are a lot of secrets. There are people a little bit hesitant to share their points of view in the way they do particular things, especially in book

editing. So I was sort of left in this place where I had to learn how to do it myself. And so like anything, like learning how to be a carpenter or learning how to lay bricks, you start with the classics. So, I read Plato and I read Georges Polti's book on *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*. I read Norman Friedman's work on the quest sort of narratives, and most influentially...and I will say that the man I'm about to talk about is a client of mine in my literary agency, so just full disclosure there. Robert McKee was a major influence in my coming to what became my Story Grid. So it's sort of one man's twenty-two year journey to learn how to make story principles very practical. So it's to take theory and make it really, really practical and applicable to any kind of manuscript.

Steve: And you've done this, and you've worked with this over the course of the years. You've developed this process, and I see you actually have it posted on your website. You did a Story Grid sort of image, a hand drawn image, for *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Shawn: Yes.

Steve: And it's fascinating. I've printed it out and showed it to my wife, and she's like, "Oh my god!" I was trying to explain it to her, and I said, "I'm not really going to be able to explain it to you until the book comes out and I really can understand it."

Shawn: Well, yeah, it's sort of like trying to explain...you know when I first showed it to Steve Pressfield...because I didn't know if this was like the rantings of a mad man or if people would actually be interested in my process. So I went to my good friend Steve Pressfield. I showed it to him, and his jaw dropped. He said, "Geez, this is like the plans for building a rocket ship." And he really loved it. And the reason why he loved it was because so many people, they really don't understand the craft and the hard work and the dedication behind every single scene in every single piece in a novel.

So when Steve saw it, he was like, "Oh my gosh, I want to have this thing and make business cards out of it, so I can show people what I actually do." So the Story Grid itself is sort of this wonderful kind of...it's like looking at a novel on one piece of paper. Like seeing a really...and you can follow the actual story of *The Silence of the Lambs*. You can do this for any novel, or originally as we were talking about, it's an editing technique. So as an editing technique, it begins this way. The first thing an editor has to do is read a manuscript, and then he's got to make notes. And what I found myself doing over the years, instead of making generic notes about the totality of the book from the offset...what I would do...

I would take the manuscript and each scene. I would take a stapler and would staple a couple of pages together that comprised a scene. And then I would write down on just a regular excel spreadsheet, you know: scene one, man walks into a bar. Scene two, waitress serves man at the bar a drink. And I'd literally do that for every single scene in the book. That way I could say to myself, "Well how are these scenes working together? Are they building up to a major climactic moment? Are they fizzing? Which scenes can I throw out? Which scenes should I put back in? What about the characterization?"

I would look at a manuscript from a very, very micro point of view. So that was sort of what I defined and called the Story Grid spreadsheet, which is not the same thing as the final Story Grid. But using the Story Grid spreadsheet, I could ask myself very large questions about the total story itself. And from that, I could create what I called a foolscap page. I got that from Steve Pressfield who kind of coined that term. But the foolscap page is essentially boiling down an entire novel into an outline that you can have on one legal-sized yellow foolscap piece of stationery. And so with the foolscap page and with the

spreadsheet, what I found was, “Hey, wow, if I plot this on a large graph and I showed the movements and the values in the storytelling, this could be really kind of fascinating.” And to be able to see, “Oh gee, where did the obligatory scene...the hero at the mercy of the villain scene, where did Thomas Harris put that scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*?” Wouldn’t it be cool to just be able to look at a piece of paper and see, “Oh there it is, it’s in scene fifty-two. Oh, wow.” And what about, “When was the first time he added a clock to the storytelling? Oh, that would be in scene twenty-six.” So all of these little pieces together formed what I call the Story Grid. And as you know, Steve, I am going to be publishing a book with Steve Pressfield, with my company Black Irish Books. We plan on having this out, hopefully within January, February of 2015.

Steve: That is going to be great because I’ve been reading your website which is TheStoryGrid.com. The image that I mentioned is on the website in the resources section.

Shawn: Yes.

Steve: And there’s some other things there as well. But just being able to print out the diagram that you were just talking about with all the scenes—and to see how it was done for this one particular book—was so illustrative that it was amazing. The things you’re talking about now, obligatory scenes, there’s a post on your website about the need for the obligatory scenes and why they have to be there. And how if you don’t do it, you’re hurting yourself. There’s sometimes a sense that we all have that we want to be creative and we don’t want to follow a script. But there are certain things, and if you leave them out, the story is not going to be the same. Or the reader is not going to get the same experience with it. And you’re creating on this website—just post after post that’s just building on this information that’s helping to walk us through your process. And I’m just finding it amazing. I’ve subscribed to the email list, and it is absolutely a must read for me as soon as I see the email pop into my inbox.

Shawn: [laughing] That’s good to hear!

Well, I’ll tell you, Steve, where I’m coming from with the whole thing, and a lot of my friends will say, “What are you doing giving away all this material on your website. You’re not waiting until you have the book and do a big press on it?” And the thing is, I’ve been in publishing for twenty-two years, and before we started our conversation here, we had that quick chat. In it, I was thinking the other day, some friends of mine over the past year have left the earth, as they say. And I was thinking to myself, you know, I’m not a young man any more. I’ve got twenty-two years of experience. I’ve got this thing in my head. Wouldn’t it be good to leave it behind in some form that myself at twenty-three and twenty-four years old, twenty some years ago, could find and be able to read it and enjoy it and to figure things out.

Because, as I said earlier, when I started there was no systematic approach to learn how to edit a book or to be a book editor. So what I’m doing at StoryGrid.com is—I’m essentially posting up quite a bit of my book. Probably it will be ninety percent of my book. And the reason why I’m doing that is that there are a lot of people who are like me. There are assistant editors and young editors in book publishing who are making less money than you can even imagine, and they just cannot afford whatever it’s going to cost to buy my book.

So as an old salt, I figure it’s my responsibility to be able to help them out to teach them how to edit. And also, coincidentally, people who are looking to write a book, there’s no better way to learn how to write a book than to learn how to edit one. And all the principles I talk about on the site are completely

applicable to the writer. In fact, you know, the writer and the editor should share the same toolbox. And so what the Story Grid is—it's just a big toolbox for anybody interested in writing a story. That story can even be nonfiction because great nonfiction tells the story as much as a novel does.

And hopefully the Story Grid will tell a little story itself from the beginning to the end. I mean, that's my intention is to keep people interested from week to week and from post to post by not being didactic and throwing down and all, "Here I am with my pipe and I'll tell you how everything you're doing is wrong." That's just not my approach at all. But what I want people to get excited about is what I get excited about, which is learning the craft. Which is, you know, sitting down, figuring out a problem, finding those problems, and fixing them. Less than, "Oh, I'm such an idiot because I didn't understand what an obligatory scene is." That's not what I'm after at all. I want to come to the site and discover things that will excite them to want to know more. And I hope...you know, I want to give them everything I can so that when the time comes, the dialogue between the audience and me can be in such a way that I can learn a lot more too. So that's my approach from the start.

Steve: And it's clearly working because it's easy to see just from the comment string on each post, it's growing and growing and growing. And this site is relatively new.

Shawn: It's only about twenty days old, believe it or not.

Steve: Yeah, I remember the first post, and I don't remember how I learned about it, but obviously I hadn't subscribed at that time. And maybe I saw something on Steve's blog about it. But I popped over, and immediately I subscribed. But I'm one of those people for whom even if a hundred percent of what's going to be in the book was on the website, I'd still want the book. I'd want to be able to flip through the pages...

Shawn: I think that's true of most people.

Steve: Yes. So I don't think that's a concern. So for most of us who are reading this, week after week, and taking it and using it to look at our own manuscripts, and seeing places where we might be able to improve things, it's very, very valuable.

Shawn: That's good. That's so satisfying to hear. You know, it's nice when you know how to make a tie and somebody likes the tie, you know?

Steve: [laughing] It is! You mentioned Robert McKee and your association with Robert McKee. I continually reread his book *Story*. And the reason I continue to reread it is because I hope to eventually understand it. When I'm reading, I have to concentrate so hard on what he's saying about this one thing, and then the next chapter it's on to something else. It gets a little esoteric, but boy, it's a brilliant book.

Shawn: It really is, but you know, I've known Bob for close to twenty years now, and I haven't...I was never his literary agent until I became a literary agent. Prior to that, I was just a fan. And I'd gone to his seminars a few times and Steve Pressfield and I were familiar with Bob, and he was kind enough to write an introduction to *The War of Art*...to Steve's seminal book on writing. Not the act of writing so much as the emotional strain of writing, which you know is probably ninety percent of the struggle. I think for most writers it's not, as Steve says, it's not the writing part. It's the sitting down in the chair that's the hard part.

So for Bob, my copy of *Story* is so worn that I've got two or three copies of the book. And I know what you mean, Steve, because Bob comes from *Story*...from a very intelligent and very analytical and studious point of view...the man has been studying story and storytelling for forty or fifty years, you know? And so his global understanding of story is so immense that what often happens is when I get into a discussion about a certain element—he'll start...he'll answer my sentence, my question, and then he'll go deeper and deeper and deeper until I'm at the point where I'm like, "Whoah, whoah, whoah. I'm not sure I understand what Gilgamesh has to do with..." [laughing]

Steve: [laughing]

Shawn: And, you know, when I'm having a conversation with him, I can stop him, and he'll go, "Oh, yeah, I know what you mean." But when I read Bob's book, I thought, "How can I apply this? How can I apply all of this brilliance to telling a writer..." Because one of the problems between an editor and a writer is communication. You have to be able to communicate with a writer without them losing their confidence. That's one of the most difficult things an editor has to learn how to do is a bedside manner when he's saying, "Hey, you have cancer in your third act." Right? Because anybody who has ever written anything can understand how very difficult it is to hear any criticism whatsoever because you immediately take it personally. You sweat it so much to actually bring the thing out on paper to begin with, that to hear criticism is very difficult. So what an editor has to learn how to do is direct criticism so that the writer doesn't take it personally, he just says, "Oh, that's the problem? Oh, I know how to fix that problem." So it becomes about problems instead of you're a terrible writer.

So some of the things that Bob has given me as my mentor are the global principles. So I can say to a writer, "Look, you don't have to agree with me on this but, if I start to tell some sort of a joke and I say, 'Knock, knock,' you're going to expect some kind of play on words as the climax of this joke, right?" You know, I say, "Knock, knock." And you say, "Who's there?" And I say, "Boo." And you say "Boo who?" And I say, "Don't cry, it's only a knock, knock joke."

You're set up for that anticipation of what "knock, knock" means. And it's the same thing in storytelling. If I say to you, "Steve, hey, I've got this great mystery novel that I've just written." Immediately your brain is going to say, "Murder, murder, excellent, I can't wait for this. I wonder who the main culprit is?" And you've got all these expectations just from your everyday life of seeing and reading and enjoying stories. That if I say to you, "Yeah, it's a mystery novel, but here's the really fun part. There's no body." You're going to go, "What? Then it's not a mystery novel if nobody gets killed. Where's the mystery?" So a lot of people get hung up on genres and conventions and obligatory scenes, but if you explain it to them in a way that make sense, "Hey, if you don't have a plan in your knock, knock joke, then it's not a knock, knock joke." People will be like, "Oh, yeah, I get it." So to be as simple as that, but it also has...there's a lot of deep holes you can do down. And one of my jobs as an editor is to stop the big plunge down the hole so you lose what the actual meaning of the principle is.

Steve: So you have been an editor for years. You mentioned that you're now a literary agent as well. And you're a publisher. So you've done essentially everything. Let's...take our listeners behind the scenes of a big time publisher in New York, and let's put your editor hat on and say an agent brings something to you. You know, a book by me, for example, we'll just say that. Someone you've never heard of before. What do you do?

Shawn: Ok, well, as you mentioned, I do have a long history. I did work in major publishing for a good twelve years as an editor, and I rose to the rank of senior editor at Doubleday, and I was responsible for publishing no more than eight books a year, ok? So I only had to bring in eight books a year, but each of those eight books was expected to be a bestseller. So there's quite a bit of stress in that job. In that, I could only pick eight novels a year to publish. And the money, the acquisition money, wasn't really the point. It was really about getting a staple of bestselling writers into the Doubleday environment that year after year could perform. So this is really the responsibility of a senior executive editor at a major publishing house.

So what they're looking for is one of two things. Now as an editor, I look for one of two things. The first thing would be a proven success. So for instance, if I knew, that say Harlan Coben was not happy at his publisher, what I would say to myself is, "How can I get to Harlan Coben and his agent to let them know that should the opportunity ever arise, that I would love to work with him." So my job, a part of my job, a major part of my job, would be to find the agents of these major, major crime writers. I concentrated in crime fiction, so there's military fiction and my nonfiction was sports. I ran the sports department.

So that was my primary responsibility. Can I bring in a big-ticket writer who's going to sell between a hundred to five hundred thousand hardcover copies a year? And in paperback, anywhere from four hundred thousand to a million copies each year. Now that's a tall order, right? So barring the fact that maybe I was able to bring in one of those guys or one of those women, it was usually women, per year, I would have to go out and do something called picking your shots. Now what picking your shots means is to sign that young voice, that young thriller or crime writer. And I'm using the word young. It doesn't mean that they have to be twenty-five years old, although that's an advantage. Definitely an advantage. So to find those young voices that I can build—meaning, not from five thousand copies to six thousand copies, to ten thousand copies to twenty thousand copies. My job was to find that book that I could ship at least fifty thousand copies on their first novel.

Steve: Hmm.

Shawn: Now, the ability to find seven new voices a year is virtually impossible. And the reason why is this. The publisher can only push maybe one writer, one new writer per season into that fifty-thousand-copy distribution. So you've got three seasons in book publishing. You've got fall, you've got winter, and you've got summer. And so I'd have the responsibility of bring three people into Doubleday each year who could do that. And the way I'd figure that out would be to follow essentially the movement of the marketplace. And what that means is that, when I was around in doing this, one of the major genres at the time that was a perennial bestselling category was a legal thriller. Right?

Steve: Uh huh.

Shawn: This is the John Grisham era, this was *Presumed Innocent*, Scott Turow, there was Robert Tanenbaum. There were a good seven to nine legal thrillers a year who were making it to *The New York Times* bestseller list. So I'd say to myself, "Look, if a great legal thriller comes in here, I know I can position it such that I can go into Barnes & Noble, and they're going to take a ten thousand copy order based upon the excitement around the book, and the writer. And hopefully the writer is a thirty-four-year-old beautiful woman..."

Steve: [laughing]

Shawn: You know, or a good lucking guy who is a partner at Weil, Gotshal who can blow the lid off of security/legal, I don't know. But you can kind of see where I'm going with this, Steve.

Steve: Right.

Shawn: So, when somebody says to me, "What would you do if an agent brought a manuscript to you back then?" Well, it would depend on who your agent was, right? Because if your agent had a lot of clout in the industry, just buying a manuscript from that agent sometimes was enough to generate enough heat to increase your initial distribution. Now I could have another twenty-four hour conversation with you about the problems with this method. And it's one of the reasons why I left big publishing.

But this is...you know, is it exactly like this today? Well, I'd like to say it's not. But think it's probably very much like this same way. All of the editors who are making a salary that is commiserate with actually making a living and raising a family, these are people under a tremendous amount of stress. I know I was at the time. And you're under a lot of stress because the need to feed the marketplace, they need to generate the cash, they need to get the books out into the marketplace. Now this doesn't mean that they don't love reading or they don't care about editing or they're just Sammy Glick who are trying to make it to the top of the masthead. It just means that the reality of the business is that you've got to perform. And if you don't perform as an editor, there are a million people behind you who want your job.

I think a lot of writers when they finish their novels and they get their agents, and the agent's excited to go out with the book...and the agent sends it to a big editor, and they hear nothing for a long time—they immediately want to string up the editor in effigy and say, "This is a terrible person, they're a charlatan, they don't read, they're idiots." And you've just kind of...like anything else you've just got to look at it from the other guy's point of view.

Fortunately, this isn't the way it is any more. There are opportunities today that I never would have dreamed of when I was publishing back in the 90s and early 2000s. I mean, we're in a very, very young place in book publishing in that there are opportunities for writers today that they never had before. And it's all internet based, and it's all about building your audience and being genuine and authentic. Working on your craft and building up a fan base of people who actually care about what you write as opposed to trying to please an agent who's trying to please an editor who's trying to please Barnes & Noble who's trying to please stockholders. That whole chain and hierarchy is, thankfully, becoming less and less important.

Steve: It's interesting, though, the number of people who still hold that out as the dream. I read something that someone wrote earlier today. It was not one of the really big publishers, but it was kind of a second-tier publisher, where they got a nice deal with a second-deal publisher and then just realized how little that actually meant. We have this dream that, you know, that we're going to become James Patterson. Basically if we get this deal, we're going to be living in Palm Beach and where ever else we want to have a house, and we'll be guest-starring on Castle. And it's just a lightning strike kind of thing in that for most people.

Shawn: Well, that's funny that you mention James Patterson because James Patterson...I think he thought he had that dream back in the 1970s and early 1980s, and he published a book called *The*

Thomas Berryman Number, I think it was called. And it was his first novel, it was a paperback original, and it was published by a division of Warner Books at the time, I believe, and he was actually nominated for an Edgar Award for that book. And nothing happened. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

So he waited another fifteen years before he published his next novel, and you better believe it, he had a plan. Because you know what James Patterson did before he became a bestselling writer? He was the head of an advertising firm, J. Walter Thompson.

Steve: Uh huh.

Shawn: So before James Patterson sold, I believe it was *Along Came a Spider*, he had his agent walk in with him. He took meetings with every major publisher and he said, "Look, I'm in advertising. I know how to get people to buy things. If you want to publish my book, you're going to let me run the marketing, and you're going to let me run the advertising for my book. And if you don't like it, I don't want to work with you." And guess what happened? The publishers were more than excited to let him do that because he knew what he was doing. And he built *Along Came a Spider* into a major bestseller, and the rest is history.

Now I'll tell you what. Every year he wanted to publish one more book, one more book, and his publisher kept saying, "Ok, ok, go ahead, but you're really going to bite into your market, though, James. You're really spreading yourself too thin." And he's like, "Trust me, trust me, trust me." And today he publishes what? Fifteen, twenty books a year? And they're all major bestsellers. He makes hundreds of millions of dollars a year. And the reason why is because James Patterson never ever put all of his eggs into somebody else's basket. He never said, "Oh, that person is going to make me rich. That person is going to make me a superstar writer." No, he realized after one disappointment that...it usually takes people like me seven disappointments before I finally get it. But he was smart enough to know, "Hey, you know what, I can't play this game. Nobody's going to do it for me except me. And I like publishers, and if they can get the books out there on the racks, great. I don't want to have to do that. But I'm going to drive my own marketing and my own publicity." And he did. And he's...you know, say all you want to about James Patterson, but the guy can tell a story.

Steve: You're right about that!

Shawn: The guy just walks up and grabs you. He grabs you. And you don't quit until the book's over. So I don't think that James Patterson ever felt that he had it made once he signed a deal with *Along Came a Spider*. He just got the work when he signed that deal. So writers today can take a lesson from that man. James Patterson does not need Little, Brown today to publish his books. He does not need Little, Brown at all.

Steve: That's true. And we can all take a lesson from the idea that many, many, many years ago he was out there pitching his own books with his own marketing campaigns.

Shawn: Exactly.

Steve: He actually...Didn't he pay for some television commercials on his own?

Shawn: All of it. He paid for all of it. He took all the money he got. He got like a million dollar advance for *Along Came a Spider* because everybody in town wanted the book because you couldn't put it down. It was a serial killer thriller with a wonderful, one of the...you know, one of the hooks in book publishing is

to come up with a series gimmick, right? It's just like selling toothpaste. He came up with this gimmick, "Oh, I'm going to use fairy tales or night time bedtime stories as my hook." So it was *Along Came a Spider, Jack and Jill*, you know, and on and on and on. But that resonates with people, and they're like, "Oh, that's the guy who writes those things about the fairy tales." And they're really dark but fun books. So I was around when *Along Came a Spider* was put out. I think his agent at the time was a guy named Richard Pine. And Richard Pine was a terrific agent. He's still around. And he sent it to every major house, and then he set up meetings. And that's how it worked. And so, I don't know where this all leads to, Steve, but I...

Steve: I think it leads to...and that was a really great story, so I did not want to stop that because it was...because there's this sense that if we just get the big deal, we don't have to do anything. And we can be like James Patterson, and that's not the case, regardless of whether you get the big deal, the small deal, you self-publish, it's mostly on you. And you need to be able to go out and promote your work, and you need to have a platform, and you need to have an email list, and you need to have these things to sell your books. And you can't rely on your publisher or your agent or Amazon or anybody to sell your books. You have to be able to go out and do this on your own. And it's exactly what you're doing with your website and your email list and your RSS subscriptions. And people like me who are coming and signing up and getting this are getting interested, and then when the book comes out, it's an easy sell for us. That's something that it seems like it's easier for a nonfiction author to do than a fiction author. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Shawn: I think for fiction, if someone were to ask my advice about it, I would say the first question you have to ask yourself is who is going to read my book? What's my genre? How am I going to find people who enjoy my genre? Are there particular places that I can reach where they'll actually care about what I'm writing about? And it's just like the things that I'm writing about on StoryGrid.com, I know I have a limited audience. But I also know it's a dedicated audience. And it's an audience that shares information, right?

So the last thing I would do, and a lot of people ask me this because I published a book that I wrote with Chad Millman who is the head of *ESPN* magazine. And we wrote a book that was kind of a hybrid book that was a lot of fun, which was about the rise of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the fall of the steel industry in the 1970s in Pittsburgh. And we have a great agent named Richard Abate who works for 3 Arts Entertainment, which is a huge LA agency. And Richard got us an amazing advance and we published the book with a division of Penguin Books, and you know what? It did ok. It hit *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller list, and it was nice. But it's not really moving anymore. I mean, people aren't really buying it anymore. And I don't think it's because it's a bad book. I think it's because Chad and I didn't have a built-in audience of people who cared about what we were writing. And we were not still talking to them.

So when Steve Pressfield and I were talking about Story Grid, I said, "You know what, Steve? The last thing I want to do is to publish *The Story Grid* with a major publisher, a top five publisher." Now I could definitely get a deal with one of them, I know them all and they would all say, "Oh, this is a great backlist book, and we'll give you, you know, X number of dollars, and we'll put a big push on it. And it'll be great." But the reality is, if I did do that deal, what would happen is, the first thing they'd say is, "Shawn, you can't give away any of the book on your website." And I'd go, "Aww, come on." And they'd say, "Ok, well, you can give away 1,500 words. And then the rest of the time you have to be plowing pitches to anybody who goes there about how they should buy your book." And so it would completely destroy

anything I could build with an audience, right? Because the audience would be suspicious of somebody who is constantly not showing and telling, like if you go buy my book, you will get this. Instead of here's what I do, and read it, and if you like it, you know, I've got it bound up together in one place that you can buy yourself. But if you don't want to do that and you just want to keep reading my stuff, and you enjoy it, well, there's nothing I can do about that. But at least tell your friends to buy my book too.

[laughing]

You know, whatever that is. But that's not the philosophy at the major publishing houses. Their belief is that anything you give away for free is never coming back. Now, Steve Pressfield and I started, as you mentioned earlier, Steve, we started a small publishing company a few years ago called Black Irish Books. And the reason why we did was because we were in the throes of major marketing issues. I'm being nice here...Arguments with Steve's previous publisher, for all the reasons that I just mentioned. Steve was publishing a new novel. Steve and I wanted to do all kinds of fun marketing things, and the publisher kept saying, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no."

And you know, what we thought was the more people who read the book, the more people who are going to buy it because we believed in the book, right? We believed that the book was that good that if somebody read it, they wouldn't be able to help themselves but to tell somebody else to buy it too. And that's our philosophy behind Black Irish Books. So three years ago we said, "You know what, let's forget about these big publishers for a while. Let's just put our theory to the test. So the first book we published was a book we called *The Warrior Ethos*. And it's basically Steve's philosophical look at what it means to be a warrior in, not only in contemporary society, but throughout time. And he uses all the deep knowledge that he has about ancient Greece and ancient Rome and the Spartans, and it's this really wonderful book that talks about what it means to fight for your country or fight for your brothers. Whatever. It's all about being a warrior. And it's a small little book. It's maybe a hundred and twenty pages.

So we said to ourselves, "Who would want to buy this book? Who would care?" Right? And we figured guys who were serving and women who were serving in the military would care. So what we did was we called in every favor that we had. And we found Lieutenant Colonels who were in the Marine Corp and at Camp Pendleton in California, and we found all of these people around the country and in Afghanistan and in Iraq and said, "We have this thing that Steve Pressfield wrote, and we want to give them to you for free. Where do we ship them?" And so we printed ten thousand copies and we shipped them, and guess what? Everybody loved it and they wanted more. So Steve and I printed some more and we shipped those. And we said to ourselves, you know, "We did a good deed, and we lost a little money. It's going to be ok. These guys love the book. Let's see if somebody else will buy it." So we put it on Amazon. We put it on all the usual suspects of distribution channels of books. And guess what happened? The first month we sold twelve copies. The second month we sold about thirty-six. The third month we sold about fifty-two. But now we sell about a thousand copies a month. And it's all because of that generosity at the very beginning. It's all about getting people to read the book.

If you believe in the book and you love the book, your job as a publisher is to get people to read it. And my number for a publisher, it's a publisher's job to get ten thousand people to read a book. Now that means, if you have to give away ten thousand copies to every Rotary Club, I mean, ten thousand total to Rotary Clubs or knitting clubs, knitting circles, or people who follow hot rods, that's your job. Because if you believe in the book, you should believe enough to market it by giving it away. Now the major

publishers don't want to do that. And they never will do that because they dump loads of money on books to publish them, and all they want to do is get that money back. The first thing they want to do is get all that money back. Now, Steve and I don't offer advances. And we don't really want to work with anybody who's wanting us to write a million dollar check to publish them. Because that's not what we're in it for. We're not quitting our day jobs running Black Irish Books. But we do it because we care about the books that we publish. And we have one major requirement for anything we publish at Black Irish Books. And it's got to be about the inner war. And when I say the inner war, it's about the thing that's the subject of *The War of Art*, and *Turning Pro*, and most everything that Steve writes in nonfiction. And the inner war is that thing that we all fight to be able to do the things that we're supposed to do. So, for you, Steve, it's writing, and so what you do to fight that fight is you do podcasts and you write every day. And you work hard. And I'm sure it's not easy to do. I'm sure it wasn't that much fun to say to yourself, "Ah, I gotta call Shawn Coyne today and listen to him harp on for two hours." But you did it, and that's what it's about. [laughing]

Steve: [laughing]

Shawn: It's about raising the energy and the caring to fight that inner war. So I know you asked me a while back, what was the 'why' behind Black Irish Books. That's the simple why. That's the only thing that drives us.

Steve: One of the things I notice. And I remember, I actually bought a copy of *The Warrior Ethos*, and I bought it, I think through your website because I have the audio book and the physical book.

Shawn: Wow.

Steve: So I probably bought some sort of package. And I have two sons who are Marines. But Callie, I can't pronounce her last name...

Shawn: Oettinger.

Steve: Callie offered to send me free books when she found out I had two boys who were Marines to give to the boys.

Shawn: Oh, absolutely.

Steve: So following up with your story on getting people to read these. But anyway, you guys were among the very first to begin selling your books in different formats on your own website.

Shawn: Yes.

Steve: That's sort of a courageous thing to do and I think I may have this wrong, but it seems like I remember reading some stuff that when it first started, it maybe didn't go as smoothly as you thought. And the problems were ironed out over time, but you throw your hat over the wall, you figure out how to solve the problem, and now you're selling books on your website in addition to all the different locations where you can sell them.

Shawn: That's right. That's right. And I think, you bring up something really important there, Steve. And that is, you know what, you gotta do it. You've just got to...When Steve and Callie Oettinger, who you mentioned before, Callie does all of our marketing, and she's the one who holds everything together. You know, I can't believe I haven't mentioned her before. So I'm glad you did. She's really gold. So,

you're right when we started Black Irish Books, we started it as an online store. And a lot of people said, "Why are you investing so much money in building this online store for books that don't really...it's not like we're selling James Patterson stuff. And the reason why we did it was, we said to ourselves, "Look, what is book publishing really? What is it all about?" And when you really break everything down, you know, throw away this argument between Amazon and Hachette. And throw away big five versus secondary markets versus small publishers versus self-publishing, versus blah, blah, blah. What publishing is—is a connection, right? It's a writer and a reader. That's it, that's all there is. And anybody who gets in between a writer and a reader isn't really creating much value beyond serving as a mailman to help the reader to understand that the writer's book is available. Or making it easy for the commerce to happen. So if it's a store, if it's more than a store base, they have shelves in the store and you can walk in or online you can just click. If you were to take this theory to the end of the line, so really all you need is a writer and a reader in order to have "book publishing." So if you want to be a writer and you want to reach readers, wouldn't it be better if you could allow that reader to buy directly from you? Because there's a reason, Steve, why you bought your book from us and not from Amazon.

Steve: Yes, there was a very clear reason.

Shawn: Yeah, the reason why you did it was you wanted to support us.

Steve: Yes.

Shawn: Right? Yeah, so you probably paid an extra couple of bucks for the shipping and everything than you could have for Amazon. But you did it because you're like, "Well, I'm going to pay fourteen dollars when I could pay ten at Amazon, but those guys are going to use that money to put out more books, so that could be helpful. So if they go away, then the thing that they're doing that I kind of like would go away too.

And it's that helping one another that the Amazons of the world and Hachette...you know, all this talk about how evil Amazon is. Hachette's no prince either, you know? They're not giving away eighty-five percent of the revenue to their writers, trust me. It's sort of like, which exploitation would a writer like better? Would they like to be exploited by Amazon or Hachette? It's not to say that either one don't do a job. They do, but you have to know, and you have to be willing to pay the price of what they do. And understand the price of what they do.

All I'm saying is, the bottom line is, there's only a writer, and there's only a reader. If you have a reader who loves your stuff, and they can buy directly from you, facilitate it. Because, you know what, they're going to appreciate buying directly from you, and they're going to feel good about it. So that's an added value that you're giving them as opposed to them buying your remaindered book out of a rack at Barnes & Noble in Saskatchewan.

Steve: And it helps to cement the relationship between you and your reader because now they're communicating with you. They bought the book from you.

Shawn: Yeah!

Steve: And it's not that hard. When you guys did this, it was a little harder. You had to build the store to sell books on the store.

Shawn: Yeah.

Steve: You don't have to do that anymore. There are plugins you can use to stick on your website. You can pay, you know, three to six percent to somebody, and they'll do all this for you. And you can just sell your books directly to your readers and build that relationship. And then you're not reliant upon someone else to sell your books because...things change.

Shawn: Sure, and Seth Godin is doing this right now. I mean, Seth is sort of the godfather of permission marketing and came up with the concept. And he sees...he's been seeing ten years down the road for the last twenty years. And for his latest book, he just did a preorder, and I just bought my copy, and it'll show up in four weeks. But I know when it's Seth's thing, he's putting his blood and his guts into that book. And I want to see it, you know? So we're not talking about anything that's new, but the energy and the global world, Steve...you can have fans all over the world who can buy your books from you and you don't have to worry about shipping things to Indonesia.

Steve: Shawn, you have been very generous with your time today. And for people listening to this, you can see that Shawn thinks deeply about all of these things and he writes the same way that he talks at his website StoryGrid.com. You can also find him at StevenPressfield.com.

Shawn: That's correct.

Steve: And I'll link to these. Is there any place else that you'd like people to be able to follow you, social media or anything? Or is the best place just through StoryGrid.com and sign up for that email list?

Shawn: Just StoryGrid.com. I haven't even figured out Facebook yet, so...[laughing] I think I'm going to throw in the towel on that.

Steve: [laughing] Ok, well I can tell people that it is a wonderful thing to get an email from [StoryGrid](http://StoryGrid.com) in the morning and know that you're going to have something that's inspiring and instructive that you can read as a way to start your day. And it's something that will help you, so I am really looking forward to the book coming out. And I'm glad you mentioned when it's coming out. I can't wait. I will continue to read this and hope that everyone listening will do the same.

Shawn: Well, thanks so much, Steve, I really appreciate it.