

**TRANSCRIPT FROM SHAWN COYNE'S
DECEMBER 5, 2014 INTERVIEW WITH
STARVE THE DOUBTS**

Kimanzi: Welcome to Starve the Doubts. I am your host, Kimanzi Constable, and today's cohost is my buddy Jody Mayberry from parkleaders.com. Hey, Jody, how are you doing?

Jody: I'm doing good, Kimanzi. It's good to be here with you.

Kimanzi: And there is one person missing from Starve the Doubts that you all are very used to hearing. That of course is Mr. Jared Easley, the host. We gave Jared a little vacation, so Jody and I are going to run the show today. Aren't we, Jody?

Jody: We are! This is like playing in his house when he's not home.

Kimanzi: Yeah. Is there anything you want to say, like maybe talk some smack about Jared while he's not here?

Jody: I probably shouldn't. He'll hear this.

Kimanzi: [laughing] Ok, well, we are joined today by a very exciting guest. Today we are joined by Shawn Coyne. He is an author and editor. The books he has worked on have grossed over \$150 million in North America. So that's a little bit of money. His longest collaboration is with somebody that I think you would know, Mr. Steven Pressfield. He's edited a number of Steven's books, including *The War of Art*, which is a favorite of mine, *Gates of Fire*, and *Turning Pro*. He is also a literary agent, manager and business partner with Steven Pressfield with a company called Black Irish Books. You can find Shawn at StoryGrid.com. Hey, Shawn, thanks for joining Jody and me.

Shawn: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited about talking with you guys.

Kimanzi: Sweet. So, Shawn, the question we ask every Starve the Doubts guest when they come on the show is—what is the best concert you've ever been to?

Shawn: The best music concert?

Kimanzi: Yes.

Shawn: Well, it would have to be Bruce Springsteen in 1978 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Kimanzi: Sweet. And I don't think I've ever heard yours, Jody. What is yours?

Jody: Oh, that's an interesting question. I'm a big fan of Jason Haird, but he's a friend of mine and I've been to maybe twenty of his concerts. So I wouldn't pick just one. But also, Harry Connick, Jr. at Illinois State University was outstanding.

Kimanzi: Nice! And so, Shawn, we're going to launch into a little true and false here, if you don't mind.

Shawn: Ok.

Kimanzi: So, question #1, Shawn, is—if you don't have a big audience, self-publishing is your best option. True or false?

Shawn: Oh, true.

Jody: Ok, the next one—working with Seth Godin is interesting. True or false? And then if you wouldn't mind just telling us a little bit.

Shawn: Oh, absolutely true. The great thing about Seth is that he's sort of like Socrates. So when you start to work with Seth, he'll never really give you a direct answer about anything. But what he does is make you completely think about why it is you're doing what you're doing from the very start. So even if you're working with him on a set project. Steve and I worked with him on a book called *Do the Work*, which he published in The Domino Project. And so even when you're working on a set project, Seth will ask you questions like, "Well, why, exactly, did you write this book?" And it really makes you focus and concentrate on what is really motivating you deep down inside, not necessarily financially, but why exactly it is that you want to do what you do in the first place. So I talk to Seth whenever I do, and he's actually got a new book out now called *What to do When It's Your Turn*, and I read it in one sitting. It's a wonderful book that's really all about motivating people who have something to give the world to get them to actually sit down and do it.

Kimanzi: Yeah, that's got to be a pretty cool experience to work with Seth Godin.

Shawn: Yeah, it is. He's a great guy.

Kimanzi: Ok, so, Shawn—a mistake too many authors make is not getting their book edited. True or false?

Shawn: Yes. True, true.

Kimanzi: And you are an editor, of course. So have you ever read anything and was like, "Agh!"

Shawn: Well, the thing is, Kimanzi, I think editing is one of those really misunderstood skillsets, and one of the reasons I started StoryGrid.com was to sort of demystify it, in a way. You know, when I started in book publishing, way back in the 1990s, in the early 1990s, there was no sort of course that you could take that would teach you how to actually edit a book. There isn't one now, believe it or not. And so I think a lot of people get a little bit intimidated by the concept of editing, and one of the things I think is really important is for writers to actually learn how to edit themselves. So that's what I'm trying to do with *The Story Grid* is to give people a set of skills that are outside of writing...what people usually associate with writing, being sitting down and having some wonderful epiphany and being able to crank out a great story. That really doesn't happen all that often, and very infrequently. So what do you do the other days, when the muse isn't sitting by your side? And that's really where the skillset of an editor can help a writer, so if you get stuck, you can take a step back and say to yourself, "Well, what exactly do I want to accomplish with this particular scene or this particular story." And to look at it from a very analytical point of view allows you, when you have to get creative to have some sort of bearings and a map and a place to go and to get to the minute you start to work. So have I read stuff that should be edited? Yeah, sure. You know, even the best books that come out...or not the best, but books that come out from Random House or Penguin or Harper Collins, a lot of those books could have used a turn or two

through an editor's head. But it's really about putting the onus of editing onto creative people so they can help themselves before they actually try and reach a marketplace.

Kimanzi: Is there a book that you would maybe recommend for a writer who wants to learn even the basics of editing? Is there a book out there?

Shawn: Well, I'm going to publish *The Story Grid* as a book in early 2015, but the thing is that I can't recommend one off the top of my head for the very, very specific skillset that it takes to edit for books or stories in general. But what I will recommend is one that I read. The things that I work through myself to learn the skillset over the period of twenty-five years. And I'm not exaggerating when I say that there really isn't one comprehensive book that's very, very direct and practical to start being able to analyze long form stories. So, anyway, back to the book that I would recommend, which would be *Story* by Robert McKee, which is a classic for screenwriters who are very concerned about getting the best story down in terms of visual storytelling as opposed to narrative storytelling in a novel. But from *Story*, I was able to take so many concepts and so many wonderful things that McKee has learned over his fifty-year career and apply them to novels and narrative nonfiction.

Kimanzi: We'll have that book in the show notes for the listeners.

Shawn: Great.

Jody: Well, speaking of books, I'm interested in this true or false question and what you have to say about it being a podcaster. Podcasters should repurpose their podcast episodes into a book. True or false?

Shawn: True. I think one of the great things about podcasting is that you get people to react and to speak off the cuff, right? And when you speak off the cuff, what usually happens is the core of your belief comes out, right? So, I mean, you didn't prepare me for this interview where you're asking me very specific and direct questions and my initial reactions kind of interesting because I have to just start talking. And I think one of the difficulties for writers is getting to that moment of honesty and clarity and directness. So podcasting, I think, is a very unique opportunity for people like you guys to bring down a lot of the conversations that you've had and boil them down to their core and then perhaps build off the themes such that you can do specific books and feature different people and their reactions. So I really do think that by doing transcripts—and a lot of times what I'll do when I do a podcast interview is have the interview transcribed myself and offer it to the people of StoryGrid.com. And what I find is a lot of people love to listen to it and then go back to the transcript and dig through the ums, and the huhs, and the stuff that we all do while we're trying to think of something to say and find the direct core of what that particular person is trying to say. So this is a very long answer to, yeah, I think podcasts would really benefit from creating books out of them.

Kimanzi: So, Jody, when is your book coming out, then? [laughing]

Jody: Well, I'll get to work on that as soon as we're done here. [laughing]

Shawn: Good answer!

Kimanzi: So, Shawn, the last true or false is—an author needs an agent to get a traditional publishing contract.

Shawn: True. The thing about traditional publishing versus self-publishing is the traditional publishers are really...I mean, if you try and look at the world from their point of view, they're owned by multi-national corporations. And there are wonderful editors today working at Random House and Harper Collins and St. Martin's Press and all those places who are really in it to publish great books. But the people who are writing the paychecks and the advances, they're business people, right? It's sort of like nobody expects the Disney Corporation to not worry about the bottom line. And the companies that own the major publishers now, there are five. There's the Random House Penguin Group, which is a co-venture between a British conglomerate called Pearson PLC and the Bertelsmann Corporation in Germany. So that's one massive publisher. And then there's Harper Collins, which is owned by the News Corporation, which Rupert Murdoch owns and controls. And then there's St. Martin's Press, which is owned by the Holtzbrinck Corporation. And among St. Martin's Press, there's Farrar, Straus, and Giroux and innumerable imprints that are all sort of part of that one corporate entity. And then you've got the Hachette Corporation, which is a French company that owns Little, Brown and Grand Central Books. And I think there's one more that I'm forgetting. But I'm sure it'll come to me soon. Oh, Simon and Schuster, and that's owned by the American CBS Corporation, which is owned by Redstone.

Anyway, all of those people that I've just described, they're really serious business people. So they need the dollars to flow much the same as any company does. And the way the big publishers do is to create as many big properties as they possibly can. So over the past twenty years, what you've seen are big swings from the big publishers. And what I mean by that is that they'll attach themselves to a particular project and invest a lot of money in one single project in the hopes that they'll create somebody like J.K. Rowling or James Patterson or John Grisham or Stephen King. So they take a smaller and smaller number of projects and try and make them big, big brands.

Now what that's done for people who used to be the bread and butter of publishing, which is what they used to call **midless** writers, is that it's kind of left them in the lurch, right? So the guy who sells five to six thousand copies of a particular book can be a profitable person. And a publisher could make a nice little profit off of that person, but they're not going to become James Patterson. They have a niche market, and they sell well, and they can find an audience. But that's not all that interesting to the Bertelsmann Corporation. What they want is John Grisham.

So what's happened is that self-publishing has sort of come in with the digital revolution in 2007 with the founding of the Kindle and all the ebooks. And what that has done is allowed people and writers who used to be those midless people to find that marketplace and build their own audiences and build their own sort of infrastructure using the Amazon.coms of the world as well as Kobo and iTunes. And what they've found is that they can make a pretty decent living, a far better living than they ever could if they were published as a small midless writer at Little, Brown. So you've got really two different kinds of...I like to think of it as the big show, you've got Major League Baseball, and those are the five major publishers. And then you've got AAA and AA and A, and B ball where you've got this young talent that's coming along and trying to do better and better with each book. And they're learning as they go. And the one major corporation that has sort of helped those people from the start has been Amazon. So the big question now is that Amazon is starting to move a bit more aggressively into taking away some of the financial incentives for these young writers. And so now we're at that sort of place where nobody's really sure where it's going to go in the future, but still there's still two really solid places to publish today.

Kimanzi: I should tell you, Shawn, I started with self-publishing. And I never even thought about going to a publisher. At the point where my books had sold about thirty thousand copies, self-published, I had three publishers coming to me.

Shawn: Of course!

Kimanzi: Yeah, and I ended up signing with an amazing publisher called Sound Wisdom Books, which is an offshoot of a Christian publisher called Destiny Image. But I can tell you, people said, “Well, why did you go self-publish?” They’ve been absolutely amazing to me.

Shawn: Well, it’s not only financially exciting. It’s also that just learning a different sort of world is always a lot of fun for a particular temperament. I’m sort of the kind of person, I think you guys probably are too, given your podcast experience—I’m the kind of person where if something is new and interesting and I could do it myself and try it, that’s really appealing to me. And that’s not appealing to everybody, but it is to a certain kind of temperament. And one of the things I love to do is to direct as much of my own creativity and my own stuff as I can.

So I’d rather not...no, I published a book with a division of Penguin a couple of years ago, and it was a fine experience, I’m not complaining. But at one point...it was a book about the rise of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1970s and the fall of the steel industry, and it was a unique, fun book that was sort of a hybrid sports narrative nonfiction and I wrote it with a guy named Chad Millman, who is *ESPN Magazine’s* editor in chief. Anyway, we really busted our hump on this book and we worked really hard on it, we delivered, we got a really nice advance, no complaints. But then when the book came out, Chad and I said to our publisher at the time, we said, “Hey, look, we have an idea.” They wanted to send us on a big publicity tour, and they were funding it. And we said, “You know, why don’t we take some of that budget and instead we’ll create some really cool postcards about the book. And we can hire this company who will put the postcards on the cars of everybody who goes to the Steelers games across the country.” And we thought that was a pretty good marketing idea. You know, instead of me just doing another interview on KDKA in Pittsburgh, we would actually get it directly into sports fans’ hands. And immediately they said no. Just no. And we said, “Would you mind if we funded it ourselves?” And they said, “No, you can’t do that because we own the property and we don’t want you to do that.” And it was at that moment when I said, “You know, the advance was great. I like going to Pittsburgh on a corporate dime, but this really isn’t that much fun if I can’t even affect the success of my own work.”

So a similar thing happened with me and Steven Pressfield when Steve was doing his novel *The Profession* at a division of Random House. And so that’s when we said to ourselves, “Hey, let’s start our own thing called Black Irish Books. And this way we can give away whatever we want and do whatever marketing mistakes we want. We can try things. And if they don’t work, we can learn from them. And if they do, great.” And so far, it’s kept the wolf from the door financially. We’re not killing it, but what is fun is to be able to have an idea and to actually execute it and see what happens. And when you hand over your property sometimes, you’re not allowed to do that.

Jody: Now, with Black Irish, you said you get to try things and see if they work. Would you be willing to share something that seemed like a good idea that you tried and it didn’t end up working?

Shawn: Let me think. Yeah, I have no problem sharing that, but let me think. The one thing I don’t want to do is to denigrate a book because of a bad marketing decision, so I’m trying to figure out a way to tell

a story without denigrating a book. Because whatever we publish, we absolutely adore the book and we would do anything for it. And sometimes what happens is when you tell a marketing mistake, it reflects back on the book, and people go, “Oh, the book must have been terrible.” When it was really a marketing mistake.

But one of the things that didn’t work so well was we decided to do kind of an online promotion at a number of places and we discounted an ebook to like 99 cents. We offered it in a very sort of diffuse way, meaning we went to outside friends of ours of other major followings and websites, and we said to them, “Hey, could you read this book?” They read the book, they loved the book, and we said, “Hey, we want to do a deal where we’re going to give away the ebook for 99 cents, will you guys promote it on your website?” So we got a whole battery of really great people to agree to do this, and when we did it, it just didn’t work. It fell on its face. And I think what happened was, we sold maybe three hundred of these ebooks that were highly discounted.

What we took away from that was this—if you’re going to do some sort of promotion about a particular book, you really need to nail the core market for the book. So you can’t just go to...say it’s a book about housekeeping, right? I’m just making this up. And it’s about how to clean your house in the best possible way without using really bad chemicals. So if you offered that book for 99 cents as an ebook at a website that was a really good friend of yours who ran it, but it was dedicated to football fans, you know, you’re not going to sell a lot of them. Right? Because football fans don’t really care about how clean their houses are or how many chemicals are in their houses because they just want to watch football.

[laughing]

So one of the things you have to think of when you’re doing marketing is you have to really—and this goes to podcasting too I suspect—you’ve got to find out who your peeps are. Who really cares about what you care about. And then walk it up from there instead of going global and then trying to do as many hits as possible. Find that core market that really cares about toxic chemicals in cleaning products that you should really avoid in your house. So if you were to go on Google and web search that, you’d probably find a really good, tightly focused market that would be really interested in that book and would be happy to give you a dollar for it. But if you did what we did at Black Irish, which was to go wide, you’re just not going to get that kind of reaction because they’re just not going to...unless it’s a specific topic, you’re kind of flying blind.

Kimanzi: What can an author do to consistently sell books? Or what are maybe a few things that they can do?

Shawn: Well, I think the most important thing...and I’m glad you brought up Seth Godin earlier. You know, Seth wrote a couple of really seminal books about marketing years ago. One was called *Permission Marketing* and one was called *Tribes*. And his new book, *What to do When It’s Your Turn*, is really about this same thing. And what that is, if you want to sell books, think about why you want to sell books. Now, for my purposes, I want to sell a lot of books when my book *The Story Grid* is ready to go. And we’re going to publish it at Black Irish, and it’ll be ready in February or March next year. Ok, I want to sell a lot of books, right? Because that’ll be great. But is that really the most important thing to me? Well, not really. What’s really important to me is to remember how hard it was for me when I was twenty-two years old and trying to make it in the book publishing business and nobody would tell me how to edit a book. There was no resource to go to. I had to kind of make it up as I went and absorb as much as I could from nice editors who would give me the time of day and give me some advice.

And so at that point in my career, if there were something that I would be able to have read like *The Story Grid*, that would be really helpful. So what I really want to do with *The Story Grid* is to be able to teach people something that took me twenty-five years to learn in a way that's practical and easy to understand and is generous. That is really...it's kind of like my life's work, right? I spent a lot of time figuring out what I wanted to do while I was on the planet. I figured it out. I worked hard at it. And now I've got something to share. So when I started StoryGrid.com, I thought to myself, "Well, I can just tease people with this and hope that they'll end up buying my expensive trade paperback down the road. Or I could actually give them as much of this content in as easy a form as I can for free. And see what happens." And maybe nobody will buy *The Story Grid*. Maybe everybody will read it online, or anybody who would care would read it online. And at the end of the day, I have to be able to say to myself, "Is that going to be ok for me?" And the truth is, yeah. It will be ok. Because I worked very hard to get where I am, and it's time for me to give something back. So when people say to me, "How do I sell more books?" I think to myself, "What is it that you're supposed to be doing? What is it that you know better than anybody else? What would fascinate people for them to hear you write about?" And if you're a fiction author, that doesn't mean that you don't have anything to share. Because the genres that you're working in say something about you. So the way to sell more books is to create content and give it away for free to people who share the same passions that you do. And you know what? It's going to take time. You're not going to be, as you were saying, Kimanzi, when you first self-published, it took a while to get to thirty thousand copies. It didn't happen overnight, right? It took a while.

Kimanzi: No, it took a lot of getting exposure. I wrote a lot of guest posts and articles for—it was fifty different websites that I had written for to get traffic back to my website and see my books.

Shawn: Exactly. That's exactly right. And I suspect that every time you did one of those fifty guest posts, you weren't saying to yourself, "Oooh, here's one more of the fifty that I need to do to sell thirty thousand copies." I bet that's not the case.

Kimanzi: No, not at all.

Shawn: I bet you were saying, "I've got this really cool idea. Somebody wants to hear what I think. I'm going to write it up, and I'm going to share it. And if somebody likes it, great! And maybe they'll come back to my website, and if they don't like it, that's ok too. But I'm enjoying the process of discovery and writing." So this is the thing that a lot of people who always say, "Oh, I want to sell more books. How do I get more traffic? What do I need to do? What do I need to do? What's the big secret?" The big secret is you've got to love what you do. And you've got to work hard, and you can't expect anything in return. See, that's a message a lot of people don't want to hear. It's not easy. You know what I mean?

Kimanzi: Yeah.

Shawn: But the reality is, you share those three things. If you love what you do, if you want to share it, and you don't want anything in return, guess what happens? You attract a lot of people who care about what you do. And they're happy, happy, they love to support you financially by buying your book. But you can't go out there and say, "Buy my book for 99 cents and everything will be great." And I think this just goes back to the mistake we made at Black Irish Books. We were trying to coerce people to buy the book instead of having them discover the book and buy it themselves.

Kimanzi: Very good point. Well, we want to be respectful of your time, so we're going to start wrapping up here. Shawn, who is doing something that interests you right now?

Shawn: Well, I met this guy through Steve Pressfield. Steve, as you know, has a lot of great ties into military and military thinkers. And there's a man at West Point who runs a really incredible program. He's been running it there for thirty years. And it's called The Performance Enhancement Center. I might have screwed that up, but he's been running this sort of like cell of really interesting, deep thinking counselors who work on helping people sort of get over their inner wars. If they have confidence problems or they're trying to take a test and they choke. This is the place they go to learn how to settle down that inner negative voice. And so I've just been talking to him for a while and I think what he has built over thirty years could be a really fascinating book because I have never met anybody who was ever overconfident when they have to perform.

Jody: Well, I have learned a tremendous amount today, Shawn. Thank you so much. Where can people find you online they want to find out more?

Shawn: Well, they can go directly to www.storygrid.com, just one straight thing, or shawncoyne.com and that will take you to the same place, but thank you so much for having me. As you can tell, I really love to talk about this stuff and I really appreciate your interest. And I think what you guys are doing is fantastic.

Kimanzi: And for the listeners, we will have all this information, of course, in the show notes at StarveTheDoubts.com. But, Shawn, what is one final thought that you'd leave with the listeners?

Shawn: The one thought I would leave is that it's not going to be every day when you work really hard and it seems like nothing's ever coming from it. You have to remember that you're building something for other people, not just yourself. And that's going to free you from a lot of inner pain. So the work that you're doing everywhere from fixing cars to taking reservations at a hotel. If you approach your job as something that needs to be done in service of other people, that's really what's important. And it's the thing I struggle with every single day—I get so deep in my own head that I can't remember what it is that's important. What's important is to remember we all came here and we're all on this planet to do something. And it's your job to find out what that is. And then to do it and to share it. So that's my final thought.

Kimanzi: Wow, thank you so much, Shawn, for joining us. Thank you for your time. Thank you, Jody, for helping me be Kimanzi and Jared on this episode. And we'll see all the listeners again in the next episode of Starve the Doubts.