

**TRANSCRIPT FROM SHAWN COYNE'S
NOVEMBER 11, 2014 INTERVIEW
WITH KEVIN T. JOHNS**

Kevin: Hello! And welcome to Episode 2 of *The Writing Coach*. I'm your host, Kevin T. Johns. If you're interested in working with me as your writing coach, it's really simple. Just head on over to kevintjohns.com and I've got a contact form there you can fill out, and we can get in touch with one another. I'll even give you a free consultation. Sound good?

Today I speak with editor, publisher, literary agent and writer, Shawn Coyne. Shawn has edited and published hundreds of books with a total gross revenue of over \$150 million. This man knows what he's talking about. He's worked closely with author Steven Pressfield, including two of my personal favorites, *The War of Art* and *Gates of Fire*, and he runs a literary agency that represents the likes of David Mamet and Robert McKee. He's ghost written several bestsellers and recently launched a new blog, *The Story Grid*.

During this spectacular interview, Shawn describes:

- his early years in the publishing business
- how he learned his craft as an editor
- why today's authors need to learn to be their own editors
- the two tracks—macro and micro—an editor can take and how the story grid combines both
- why authors must start their writing with a strong understanding of genre
- how experience in stage acting translates to writing
- what separates the best of the best from everyone else
- why a scene must revolve around a story value and move from one place to another
- the importance of understanding surface language and subtext
- and much, much more.

So let's get to that interview now.

So today on *The Writing Coach* podcast, we have Shawn Coyne. Now, Shawn, your new blog, *The Story Grid*, it teaches the business side as well as the writing craft side of publishing, which is exactly what we're covering on this podcast. I'm so thrilled, and I'm honored to have you here today to speak with us. So welcome to the show.

Shawn: Great, thanks so much, Kevin. It's my pleasure to be here. I'm happy to help in any way I can.

Kevin: So you're someone who has had an extremely successful career in the publishing industry. And I'd like to kind of go back a bit to start things off and hear about how you first got interested in writing and editing and publishing.

Shawn: Well, it's like a lot of people in publishing; I started out not really knowing I wanted to be in it until I sort of had to figure out a way to make a living. So prior to becoming a book editor, I was an actor and prior to that I was in science. A lot of people get into book publishing because they love to read. And when push comes to shove and they need to find a position in the world and a place to go, they fall back

on the one primary love they have, which is reading. And that's what I did. So after my acting career kind of fizzled out here in New York, I applied to all the major publishing houses in the city at the very bottom rung. I think I was about twenty-five at the time. I got a job at a company called Dell Publishing, which was a huge paperback publishing corporation for years and years and years until it was bought by Bertelsmann and Random House. But at the time, it was an independent book publishing company that really specialized in commercial, fun thrillers and romances and all those kinds of books that you used to be able to buy at the dime store, and the pharmacy, and paperback outlet when you go on vacation. So it was a great indoctrination into commercial book publishing by starting out there.

So again, I started probably when I was about twenty-five years old and I had the great fortune of being able to work with a bunch of editors there who worked with some of the seminal names in publishing at the time. I got to work with Elmore Leonard. I was the assistant editor on a couple of his books, one of which was called *Rum Punch*, which Tarantino made into *Jackie Brown*. And I also worked on a book called *Pronto*, which introduced a lead character Raylan Givens, which eventually ended up on TV, the TV series *Justify*. And so one of the things I learned very, very early on as an aspiring editor is just commercially to be able to hook a reader as quickly as you possibly can. And as Elmore Leonard famously said—to work to leave out the parts where readers skip. So you really boil down the storytelling to a place where the reader is just sort of on their toes. They're not really sure what's going to happen next. They fall in love with the characters, and you just sort of sweep them up and take them on a wonderful ride. And that's what I really love about commercial book publishing. It's not all about the line-by-line writing. It's really about the storytelling craft.

So I fell in love with it back then and I'm still in love with it now. And as you mentioned, my new website is called StoryGrid.com. And that's a place where I've sort of put everything I know about book publishing online for free. And eventually, you know, it's going to be part of a book that I'm working on that should be out probably in January or February of next year.

Kevin: I've been really enjoying the blog so far. It's hugely educational. And it's interested me, you know, in one of the blog posts, you spoke about how when you got into the publishing industry there wasn't really any sort of educational training program for editors. It was really a sort of apprenticeship, old-fashioned approach to learning on the go. Can you speak to that a bit—about the role that mentors and teachers have played in your life.

Shawn: Well, like anybody, when you're really excited about something and you really don't know all that much about it, you have two options. And this was back in the early 1990s, you know, we were still using typewriters back then. I remember how hard it was to even get a computer on the publishing tour. So the only way to really figure out what it was that an editor did back then was through the help of a seasoned editor, and there were a few who helped me along the road.

One is the editor I worked with named Jackie Farber who...she not only edited Elmore Leonard, she edited Ken Follett. I worked with her on a Ken Follett title called *A Dangerous Fortune*. She edited Sara Paretsky, who was a bestselling crime writer for years and years. She edited Belva Plain who writes these epic family sagas. So when I worked with Jackie, she would hand me a manuscript and I would read it. We'd sit in her office and I'd tell her what I thought and where I thought the weaknesses were. And she would explain her point of view. And that's really how I started to kind of get a sense of how to wrap my mind around what it is an editor actually does.

From those experiences, what I found out was—there are two tracks for an editor. The primary track is to kind of take a macro point of view that’s a thirty-thousand-foot view, if you would, of how a story is developing, how it’s working, is it paying off. And the primary, the major, major thing for an editor is to come to the conclusion—is this book working? And, you know, the definition of working for an editor means—did it drag me through the entire narrative without distraction? Did it keep me guessing? Did the revelations in the book shock me, but were they inevitable when I looked back at the beginning of the story? So those are the macro points of view that an editor needs to look at. And writers today, who I believe need to be their own editors...that’s why I started the website, to teach people how to do it because the competition today in book publishing is so high that editors really don’t take the time, nor do they have the time, to do the things that Jackie Freiberg and I used to do back in 1992. There are just so many meetings today. There’s so many commercial responsibilities, there are innumerable things that an editor actually has to do every day inside the publishing house. And unfortunately, the first thing that sort of falls by the way side is doing those deep dives inside the editorial content of an individual title.

So anyway, back to what I learned. You have your macro point of view, which is—is this book working? And then you have your micro point of view which is scene by scene, line by line—is this particular scene moving the story forward? Or is it sort of slogging down? Do we really need this extra character? What are the relationships between the characters? Are they working? Are they believable? There’s kind of a two-sided approach for an editor. And what the story grid is—is a combination plate, if you will, of those two methods. And as I will go through on the website and in my book, the first thing I want to establish for people is to understand the primary focuses that you have to have when you approach a story. And that’s as simple as, well, what kind of story am I going to write? Is this, what kind of genre is this? Is this a horror novel? Is this an educational, coming of age story? Or is this more of a thriller or a love story? Or is it a combination of them?

And so the first thing you really need to understand if you really want to become an editor or you really want to figure out how your story is working or not working are the genres. What are they? What are the specific elements in each one of these genres? And once you kind of know the terrain of stories—and I define that by genres—once you know that terrain, then you can think about what it is in the story you want to tell. Say to yourself, “Which one of these genres or the combination of these genres is going to be best for me to tell the story that I want to tell?” You know, one of the first things that I always tell people they should do is really look and find out what the genres are, and fortunately today I have a post up on the site about—genre is not a four letter word.

I think a lot of people think, when you say genre, think you’re talking about, slasher films or cheesy romances, or... And personally I love that kind of stuff anyway, but a lot of people denigrate storytelling by calling it genre and the reality is that even *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a genre. I mean, it’s metafiction, and I could go on for days talking about genre, but you really need to know that it’s not what you think it is. Every single story ever told from *The Iliad* to *Pride and Prejudice* has a genre. And they have expectations in those stories and what I call obligatory scenes and conventions. The writer really needs to understand what those are before they try and tackle writing one of those stories. These are all things that I think...

Our original question was about apprenticeship and how I came to the knowledge I have today. And despite the fact that there were people who lent a hand, the reality is that everybody in book publishing

has a certain specialty, in that there are some editors who are terrific with love stories and there are some editors who are great with narrative nonfiction, and I wanted to be a generalist. So what I tried to do was suck as much information as I could out of each one of these specialists and come to my own conclusions and my own theories about a global art of editing. And that's really codified in what *The Story Grid* is all about. You know, apprenticeship was fantastic and got me started. It was sort of a kick-start. But once I had that kick-start, I had to dive deep into the literature to read people from Plato to Robert McKee because full disclosure is one of my clients in my literary agency. But the main reason why I'm doing StoryGrid.com and writing the book is because I think back to when I was twenty-five years old and just starting out. And I wonder, "Wow, I wonder what it would have been like for me if I had the opportunity to have a place like *The Story Grid* where I could learn how to edit and really get a global understanding of what it was all about without it having to take me twenty-two years to get there?" So that's kind of why I'm doing it. I think it is each one of our responsibilities that, when we learn a particular craft, when we have information that other people don't have or would take them a long time to gather—I think today with the way the internet works and everything, it's kind of your responsibility to share it so that we can take storytelling to a new level.

Kevin: You've edited, you know, one of my favorite fiction books and one of my favorite nonfiction books, and then when I went and started looking at *The Story Grid* and seeing your approach to teaching writing, it just resonates completely with my approach to teaching writing—like you're saying, starting with genre. I have a book on writing, and chapter one is genre—exactly where I also think aspiring authors need to start thinking about their story structure. And again, you just spoke about it now, about *Gravity's Rainbow* and this idea that you need to learn your craft before you can start subverting and experimenting with it. That's the message I give to my students again and again, and I was so pleased to see it coming from, you know, a master editor like yourself. Kind on that note, I'm wondering, what are the common challenges that you see writers succumbing to?

Shawn: The most common problem that I see, and I think any editor would agree, is a lack of understanding of the inciting incidents. And when I say the inciting incidents, all I'm talking about is—you've got to hook the reader immediately. From the first sentence, you've got to grab the reader and make them want to read the next sentence. It's that simple in many cases. And a lot of what people do when they're starting, when they say they want to be a "writer" is they think they want to begin with the very writerly skills of mimicking classic novels or classic opening lines of other novels. For instance, I can't tell you how many times I'll pick up a book or a manuscript and it'll be just someone trying to rip off the opening line in *The Great Gatsby*. You know, that's been done. I think we've pretty much nailed that style. So what you need to do is figure out what it is that you want to say, what is the most important thing to you. And if you want to write a terrific thriller, or you want to write a great love story, hey, start in the middle.

Start with some conflict. Start with something that's interesting. Don't start setting the scene because nobody has time to...there's no such thing as this long buildup. Like the early nineteenth century novels, they started with these very long-winded overviews of the world, and the place, and the setting. You know, I'm talking about like the French realists or even Dickens to a degree. But the difference between then and now is that the reading public back then, they didn't leave their town. You know, they didn't leave on airplanes and go to Paris. So those great nineteenth century novelists, they had to sort

of...that's the way they gripped the reader by introducing the reader to another world. Today, everybody's sort of traveled all over the world, and if you haven't traveled all over the world, you've seen it on television. So you want to begin with the heart of the story and a conflict between characters. An internal conflict where, say, they're not sure whether or not they're going to get married, or whether or not they should rob a store, or whether or not they should kill their next door neighbor. A conflict between two people, or a conflict between the environment and one person, but you need to start with the heart of the story, which is conflict. And then once you sort of have that opening conflict settled, you then have to ask yourself, how do I pay off this inciting incident by the end of the book? What is going to be an unbelievable climax to this entire story by the end? And these aren't questions that you're going to be able to figure out in a week, or a month, or even a year sometimes. When you look at the great, great thrillers, or the great novels, you'll find that at the very beginning there's a promise that's made. And at the very end, that promise has not only been abided, it's been blown apart and the reader finds a new revelation by the end of the novel that's both surprising and inevitable. I'm talking in very vague terms, but you've got to grab the reader.

A friend of mine named Noah Lukeman is also a literary agent, and he has written a couple of books on writing too. He wrote a book called *The First Five Pages*, and you know, he wrote an entire book about what I'm talking about now. If you don't grip the reader within the first five pages, they're not going to continue to read. So that would be my primary advice.

Kevin: On your blog recently, you wrote, "Understanding how to throw a knuckleball is one thing. Doing it is another. Same with acting and writing of course, but understanding lends itself to repetition of action which is the only way to get good at anything." So you're working with top folks like David Mamet and Steven Pressfield and these types of people. I'm wondering, with folks like that, is it the understanding combined with repetition that separates folks like that from everyone else, or is there an additional element that makes these writers that you work with the cream of the crop?

Shawn: Well, I've got to tell you, there's no magic really. There's no magic bean. I'll tell you that David Mamet and Steven Pressfield and Harlan Coben and Ian Rankin and James Lee Burke and Robert Crais and all the people I've worked with over the years who are wonderful writers—they work hard. And I think the problem that young writers and amateur writers have is they want to work, they're not afraid of work. The problem that amateur writers have, and you're addressing this, Kevin, in your work too, is that they don't know what the work is. So there are a lot of magical stories about sitting down at the typewriter and having a nice, hot cup of coffee and then all of a sudden this surge of wonder comes out of your fingertips and you bang out an incredible piece of work. Well, you know what, that doesn't happen. It doesn't happen to Steven Pressfield. It doesn't happen to David Mamet. It doesn't happen to any of the great writers. What happens is this. They sit down and they're so used to working, even if they don't want to write, they just start writing. And they put in their hours. And they do the work, and guess what happens—that inspiration comes to them because they've done so much work.

Now what is the work? In my opinion, if you could teach somebody, if you could focus on one specific skill right now, and that is creating just one scene. A scene. The scene is the building block of a novel, it's the building block of a screenplay, it's the building block of a play, it's the building block of narrative nonfiction, and a scene is really the operating sort of building block of storytelling. What a scene is—is it moves from one place to another, and a lot of people either don't understand this concept or they don't want to understand the concept because it requires a lot of work. A scene revolves around what I call a

story value. And at the beginning of the scene the story value has to be at one pole, it's either positive or negative. And at the end of the scene it has to be the opposite. So for example, if you're writing a love scene, at the beginning the two people in love are absolutely in love, that's a positive. At the end of the scene, if those people are still in love, that's not a scene because it hasn't moved. It hasn't changed. I'm talking about the central value of the scene itself. So if you're writing a breakup scene, and it begins with the two lovers together, and it ends with the two lovers together, that's not a scene. They've got to break up by the end, or they have to come together by the end. Or they have to escalate from liking each other to consummating their relationship, or hating each other to one of them committing suicide. I'm using very drastic examples here, but the scene is really the most important thing that a writer needs to concentrate on doing. You know, I don't do what you do and it's difficult for me to...I don't teach specific writing courses, per se, I teach editing and I do consultations on major thrillers and commercial novels, et cetera. Where, I don't have to say to David Mamet, you know, you've got to work on your scene work.

Kevin: Right! [laughing]

Shawn: He'd punch me in the face if I said that to him, and he'd have every right. So I can talk in...you know, same thing with Steven Pressfield, I don't have to talk about scene work and I don't have to talk about inciting incidents, all I have to say to them is, "You know, man, it didn't turn in act two. You've got to do something there. It's not working. It's just sitting there. Your second act climax just never pays off." And he'll understand what I'm talking about because he's spent thirty years writing, and he understands the principles that I'm relating on StoryGrid.com and also what you teach. So I don't know if you feel the same way, but I really think that if you can teach people how to work scenes and they spent years just working on their scenes and then tried to piece together a whole bunch of scenes into a book, they'd have a shot at creating a terrific novel.

Kevin: Well, you made a really interesting point, again, on your blog about tying your experience as an actor and taking some acting training with a better understanding of the scene. And that kind of jumped out at me because I met my wife when we were both acting in a play together. My business coach, Jason Billows, studied acting. His mentor, Michael Port, who wrote *Book Yourself Solid*, has an acting background. So I'm wondering, what is the connection there that allows folks who studied acting at some point to transition over into...it seems to be successful storytellers and, you know, business type cultures and entrepreneurs?

Shawn: Well, here's what I think. Here's my grand theory about it. If there's one skill, or one profession that people just never want to tell you anything about, it's acting, right? Because acting, everybody is...you know, there's the method actor, there's the people who build themselves into this crazy high-pitch performances and run onstage and insist that they're feeling the emotional energy each moment. But the thing about acting...and again this goes back to a lot of what Mamet teaches...The thing about acting is you have to figure out the subtext of the scene, and then you play the subtext. It's really that simple. So if you can't read a scene and analyze it and figure out what's underneath the language, you're not going to be a very good actor. Even people who can do that, it's still hard to be a very good actor.

I was always good at analyzing scenes. I was never very good onstage. So I think a lot of people who train for acting, no matter how many years they put into it, they finally reach a point in their lives where they realize, "Oh, I get it! This is what acting is. Oh, I have read the scene over and over again and I have to figure out what action I can use to portray the subtext." That is really an amazing skill to have as a

storyteller. Because then, what you think about when you're writing is, "Oh, ok, I have to write a scene where somebody needs to break up with somebody." Now what do you do when you break up with somebody? It's the classic "as if." You know, you think about, "What would I do if I had to break up with somebody." The last thing you're going to do is look at them straight in their face and say, "I want to break up with you." No, instead you're going to say, "Oh, I'm not feeling well, I'm sick, you're too good for me..." You come up with all this list of stuff that you can get away from the actual pushing them away and hope to get them to break up with you, so you don't have to do it to them. So how many scenes in great drama have been written about somebody avoiding the conflict that is absolutely inherent in the scene itself. And it's the same thing with writing prose, or anything else like that. So you have to...the surface language and the subtext are...you have to have a crucial understanding of what both are. And actors have to or you'll never work—you'll die. You'll never get any parts, and you'll never feed yourself. So that's why I think actors end up being very good writing coaches and communicators because they understand the uses of language in order to convey things that nobody really wants to say.

Kevin: I think a lot of people, you know, commonplace folks as well as a lot of amateur writers, mistakenly think of writing and book publishing as this solitary endeavor, and I feel like part of my job as a writing coach is to dispel this kind of myth of the solitary writer. And as someone who's worked as a ghostwriter, as a publisher, as an editor, across the board in publishing, can you speak a bit about the collaborative nature of producing a book?

Shawn: Well, you can be as collaborative or as non-collaborative as you'd like as a writer. Some of the most fun that I've ever had is when I was working with a very successful commercial writer. And the book is not working, and the publisher needs to have it in the bookstore in six months. I often get calls where that's the situation. And I'll go, and I'll travel, and I'll sit down with the writer after having read their draft. And I'll have mapped it out with the story grid. And I'll say to them, "Look, here are our problems. The crisis in the climax of your novel just isn't that thrilling. So because the crisis isn't very thrilling, your climax isn't very fulfilling, and the resolution isn't working. So we need to figure out a new scene, so it'll be at higher stakes." And then we'll sit down and we'll just spitball. What would happen if the character...

You know, there's a great scene that I talk about a lot when I'm trying to explain how a scene turns. I'm not sure if you saw the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, but there's this wonderful moment in it where the lead character played by Jessica Chastain, you know, she's kind of a working grunt at the CIA. She can't stop working, she loves what she does, she just can't pull herself away from her desk. There's another woman...and there's only two women in the station in the CIA, and I think it's somewhere in Pakistan. And the other woman is kind of, you know, she's a little bit more experienced and she insists that Jessica Chastain go out to dinner with her. So the scene opens with the colleague having a glass of red wine sitting at a nice, elegant table in a restaurant that used to be part of a larger kind of hotel complex. And you can tell she's getting pissed off because the Jessica Chastain character hasn't shown up yet. So the viewer—when Jessica Chastain finally does show up—the viewer is expecting a sort of girl-talk scene, right? They're expecting two women to talk about how hard it is to be in the CIA, and boy isn't it tough, there's all these men around. They don't give us any respect and it's so terrible. And so they're sitting there and they're just beginning to poke around that scene, when what happens? Mark Boal, who wrote the screenplay, that's the moment when he has the bomb go off in the hotel, right? So this bomb goes off in the middle of their really intimate dinner and completely shatters the viewer's anticipation of what's going to happen next. Now everybody's hearts are in their throats and they're watching these

two women try and get out of this inferno, which all this fire is around them. So that's an example of how the scene turns. Right? You're expecting one thing at the beginning of the scene. Something happens, an epiphanic moment, and changes what's going to happen and it's completely different, but it's believable, right? Because they're in Pakistan, they're CIA operatives, there's got to be a bomb that goes off, and it just happens to go off at that moment. That's a way to write a scene, where somebody who's reading that will at the beginning be like, "Oh, geez, I don't know if I want to read this scene about these two women jabbering about how terrible it is at work." And then bang, they have to survive. What's going to happen next? So when I talk about scene as the unit and building block of a story, that's what I'm talking about. And that moment in that movie, you know, that's the inciting incident of the second act of the movie. Now shit is getting personal in that movie at that time. Before it's like, oooh, let's look at our computer for a while and get our drums and all of a sudden, bang, there's a bomb and people are dying. And that movie is the story from an intellectual enterprise to something that is life and death.

Kevin: So that's looking at storytelling from the kind of micro level at the scene level in terms of analysis. To bring it back a little bit to the story grid itself, which is this tool you've developed to analyze the stories. I'm a big fan of Larry Brooks' books the story physics and story engineering where he has some really nice story structure approaches that he recommends. And so when I saw the diagrams that you'd put on your website of how you'd used the story grid to look at *The Silence of the Lambs*, I was really excited because, you know, I guess I'm a story geek or a story nerd or whatever, but I love seeing it broken down like that. So I want to be respectful of your time here. I don't want to go on for too long, but I'd love to hear a little bit about how you settled on the grid and the types of things...I mean, I think if people wanted to get excited about the book, all they need to do is check out the website, check out your blog, and they'll see all the great stuff you're writing there. But perhaps, just to give them a bit more of an ace, can you tell us a little bit more about the tool itself?

Shawn: Sure, I think I mentioned earlier that I discovered there were two kinds of editing, right? There's the macro, thirty-thousand-foot view editing, and then there's the micro scene-by-scene kind of editing, right? So the way the story grid evolved was I put both of those things together, and I put it all in one document. Now, not to get too confusing, but there is a document that represents the macro view, which I will teach everybody how to create on StoryGrid.com, and that's called the foolscap story grid, global thing. And basically, that's only a single page of paper, which will outline the big, big chips of story in your global story. So that's only one single page. But it gives you what I call the beginning hook, the middle build, and the ending payoff of your story. The second thing is what I call the story grid spreadsheet. And that is literally, you know, it's like an Excel spreadsheet that goes scene by scene and outlines the value shifts that I was talking about earlier—like somebody from love to hate, or from life to death, or from justice to injustice, or injustice to justice. And each scene moves on a particular value.

So each scene I literally write down a description of the scene. For example, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, the opening chapter, we have a young FBI in training, comes into the boss' office, and she is offered a job. That's basically what happens in the first scene of the first chapter of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Clarice Starling goes into Jack Crawford's office, and he says to her, "Hey, I have a job for you. Well, it's not really a job. It's a bit of an errand." So in that scene, the value goes from unwanted to wanted. So before, she was just a trainee, and at the end of the scene, she's now a wanted member of the FBI and she now has a job. So that is what would be...and it moves from a negative to a positive. The negative at the beginning is that she's just some plebe and at the end, her status has shifted from plebe to working

for the head of the Behavioral Science Division at the FBI. So that's a scene that really moves, right? So you can track that scene by scene on a spreadsheet, all of those elements, and then you put your big, macro view, the foolscap page and your spreadsheet together. And you create the info-graphic, which is what I called the story grid. And so if you look at the info-graph, and again, the thing on my website right now, it's not the final art. It's just my chicken scratch. No, it's the notes that I made that I created when I went through *The Silence of the Lambs*. And so for the final book, it'll be much more clear. But you'll be able to track each one of those sort of one through sixty-four...there are sixty-four scenes in *The Silence of the Lambs*. And you'll see the shifts in the global values that are at stake, which are life and death in a thriller, and in the case of *The Silence of the Lambs*, it's a disillusionment plot. Starling goes from a plebe wannabe who thinks the FBI is the greatest thing in the world at the beginning of the book. And at the end she's completely disillusioned, has to operate on her own, and she rejects the FBI's sort of hypocrisy. So that's what the story grid is. It's a way of looking at an entire novel on one piece of paper. And if you follow it and understand how to read it, it's really kind of fun because you'll be able to go from scene to scene and you'll be able to track what actually happens in the story. And you'll also be able to find out where those critical moments in the story are. At the end of the beginning hook, we discover that there's a body that has been found in West Virginia, which is the work of Buffalo Bill. Prior to that, there was no evidence of Buffalo Bill continuing to kill. Now it raises the stakes and that moves into our middle build which goes until the end of...I think it's chapter forty-eight, where Jack Crawford's wife dies. And Starling goes to see Crawford to find...to get his approval to go to Ohio to track down Buffalo Bill. So that's a key moment in the story that now she has to move from operating within the confines of the FBI to operating by herself. And then that pays off at the very end of the book where she's all alone with the killer, blind, and has to take him down by herself. So there's no help from the FBI at that point, she's all on her own. So as you can tell, I could probably go on for about nine more hours about this. And the great thing that I ... the thing that's a lot of fun for me is that I can do this story grid for just about any book with the exception of...

Kevin: *Gravity's Rainbow*... [laughing]

Shawn: ...all the metafiction that's a little bit too intellectual for my taste. That operates under sort of the anti-plot rules which don't really...I don't want to get too much into it. But for 99% of novels and narrative nonfiction, I can create a story grid that you'll be able to enjoy just from the way that you can enjoy *The Silence of the Lambs*. And I can do more books. I know a lot of people have asked me to do *Gates of Fire*, which is one of Steve's big books that I edited or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A lot of people want me to do, I should probably do some narrative nonfiction, like *The Perfect Storm* or *Blackhawk Down*, just so that...what's really fun about it is, I think what attracted you to it is that a writer, when they see what goes behind all of the work. That it's just invigorating, right? You look at it and you go, "Oh, man, THAT'S how he did it!" That's how he got us to scream at the mid-point of chapter thirty-six.

Kevin: It's just, as a writer I get so excited when I see that sort of thing because it just makes my life easier when I'm working with a coaching client and they say, "You know, I'm stuck. I have writer's block and I don't know where to go next in my story." I can go, "Well, look at your story structure. The structure tells you where your story needs to go next." So when you're functioning with that framework, you know where to go.

Shawn: It's true, and that's why people like you obviously will like the story grid. Because, like Steve Pressfield always says to me, "I'm going to get business cards made out of that *Silence of the Lambs* grid." And I go, "What do you mean? Why would you get business cards made?" And he goes, "You know, the next time somebody asks me what I do as a writer, I'm going to pick up that business card and say, 'This is what I do.'" So that people can understand, this is not just like writing a novel in thirty days. This is an art form, you know, it's like creating a symphony. It's like pulling up the charts for the Ninth Symphony, and that's what I think the story grid is. It represents sort of the musical charts for a novel, you know?

Kevin: So, Shawn, you're someone who has accomplished so much in your career already. You know, I'm sure this book is going to be fantastic. I certainly can't wait to read it. Looking back at your career so far, you know, what gives you the most satisfaction?

Shawn: When I first got into it, I thought, like we all do, "Oh, someday I'm going to sit down and write that great American novel that will really, really take people by storm. And I'll become this big writer, and everything will be great." But the reality is—I'm not a young man any more. Though I certainly try and think I am. But the reality is that what gives me the most satisfaction is when a book is not working and I get called in, and, you know, I charge quite a bit of money, to do this kind of thing. And I always think, "Oh my gosh, I'm charging too much money, I'm going to upset the cart. I'm not going to be able to deliver what I think I'm going to be able to deliver." You know, like everybody else, I panic. But when I sit down...and like you just said five minutes ago...I'll sit down, looking at the manuscripts, I'll put the story grid on it. And then I'll walk through it and I'll go, "Ok, look, here's the problem. You haven't escalated the stakes." So the bottom line for me, what gives me the most satisfaction is helping people solve their own problems. I don't tell them how to fix their scenes. I'll give them some suggestions. And usually they'll throw mine out because they've got the best solutions inside their own brains. They just need to be told, "Hey, look, this is your problem. This one scene is your problem. Fix this problem and everything else will be fixed too." Being able to tell somebody that and then have them do it. And have them look at you and go, "Oh my god, you're absolutely right. That's true." And then, that's all well and good, Kevin, but the proof in the pudding is when that book goes to the publisher and the publisher calls me and says, "It works. Thank you. Where do I send the check?" That really feels great. Because it's not just me and my friends saying, "Oh, look at us, we solved a problem." It's being validated by, you know...look, I've worked in major publishing for years and I've got a lot of problems with it. But when they say, "You know, you're a pro. You know what you're doing. You've fixed things for us. Thank you." It gives me satisfaction, and it also helps me pay for my kids' school, so that's good.

Kevin: [laughing] Well, you know, Shawn, I don't want to come across as too much of a kiss ass here, but...

Shawn: [laughing]

Kevin: ...I am seriously honored you took the time to speak with me today. You know, I *really* respect the work that you've done and also just appreciate you sharing your knowledge through your blog and taking the time to come here and chat with me today. It's just so fantastic. So I really, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for speaking with me today. I appreciate it, not just getting to share your message with my listeners, but it's just an honor as a writer myself to get to learn from you for an hour today. It's incredible. Thank you very much.

Shawn: Oh, well thank you. I'm happy to do it, and any time. I've got a million stories.