

**TRANSCRIPT FROM SHAWN COYNE'S  
DECEMBER 2, 2014  
INTERVIEW  
WITH DAVE BULLIS**

**Dave:** Hello, everyone. Joining me today is Shawn Coyne. Shawn has been a publisher for twenty-five years. He's also the co-founder of Black Irish Books, and he's working on a new project right now called *The Story Grid*. Shawn, how are you today, sir?

**Shawn:** I'm doing great, Dave, thanks for having me on.

**Dave:** Oh, thanks for coming on. So, Shawn, could you give us a little about your background?

**Shawn:** Sure. Well, let's see, I've been in book publishing since the early 1990s, and I've been everywhere—from the major publishing houses where I worked as an editor, acquiring and editing books for about fifteen years. I was at Dell publishing, St. Martin's Press, Doubleday Publishing. And then in the year 2000, I started a new publishing company, probably about ten years too soon, called Rugged Land Books. It was an independent company I had for about seven years, and some of the titles we published there were *The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield, a big bestseller by Brett Favre, and a number of projects with the National Football League. It was a wonderful time, but it was also extremely stressful because this was before the era of the Internet, self-publishing, and all the revolutions that have happened over the last, say, ten years. Probably even shorter than that, it's probably only been since 2007 when the Kindle came out that things have really gone crazy.

So, anyway, after Rugged Land Books shuttered, I worked for a literary agency, which was part of a major Hollywood agency called The Endeavor Agency for a couple of years. And when Endeavor merged with William Morris, I decided to start my own agency, and that was around 2009. And that's called Genre Management Incorporated. And one of my first clients was Steven Pressfield, who I've known since 1995. I've edited pretty much everything that Steve has written with the exception of about three or four projects. And I also represent David Mamet for his work with books, Robert McKee, the very big story expert, a number of wonderful journalists from *The Wall Street Journal*, and my fiction writers range from a guy named Matthew Quirk who wrote the great thriller called *The 500* a couple of years ago and followed it up with another good one. And off the top of my head, that's pretty much it.

So I've done everything from being an editor at the major publishing houses, an independent publisher pre-Internet/Kindle/ebook, and a literary agent. Oh, I also wrote a book with a friend of mine who is the editor in chief of *ESPN Magazine* about the rise of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1970s and the simultaneous fall of the steel industry called *The Ones Who Hit the Hardest*. So I've pretty much covered all the terrain that you could really think of in book publishing, and I've got to tell you, I couldn't find a better profession. I just absolutely love what I do.

**Dave:** And that's an amazing background, how you can have...working in California with Endeavor...and you know, I actually have connections at William Morris, and it's funny because they were just talking today about...they're integrating with somebody else now, I forget who they were mentioning.

**Shawn:** IMG.

**Dave:** Yes! And they were just saying that now they have a whole process. Obviously some people are going to leave, some people are not going to be there anymore, which actually runs into my next question. Is there a reason...actually, how and why did you start Black Irish Books?

**Shawn:** Well, that's a pretty good question. [laughing] So after I left Endeavor, and they were actually really cool about my leaving. It was one of those situations you just described where they took on a new agency. What they did was they nicely asked people to volunteer to be fired. So I was at this point in my life where I loved working there but I didn't really like having a boss all that much, so when that opportunity arose, I really jumped on it.

So the reason why I started Black Irish Books with Steven Pressfield was because a few years ago—and this is not to denigrate his former publisher—but a few years ago, he had finished and completed a really wonderful thriller, which was sort of set in the near future, called *The Profession*. And this was a wonderful book about what the future warfare and life would be like if there was a charismatic, sort of McArthur figure who came on the scene. Great book. I mean, Steve and I worked on it for quite some time, and his publisher at the time was not so interested in hearing and doing the kind of things Steve and I wanted to do to promote the book, which was to radically give away quite a number of copies. What we wanted to do was start the conversation about the book within the military communities.

Steve has great connections to the marines, to the army, to the navy, and so when we went to the publisher and we said, "Hey, look, why don't we give away five thousand copies of *The Profession* to guys and women who are serving in Afghanistan and Iraq." And one of the things about being in combat and serving in the military is that you're constantly on standby. So you have a lot of time, and what these guys do is they read a lot. So we thought if we could get this book into their hands early and give them an opportunity to read it, they could start a conversation outside of the military community and really get the book sort of talked about before it was even published. Well, unfortunately, the publisher did not want to give away any books. And they said, "Nah, it's a really nice idea, but we've invested a lot in the book and we don't want to give away any copies. So, no, we're not going to do that." So that was a really, sort of major turning point for Steve and I because, you know, here was an effort...we even offered to pay for them because we believed so strongly in the concept. And again they said, "No."

So I remember walking out of the Random House high rise in the middle of midtown Manhattan and my head was kind of shrunk down, and Steve wasn't feeling so great. We went across the street to get a cheeseburger and I said, "Look, you know, why don't we just figure out a way to do something ourselves." And what we came up with was using the concept of the military community that we both love, and doing something for them for free. So the very first book we published was called *The Warrior Ethos*. *The Warrior Ethos* was a way for us to make a connection to the guys who are serving in the military in a way that would really touch them.

So Steve is this very devout, deep reader, in all things military. In military history, this guy knows so much about it, especially the antiquity—the Greeks, the Spartans, the Romans—he knows all this stuff. So I said, "Why don't you do a nonfiction book that explains, sort of the traditions and the ethos of what it is to be a combat veteran or somebody who has to go to war." So that's the very first book we published, and we ended up giving away something like twenty-three thousand copies because the minute we gave them to people in Afghanistan, they were coming back and asking for more. So that

concept was so interesting to us that I said, “Hey, Steve, as a lark, why don’t we put it on sale. Let’s just throw it on sale, put it up on Amazon and all the other sort of ebook revenue streams like Kobo and iTunes and see if there’s enough of a demand for this thing that it can live on its own.” And what do you know, the first couple of months we sold fifty copies, and then it was sixty copies, and before you knew it, we were doing fifteen hundred copies a month. And to date, we’ve sold, and it’s only been since 2011, we’ve sold about sixty thousand copies of that book. And it’s all word of mouth. So anyway, this is a very, very long story to tell you that Black Irish Books sort of came about through a frustration with the major trade publishers and our dedication and our love for guys and women who serve in the military. That’s how it started.

**Dave:** [laughing] And, you know, Shawn, I love long stories. But that is a very fascinating story, and I think it resonates with a lot of people nowadays where they sort of...I think you hit the nail on the head with they want to be their own boss, they don’t like having other people be their boss, you know what I mean?

**Shawn:** Yeah, there’s nothing wrong with a boss, but a lot of bosses, what they do is just say, “No.” And if you’re your own boss, it gives you the freedom to do things and to try things that you would never get approved from a third party. So that’s what I love about it, and, you know, you fail a lot, and everything doesn’t work out. There were a lot of mistakes that we’ve made at Black Irish Books, and you know what, we try to learn from each one and we try to make the mistakes that aren’t going to completely wipe us out but ones that we can learn from. And even if it doesn’t work out the way we want it to, as long as we take it from the point of view of sort of generosity in that if we’re going to make a mistake, we’re going to be too generous as opposed to too stingy and worrying about people stealing our stuff. You know, I think Tim O’Reilly, the famous entrepreneur once said, “The Internet age, the problem is not piracy, it’s anonymity.” And I think he was absolutely right.

**Dave:** Yeah. You know, as I look out more on Amazon, especially in the Kindle, which you brought up, I see more and more people self-publishing their books. And, you know, a lot of the times...sometimes I’ll purchase a couple here and there from completely unknown authors, just to see who’s out there.

**Shawn:** Right.

**Dave:** And also, obviously, all Steven’s books, I actually have them behind me. You can’t see them right now, but I swear they’re there and I buy them all from Black Irish Books. Obviously I have *The War of Art* and all of that, but with the avenue of self-publishing, do you ever see a decline in quality? Like meaning, whether you’re on your Kindle or your Nook and you’re looking through books, do you ever see, you know, things as an editor that really irk you at all?

**Shawn:** Well, what I actually think is of course there are bad books. I don’t think the quality has gone down. What I do think is there’s a certain percentage of terrific storytellers out there. And then there are the workmen, grinders, who learn their craft, and it takes a few books to kind of get their feet under them. Then once they get more familiar with the terrain of the place they want to work, the genres they want to explore, they get better and they get better and they get better. What I think is great is that there is an opportunity for people to really work and get feedback. And even if the feedback from the general public isn’t so great in the first book, they can learn from that.

So back in the era when I started, the only way to be published was to be picked by an agent. Right? An agent...you would solicit a bunch of agents, and they would go through your stuff, and they would say, "Yeah, I'd like to represent you." And then they would submit it to the fifteen or twenty publishing houses and if you made that cut then you would get into a list at a publisher. And that was the only way it ever worked. And the problem with that was there were a lot of terrific writers who just could never navigate that very difficult process, that business process that can kind of suck the soul out of you. So I think the fact that there are opportunities for people now to self-publish is great. And I tell you what, a lot of the major best-sellers that come out now, it turns out these were self-published writers before they hit with the major publishers. You know, famously, there's the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, and there's a terrific book I just started reading called *The Martian*, which I don't even like science-fiction generally, but it's a lot of fun. And I think that was a self-published title too. I think Andy Weir is the author of that. So I think what you're finding here is that before there was never a AAA system, you know, to throw a baseball. There was no AA, no local baseball team. And now, with the Internet and the Kindle stuff, there's an opportunity that if you can tell a really great story, and you can get a critical mass of people to agree with you, you could have a career. And you don't necessarily even have to go to a major publisher any more. In fact, the economics are probably much better going the self-publishing route than going with a major publisher, unless you just really want to be published by Random House and tell your mom that.

**Dave:** [laughing]

**Shawn:** There's nothing wrong with that, you know. I was published by Penguin, and I told everybody I was. And it was great. But if I had to do it all over again...for instance, I will be publishing the book *The Story Grid* at Black Irish Books with Steve because we'll be able to do a lot more marketing and fun stuff, giving things away and promoting it and doing things that a major publisher would just never even consider.

**Dave:** You know, that's a good point you brought up is the marketing. Because what I find, when people self-publish...you know, I have friends who self-publish books, and a lot of times, there's a point where they kind of throw up their hands and go, "What next?" I mean like, "How am I supposed to market this?"

**Shawn:** Right.

**Dave:** And most people, I think they go on their Facebook and they say, "Hey, everybody, I published a book. Here it is." But people are starting to learn that there's a lot more involved with a book launch. Even, as you know, if we launched a movie, there's always a buildup to the release date, there's always the email lists that we have to procure, you know, things like that. Right? Am I right, Shawn?

**Shawn:** Oh, absolutely. But again, the opportunities today are available, and generally speaking, the way to market a book is not to tell your friends, "Oh, I just finished my book and you can go buy it." You know, that's not really...if somebody told me that, I'd be like, "Why would I want to buy your book?" You know, "You're not that interesting. I can't imagine that you'd write an interesting book." But the way to market is really about writing more, reading more, thinking about how you could be of service to other people.

So for example, the way we sort of got in contact was through my website, StoryGrid.com. Now I started that in September to write about my life's work, right? It's not just to sell a book. It's to present the information that I've learned over twenty-five years in the book publishing industry as an editor. To tell people what I've learned. The fundamentals of storytelling I have learned and how I have created and think about how I do my job. Now, in the olden days, and this is only like, what, seven years ago? In the olden days, you would have these great editors or these great painters, or musicians, or people who build houses, whether they're carpenters or electricians, and when they would die, all of the stuff that they had learned over their lives would die with them. Now today we have the opportunity where if I get hit by a truck tomorrow, knock on wood that that doesn't happen, at least there's going to be some of the stuff that I know available for people in the future. Now does everybody really care about how to edit a story? No, of course not. But there are people who really love storytelling and would like to be better storytellers, right.

So the reason why I do the blog stuff is not necessarily to sell my book, although I'd love to sell a ton of copies, don't get me wrong. But it's to give away the information that I have learned over twenty-five years. Something that I had to learn myself by reading and thinking and working and editing, probably hundreds of books and practically every kind of genre you could imagine—nonfiction and fiction included. So when people say, "How do I market my book?" I think what they need to think about is, what is it that they have that other people don't have and would want? So if, say, you're writing a nonfiction book about how you built your house, the tools and techniques that you would have acquired to do that kind of great, imaginative thing, that's information that people would want to have.

So the way you market your book is by giving away your intellectual capital in a way that's entertaining. So market...it takes a long time. You know a friend of mine, and I'm lucky to have him, he's a guy named Seth Godin. And Seth is on his 5,783<sup>rd</sup> post. The guy posts every day. He blogs every day, and he's been doing it for over ten years. And every day he comes up with something that just rocks my world. I read it every morning and I'm like, "Wow! That's something I hadn't considered. And that's going to make me get out of bed with a little bit more of a spring in my step." And so what he does, he's not doing it to sell books, you don't buy the blog, you get it for free. So my advice for people who are like, "I don't know how to sell my book. I don't know how to market." Well, why were you put on earth? What have you done with your life? What is interesting about you? Tell me about that. Don't tell me about the deal you're going to offer on your ebook. I don't care about that. I care about why you think you should be on earth breathing air and what you've done in your life that's interesting. So that's my big take-away from marketing. [laughing]

**Dave:** [laughing] And you know, Seth Godin, I subscribe to his blog every day, so I get the email...I get it sent right to my email, and his book *Tribes* is phenomenal.

**Shawn:** Yeah.

**Dave:** And I always try to urge people when they're talking about marketing, I say, "Have you read Seth Godin's *Tribes*?" And usually the answer is, "No." And I say, "Well, go buy it right now." About finding your audience, that is basically what that book is all about.

**Shawn:** Yeah, and he came up with the concept of permission marketing, which was a completely revolutionary idea. And he wrote that book, I don't know, twenty years ago? And that book is the basis of billions of dollars of economic activity today because it's about not hoodwinking your customer. It's

about being honest with somebody and saying, “Hey, I’ve got something that might be interesting to you. Would you like to hear about it? If you do, I’ll send you some information every now and then.” And it’s that simple concept where you’re dealing with somebody as a human being, not as a potential dollar sign, that has really, really inspired me to do what I do because I used to think about business and bookselling and being a publisher as, “How do I manipulate people to the point where they’ll part with \$20?” You know? And that’s a very adolescent and amateur way of looking at the world. And through people like Seth and Steve, who is a good friend and a great mentor, too, I’ve learned that people are much more receptive if you’re saying, “Hey, this is interesting to me. Is this interesting to you? What do you think?” And so you make a connection, and you take it from there as opposed to, “How am I going to acquire this customer and suck \$127 out of him for a year?”

**Dave:** You mentioned *The Story Grid*, which is your life’s work. Could you take us into that? How you actually came about creating *The Story Grid*, and for those who don’t know, can you actually explain what the purpose is?

**Shawn:** Sure. Well, I started sort of piecing this idea together twenty years ago when I started as an assistant editor at Dell Publishing. I had the great fortune of being able to work with an editor who at the time was editing Elmore Leonard, right? I’m sure you know how amazing Elmore Leonard is.

**Dave:** Yep. I have a lot of his books right behind me. You can’t see it, Shawn, but I swear it’s there.

**Shawn:** [laughing] Well, I was an assistant editor, and I was working with Jackie Farber, who was his editor at the time, and we edited...she would give me his first draft, which was just gold, you know. She gave me the first draft of *Rum Punch*, which turned into *Jackie Brown*, the Tarantino movie. And she also gave me *Pronto*, which turned into the Raylan Givens Justified series on TNT. So that’s how I started really saying to myself, “Wow, here is a master storyteller, who it seems just completely effortless.” And when you read Elmore Leonard, it’s like you’re listening to a story, he’s such a great writer.

So from those beginnings, I said to myself, “There’s got to be a real foundation, a real *thing* behind storytelling that nobody is telling me.” Because editors would just say, “Oh, well, you know, I write down a list of the characters and what they do and then I try and figure out if it makes sense.” And so editing—there’s no school to go to in order to learn how to be an editor, there’s no... The apprenticeship is great, and I learned a lot from the editors I worked for before I became my own editor, but when I became my own editor and I was acquiring books and I was doing it all myself, I felt like a fraud. I felt like I was sort of giving gut reactions to stories and not really speaking in a language that the writer and I could both share. Like if you’re a car mechanic, right? You know what a carburetor is and a drive shaft is, and if you have a discussion with another car mechanic, the two of you can talk about what’s wrong with a car. Right? “Well, you know, the carburetor is on the fritz, and...” I’m not a car mechanic. I’m making it up. But you know what I’m saying. If you have a shared language and a shared sensibility of what makes a car work, then you can really have fun. Then you can really get into the details of the electrical systems, the air conditioning systems, all of that stuff. So I thought to myself, there’s got to be this manual, right? There’s got to be this manual about how to edit a story, how to edit a long form story. So I tried to find it. What I found was Robert McKee and *Story*, which is an amazing book. And I’m sure that’s right behind you, too, Dave. [laughing]

**Dave:** [laughing] Yeah, it’s right next to *The War of Art*.

**Shawn:** [laughing] So I read *Story* and I'm like, "Oh my god, this is like the keys to the kingdom." And I went to Bob's seminars, and eventually I became his agent like a decade later because I became such a fan boy. And I'm like, "These principles, they're amazing and they're perfect, and they make complete sense. How can I make those principles practical? How can I say to a writer, ok your inciting incident in act three doesn't have the oomph that your inciting incident in act two had." You know, how can I teach them to lay out a book in a way that we can both use?

So this is how *The Story Grid* kind of began. And over the past twenty years, I've discovered that there are basically two ways of editing. There's the big global point of view, which is like the view from thirty thousand feet where you say, "Oh, the beginning of the movie was great, the middle was a little flaky, but then the end really paid off extremely well." So what I've created from that is sort of a one page, what I call the foolscap one-page method. And I get that from my friend Steve Pressfield, and that sort of gives you a full outline of the entire story on one page. So along with that, I break down scene by scene from the beginning of a story to the end. For example, on the website I'm working on *The Silence of the Lambs*, and I'll be walking readers through how Thomas Harris put together *The Silence of the Lambs*, the novel, not the screenplay. But they're remarkably similar.

That's why, I think it was Jonathan Demme, he did an amazing job because he basically shot the book when he made that movie. It's really that tight. So, *The Silence of the Lambs* had sixty-four scenes in it. So for each scene there's a whole bunch of criteria that I've analyzed to show the movement of the scene from the beginning of the scene to the end of the scene and the scene after that. And so, if you go to StoryGrid.com, you can see what eventually I've created, which is basically just a big infographic showing how the movements and the storytelling work in *The Silence of the Lambs*. So it's very...it's not the kind of thing I can describe in a really quick two-second sound bite. But essentially, it's a way of looking at global storytelling and line by line storytelling on one, beautiful piece of paper so that if you ever get stuck you can say, "Oh, right, well, I didn't really..."

So when I'm explaining to a writer why their book needs a little work, I can show them a story grid and say, "Look. As you can see, you've dipped here when you could have risen." So over the next few months, we'll get more and more deeply into it, but if you're a story nerd like me, you know, I could go on for hours about this stuff. And over the last couple of months, what I've been covering are the particular genres because you really need to have a sensibility of what genre you want to work in before you can really dive into the nuts and bolts of creating that one page story outline and then what I call the Story Grid spreadsheet, which is the scene by scene evolution of a global story.

**Dave:** Is that because each genre has, you know, its own tropes and everything that audiences come to expect?

**Shawn:** Exactly. Every particular genre has its own conventions and obligatory scenes. For example, if you went to see a horror movie, you're going to expect a scene where the victim is at the mercy of the monster. Right? That's like the climactic moment of the horror movie is when the monster's on top of the victim and about to eat them or slaughter them or whatever. [laughing] And seeing whether or not that victim is able to outsmart that monster and get away. You know, that's why people go to see horror movies. So if you don't have that scene, you don't have a horror story. You know what I mean? And a lot of people—believe it or not—a lot of people don't put that in. So it's a very easy thing to say to somebody, "Hey, your crime story is terrific, but you don't have a body. Nobody's dead in your crime story. So if this is a murder mystery, you've got to have a body." Sometimes it's as simple as that.

**Dave:** So as you see a lot of things from the editing perspective, you use a story grid, correct? To go through each story and say, “Hey, listen, you don’t have this.” Or, “This scene is too similar to something we’ve already seen before.” Am I correct in that?

**Shawn:** Yes. I really...the in-depth story grid work that I’ve done, I do maybe two projects a year where I will go soup to nuts with the writer and work with them for anywhere from two to four months going through a particular draft, multiple drafts, many times. So that’s a very intense amount of work. So generally, I only do one or maybe two of those per year. And they’re usually a situation where I’m called in by a major publisher to help them out of a jam. You know? So I don’t really solicit new clients for my literary agency because I am focused on my own writing and on the Black Irish Books publishing side, but as this system was evolving, this was the work from editing three hundred books and figuring out what worked and what didn’t work and what helped people and what didn’t help people. So every time I’ve walked a writer through the system, they love it because it tells them what their problems are. Not that they’re the problem, but what the problems are. Because a lot of writers, something is bothering them and they don’t quite know what. They think it’s their fault, right? They think, “Oh, I’m a terrible writer, I just can’t break this. It’s just driving me crazy.” And the reality is that if you can identify that one scene or even that one beat in the scene that’s the problem, then they’re so excited because then they can just turn their mind to fixing it. And they don’t have to self-flagellate. And that’s the great thing about being an editor is that to help a writer find out the problems and to help them come up with solutions, there’s nothing more exciting and fun.

**Dave:** And, you know, I’ve been there too and I think a lot of other writers have been there before where you just get so frustrated at a certain point in the story. Or you just sort of push away and say, “That’s it, I’m terrible.”

Shawn: [laughing]

Dave: Like in Steven’s book *The War of Art*, he says that’s another form of resistance coming through where it’s like, “Let’s just give up, it’s never going to go anywhere. Let’s just pack it in.”

Shawn: Right.

Dave: And I think a tool like this would be very beneficial...

Shawn: Well, it will. And the other thing that’s fun, Dave, that I plan on doing is taking some of the great archetypes of particular genres and doing story grids for each one of them. So for example, the thriller. I think you can’t really do much better than *The Silence of the Lambs*—breaking it down scene by scene and then showing exactly how Thomas Harris put together that Ferrari. You know, it’s literally like pulling apart a car and showing all the moving parts and all the really difficult decisions and brilliant decisions that he made to keep the reader guessing and turning pages. And so what I plan on doing is similar things for the love story and for the horror novel. I mean, Stephen King’s *Misery*, that’s a great story. Even *The Shining* or *Carrie* to pick that apart and to show the fledgling horror story writer how Stephen King cracked the back of those stories and really put together something remarkable. So I plan on doing this eventually. One of the most important things to do when you’re a writer is to read. Right? So if you can find those archetypical, those best, those pantheon novels that you always loved, and you’re able to break them down and look at the story grid and see exactly how they solved the problems that you’re going to face. Like, how exactly did Thomas Harris solve the hero at the mercy of the victim

scene? Well, if you watch the final twenty minutes of that movie, you'll see what he did. And it's *incredible*. So I'm sure a lot of your listeners have either seen the movie or read the book, but it's putting the hero blind into a basement and the villain has on, you know, what are they called again?

**Dave:** Night vision goggles?

**Shawn:** Night vision goggles. So the villain's just toying with Starling and if Thomas Harris didn't set up the answer to her figuring out where the guy was in the first third of the book, it wouldn't have worked. But brilliantly, at one of the first meetings that Starling had with Hannibal Lecter, he said to her, "Do you know what a schizophrenic smells like?" And she says, "No." "It smells like goat. It smells like a goat." And so, in the novel, when she is in the complete dark and she hears this snick of Jame Gumb, Buffalo Bill, starting to pull back on the chamber of his gun, she smells goat, and it's through that sensory understanding that she is able to move and freeze and shoot him before he shoots her. And it's brilliant because he sets it up, you know, a hundred and fifty pages before that climactic moment. If he didn't make that setup, it'd have been like, "How is she going to know where that guy is? Really?" So, those are the little setups and payoffs that are so wonderful when you're an editor or a writer to see and say, "Oh my gosh, I know how to do that!" Because look what Thomas Harris did. He said, "I'm going to have to set up my climactic moment in act one and then when it really pays off, I'm really going to frighten the reader or the viewer."

**Dave:** So, you know, Shawn, you talk a lot about the movies, the movie adaptations. Your story grid, would that work the same for screenwriters. I mean, like if I created a screenplay without being an adaptation, would it still work the same?

**Shawn:** Absolutely. Absolutely, it's exactly the same concept. The long form story in a screenplay or even in short form—shot story or short film, you know—what you'll eventually do in the Story Grid is to break down each scene into the least common...the least number of words possible. So for example, the first scene in *The Silence of the Lambs* is Clarice Starling gets called into the office of Jack Crawford, who is the head of the behavioral science unit of the FBI. And he asks her to interview Hannibal Lecter. So that first scene you can break down to three words. "Starling gets job." Right? So if you're going to do a screenplay, what you're doing is you're working in imagery in a screenplay and not words, so to be able to describe each of the sixty-four scenes in *The Silence of the Lambs*, you're going to have sixty...I think there's probably about sixty setups in the film too. It was probably a one hundred twenty-five to one hundred thirty-page screenplay because if you just pull out all of the exposition and the text, you can boil down the scenes into their active moments. So to analyze a screenplay, like even *Lost in Translation*, or any screenplay, you can do the exact same thing to see the shifts of the external values that are at stake. I'm getting a little technical, but the short answer is you can absolutely use it for a screenplay.

**Dave:** That's amazing. And, Shawn, please feel free to get as technical as you want to.

**Shawn:** [laughing]

**Dave:** Believe me, I love talk like this and, you know, like you said, we could go on for hours and hours about this stuff. So, Shawn, beyond *The Story Grid*, is there anything else that you're working on right now, whether personally or with Black Irish Books that you can talk about?

**Shawn:** Actually, I'm really at the final fumes of putting together all day art for the book. We think the book will be ready sometime around February or March of next year. And it'll be an oversize trade

paperback so that you'll be able to see all the graphs and the infographics that I'm talking about. So right now, I'm really hammering home on making sure that it's as clear and concise and as easy to understand as possible. So that's my primary thing. And in the offing, Steve and I are working on a new book from him that we're going to be bringing out. And I really can't talk too much about it because it's in its early stages. And then in terms of my literary agency, it's a good time because I have fifteen clients and they're all under contract and doing their work, so I don't have to bother with them right now.  
[laughing]

**Dave:** You don't have to call back going, "Where's that book? It was due two weeks ago!"

**Shawn:** Exactly! I don't do that anyway. The way I look at it—when somebody's ready, it's ready. You know?

**Dave:** Yeah, that's very true. You know, Shawn, correct me if I'm wrong, does Robert McKee have a book coming out soon? A new book?

**Shawn:** Actually I am working with Bob on a project that is very, very close. We're in our second edit now. Bob and I are working on a series of books on genre. And he's also working on something on dialogue, which I think a lot of your listeners would be really into.

**Dave:** Yes, that's what I was thinking about. The book on dialogue.

**Shawn:** Yeah, we're very close to locking it in. And so Bob and I have to talk about the strategies about how to best publish it. So, a lot of the major publishers would love to work with Bob, but I also think he could do it himself and with his own publishing enterprise. So we'll see what he wants to do. I see it as one of my missions in life is to get everything out of Bob's head that I can because I consider myself a pretty astute student of story, and every time I talk to Bob, it's like talking to Merlin or something. I mean, the guy can talk. He knows so much. And he's even more into it than I am. And so it's so much fun to talk to him about stories and...it's not only that, it's how important they are. Because I think a lot of people see storytelling as like, "Oh, yeah, he told me this funny story and it was really neat." But the reality is, we as human beings, the only way we're capable of dealing with the chaos of our world is through storytelling. So to know how to tell a story is a crucial skillset that's only going to be more and more important as the years go on. So Bob's knowledge is just so comprehensive, and he's introduced me to other people who are as excited about story as I am. One of his colleagues is a foremost expert on action stories, which that's what's running Hollywood right now are all the superhero action stories and all that. His name is Bassim El-Wakil and we're working with him on doing a book on action, which I think would be great. So, lots of stuff to come from Bob, and I'm pressing him as quickly as I can, but he's a perfectionist, and thank God he is because his stuff is great.

**Dave:** Yeah, and you know, Bob is the last one of the big three. There was Syd Field, then there was Blake Snyder, and then there was McKee. And, you know, Syd and Blake have passed away, and whoever I talk to out in Hollywood or meet any type of story consultant, they know of the big three. And usually somebody will say, "What's your *Save the Cat* beat sheet?" or something like that. But McKee, everyone goes back to him because everyone goes back to *Story*. Everyone goes back to, this is the foundation where everyone is coming from.

**Shawn:** Well, I was lucky enough when I was at Dell. I worked with Syd for four screenplays, I think it was. Great, wonderful guy. Syd Field was a really charming, really great guy. And his concept...I think his

take is from Aristotle. The three-act structure I use too...I don't really care so much about how many acts you have, in that some people have five acts, seven acts, whatever. What's important to me when I look at story is the beginning hook, the middle build, and the ending payoff. And that's basically what I took from Syd. It's to look at your global story in three major chunks. And I do a lot of stuff in the book, in *The Story Grid*, on where did those chunks come from. And if you break it down, look at the math, I also have a science background. When I went to college, I majored in microbiology and I did a lot of work in biochemistry, so I'm all about—is there some formula I can boil it down to. And it's not formula, but basically what it boils down to is storytelling structure is basically—twenty-five percent of the beginning of the story is your hook, right? It's how you grab the reader. It's the inciting incident. And then you've got fifty percent that is sort of your middle build, which is where you progressively complicate the story to the point where it's excruciating. And then the final twenty-five percent or fifteen—and these are generalities, it doesn't have to be perfectly twenty-five percent—that's your ending payoff, right? So the promise you make at the beginning hook where you've got a payoff at the end, and as David Mamet always says, the ending has to be surprising but inevitable, right? You have to...reflecting back, when you think of the beginning of the story, you have to go, "Oh my gosh, how didn't I see this coming?" But it's so surprising that it rocks your world, and it creates catharsis. So, just to get back to Syd for a moment, it really deeply implanted in my head that they're the three major pillars of your story. So I look at it, I look at long form or any kind of story in those terms—beginning hook, middle build, and your ending payoff. And you just use that as a mantra and make sure that your beginning hook is always paid off by the end in a surprising and inevitable way. And one of the ways to do that is to use and to know genre to a degree that will just make your life so much easier. Anyway, Syd and Bob, I'm lucky enough to have worked with both of them. I didn't work with Blake, but everybody I ever talked to always said, "Hey, have you read *Save the Cat*?" And I haven't, but I'm sure it's extremely valuable.

**Dave:** Yeah, you know, that's a great saying by Mamet, by the way. I'm going to write that down.

**Shawn:** [laughing]

**Dave:** That is so great to keep in mind, and Mamet, I actually downloaded one of his audiobooks. It's a play, though. It's *Speed the Plow*.

**Shawn:** Oh yeah.

**Dave:** But it's obviously, it's a re-enactment through actors, you know. But I've heard amazing things about it, and I have his one book *Bambi vs. Godzilla*.

**Shawn:** Love that book.

**Dave:** And there's another book I have of his, and I can't remember. I think...it's not on film, is it? Yeah, it's on film. And that is another book where...

**Shawn:** You can't go wrong with him.

**Dave:** Yeah.

**Shawn:** He's written *Three Uses for the Knife* is a great book, *True and False*, of course, *Bambi vs. Godzilla*. He's just...his essays are just so entertaining, you can't help but laugh out loud. And he's a wonderful guy. He's so smart it's intimidating. Like every time I talk to him, I feel like I'm saying something stupid, you know? [laughing] And he lets me know when I am, too.

**Dave:** [laughing] Shawn, this has been an awesome interview. I know you're busy, and I've taken up enough of your time. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you maybe wanted to mention, or do you have a final thought?

**Shawn:** The only thing that I'd...you'd mentioned to me earlier last time we were talking about is there...what do I look for if I'm ever going to consider bringing on a client. And the one thing I'd say is I want a professional. And what a professional means is somebody who's done their research who knows the terrain they're working in and is an adult, right? Who is not going to freak out if I say, "You know, this isn't quite for me." So that's really...becoming a professional writer requires a lot of hard work, and if there's one thing I could say, it's like if you're a writer, you know you're a writer because you're just miserable unless you do it at least an hour a day. And what I'm trying to do with *The Story Grid* is make the work less esoteric and more practical to really give instructions on how to become a better writer every single day. That are real, practical things to do as opposed to, "Take some time and think about the clouds and write about how birds move." You know, that stuff does not help you if you're trying to solve a middle build problem where everybody's going to sleep the minute they get to page two hundred in your book. So, hard work. It's a reward in itself and if you're a writer, just keep at it. And, that's it.

**Dave:** You made a very good point. If you don't enjoy the work...sorry, if you don't enjoy the journey, you won't enjoy anything. You know, somebody once said that to me. I may have gotten that from Steven Pressfield's *Do the Work*. But that's something I've learned. And it's so true. If you don't enjoy doing this, you're not going to enjoy the next one or the third one or the fourth one, and you have to sort of make the work meaningful because I don't know where I've heard this one from, but the only thing hard work gets you is more work.

**Shawn:** Well, it's the famous thing that Steve always quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is that everybody has the right to their work, but they don't have the rights to the fruits of the labor. So it's a hard concept to come up with when you've finished something and you're like, "Where's my payday?" And there's no payday. You have the right to do the work and that's what you need to really focus on, and the other stuff is going to take care of itself. Just keep doing the work, and if you get just a little bit better each day, that's all you can do. And it's not easy for anybody. That's true...it's hard for David Mamet to sit in a chair every day. It really is. He wants to go fly his airplane. He wants to go do something else, but the guy sits down in his chair every day and he writes at least five hundred words, whether they're worthless or not, it makes no difference to him. But he has to do it. Same thing with Steve. Same thing with me. I mean, I'm not near their level of expertise, but that's just the thing. It's like a habit, you know. It's like brushing your teeth. You've got to do it.

**Dave:** [laughing] That's amazing advice. And, Shawn, where can people find you online?

**Shawn:** Just [www.StoryGrid.com](http://www.StoryGrid.com). I'm not really good with Facebook and Twitter and all that stuff, so that's the best place to reach me. And it's a very down and dirty site that you'll either fall in love with or you'll say, "This is ridiculous. This is the rantings of a madman." [laughing]

**Dave:** Well, after this interview, I think people are going to say, "This guy knows what he's talking about. We should definitely read more." My site is ravings of a madman, believe me.

**Shawn:** No, no, no. I checked it out. It looks great.

**Dave:** Oh, thank you. To get all those little buttons on. To make them all perfect...

**Shawn:** Oh I know, I gave up!

**Dave:** It took a lot, and I'm actually redesigning my site right now because I don't like the way it looks any more. I'm a perfectionist too. I'm always like, "Meh, this looks like garbage. I gotta redo this." But everyone, thanks again for listening. You can find me at [DaveBullis.com](http://DaveBullis.com). Twitter is @Dave\_Bullis. And, Shawn, thank you so much for coming on.

**Shawn:** Not at all, Dave. Happy to do it.

**Dave:** And when your book comes out, please let me know. And I'll make sure to have you back on.

**Shawn:** Oh, that'd be fun. That'd be great.

**Dave:** Excellent. So, Shawn, please have a great night. And if you need anything, please feel free to call.

**Shawn:** Ok, take it easy, Dave.

**Dave:** Take it easy, bye.