(applause)

Andrew Clark: All right. This past fall, we had a Print Humor workshop in New York. It was a two-day event. It was a lot of fun. In my opinion, one of our best speakers, he was so good we decided to bring him up here today. He was terrific. *(applause)* His name is Byrd Leavell. He's a literary agent and a partner with Scott Waxman at the Waxman Leavell Literary Agency. He's a Virginian. He's a graduate of the University of Virginia and the Radcliffe Publishing Program. And he has represented two of the most successful and funny humor books to come out in recent memory: Tucker Max's *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, he discovered Tucker Max, and Justin Halpern's *Shit My Dad Says*. He handles narrative non-fiction, sports humor, commercial fiction. The quote reads like you just grabbed hold of a speeding train. I liked that, so I used that from his bio. His clients include Pete Sampras, Mike Sacks, who's a contributing professor for us, and Cat Marnell. Please welcome, Byrd Leavell. *(applause)* You went to the University of Virginia.

Byrd Leavell: I did.

AC: And then went into publishing. What drew you into a publishing program?

BL: Let's see. I worked at a local regional magazine in Charlottesville. It's about gardening, Thomas Jefferson, guns. And my dad used to always have the question, "What are you gonna do with your life?" I never had any answers, and I found this publishing program up in Boston called the Radcliffe Publishing Program. It's two months. I didn't know a literary agency existed. I just knew I wanted to be in books. And I saw a literary agent at something exactly like this, and unlike me, he was someone who was just totally in control of his environment. He was a UVA grad, his name was Sloan Harris. He's at ICM. I was twenty years old, and I said, "I want that. Whatever that was, I want it." And then I went to New York, slept on a couch, made $30,000 a year for the next eight years. Walked to work dreaming about winning the lottery. It was a very dark time for a while, but I just kind of stuck it out, and eventually publishing paid me back.

AC: So you were working for eight years in publishing. Where were you working, what were you doing?

BL: So publishing's an apprenticeship industry. My first job was basically as a secretary. "Waxman Leavell, Waxman Leavell." Excuse me, I'm saying that wrong: "Carlisle and Company, Carlisle and Company." It's all about (getting) a foot in the door. Eventually, after being secretary for a year, I was an assistant at Carlisle and Company for a very successful British agent. We did some big books at that time. I started to learn how to do the job. Your whole point in book publishing is to try and find some way for how you're gonna do it. How are you gonna find your niche? I didn't know at all what my niche was. And I got so linked to Tucker Max in my career, which is both a positive and a negative. A lot of people don't have positive associations with him, understandably, if you read some of the stories. *(laughter)* But for me, it was simply a matter of…how old was I, 25? I kept getting forwarded these stories. This was pre-Twitter. I didn't even know what

social media was back then. You'd just get these e-mails of these stories that were funny, so you'd have to read them. It just seemed like something a lot of people would want to read.

So that was one of my first books I ever sent out. The job was so hard back then. You'd write these cover letters when you sent something out, and that cover letter took me two weeks. Now it takes me ten minutes, but it was just trying to get every sentence right, trying to describe why you thought this could work. I had twenty rejections, and I was going out to these editors who had done these legendary, edgy books. I was like, "This is what people will read, I promise you. This is a new way of doing this." And I couldn't get anyone to take it. Finally, I got one offer for $30,000, which was a huge thing in my life. I had to split it with my boss, $2000 of it went to credit card debt, it was a huge thing. I called Tucker up, who himself was broke at the time, and I said, "Dude, a fuckin' offer, $30,000 from Warner Books, it's all gonna happen!" Tucker said, "How much is it?" I said, "$30,000." He said, "You tell them to go fuck themselves." *(laughter)* I said, "No no, you don't get it, it's all about getting the offer, and we'll get the money in the back end." And he said, "Byrd, shut the fuck up. If I want to be treated like a Haitian boat person, I'll go to Haiti." *(laughter)* That was his quote. My first offer. I had to go walk around the block like six times just to deal with my depression after that.

But I didn't end it with him. I didn't be like, "I don't ever want to talk to you again." Eventually, when I was at this agency called Inkwell, a very successful agency, they've done *Thug Kitchen* and all these other huge books, an editor called, who I did the panel with, Jeremy, he said, "Let me get on the phone with them. I've got a $7000 offer." He was at this romance publisher called Kensington. I'm just gonna keep telling the story even though it's boring, I apologize. Kensington is essentially a romance publisher. I said, "Jeremy, there's no way that he is gonna take a $7000 deal from a romance publisher. I'm sorry that this is where your career has ended, but I can't help you." He said, "Just get me on the phone with him." And he talked Tucker Max into taking a $7000 offer. And that book sold two million copies.

It changed my whole life. It gave me a niche. It gave me something I could point to, which as a literary agent you're desperate for. You get hooked on being kind of counter to the staid literary aspect of book publishing. I read those books, I enjoy them. That is the real talent, in many ways, is literary geniuses that write those books. But for me, book publishing is a broad canvas, and I can kind of inhabit my corner where I'm looking at everyone else saying, "I'm gonna prove to you, I'm gonna sell books to people who don't buy many books. I'm gonna prove that these people will read." And that was what Tucker Max kind of did, because people were buying his books who buy one book a year.

AC: Yeah, I read somewhere you saying that you've gotta find the people who buy only one book, but they all buy that one book.

BL: And they talk about it.

AC: And they talk about it, and that's a big deal.

BL: Yeah. I remember there was this one tweet, I did this book called *Total Frat Move*, who are these guys out of Texas. You have to get used to my career. I see you laughing. This one guy's tweet was, "So proud to announce I just bought my first book of my whole life, *Total Frat Move*." No awareness of the fact he should have any shame about the fact he just bought his first book at 25. *(laughing)*

AC: Was there anything else you learned from that first bestseller? I think publishing sometimes sort of says, "Well, this is the kind of person who buys a book," or "this is who our reader is for this particular publisher." And as an agent, is it sort of trying to figure out a way to convince them there are other ways to do it? Or just knowing where that market is?

BL: I think that certainly…I'm trying to figure out how I should answer that. What my job is so often these days is, and I say it in this kind of dark way that's not necessarily true, is even if you have the most crystallized, perfect vision for a book now, in the year 2015, going out to book publishers with that idea without anything to point to that you have done and has hit a nerve or created any sort of response isn't enough. It's just where it is. Especially with humor. You have to have shown that what you've done has produced a response. If you can marry those two together, "I did this and now I have this crystallized, perfect idea," then you have a conversation going, and then I can get you a book deal. If you have one but not the other, it doesn't work. Does that answer your question?

AC: With humor, I don't know if it's true or not, there's a story about an author who, when he saw books of other authors who he didn't like on shelves, he would hide them in the Humor section, because he felt like no one would go there.

BL: It's true. It's always by the bathroom.

AC: Yeah, and there is sometimes that feeling that humor books come out and just kind of flop. When we talked in the fall, there was a real idea of a platform for a humorist or a comedian. Can you talk a little bit about that?

BL: Absolutely. And just to lead into that, with humor, I tend to rail against this kind of idea that humor books are a lesser sub-species. It irks me. Why is making someone laugh have to always defer to making someone cry? That always bothers me. It may be that I've been to one too many big book parties where people sniff when I say *Shit My Dad Says*. Fuck you, dude! Over a million copies in one year. Excuse me, my insecurities are coming out onstage. *(laughter)* Sorry. But to your…ask me one more time?

AC: Well, the idea of a platform. I know that with Jeremie Ruby Strauss, he said quality was job three, which I thought was kind of funny.

BL: Yeah, that's classic Jeremie. "Show me the numbers."

AC: Yeah, how much have you sold and how famous are you?

BL: So much of what I do, just to go back to my previous comment, is about talking about that platform, and about how they built it, and how they're gonna leverage it into presales and everything along those lines. It's a huge part of the pitch. I'm sorry, I'm not…

AC: Well, with, say, *Shit My Dad Says*, that was a Twitter feed that you were aware of, because you were sort of instrumental in shepherding that along. Were you on the lookout? Were you searching Twitter, looking for people?

BL: So that's a larger part of what I say often in things like this, and I said this in New York, I get these queries. There's still this kind of mindset where, if you want to get your book published, you query a literary agent. That's not necessarily wrong, but I said this about Mike Sacks's book as well, but we don't really read them. I have like 8000 queries. It's really a terrible thing, because it's not my mindset. I go look. I don't search through people who have found me. I can only imagine the good books I missed out on. I wake up in the middle of the night just sweating. But beyond that, what you can do now, and I'm old, how old am I, 36? What you can do now, it's such a better way to have literary agents come to you, is use what's out there to build an audience. Just go on any form of social media, but you see it if you're good at it, and you're able to work the system in the right way, then people show up, and your numbers grow, and then among those people that show up, maybe you get one article.

We have this one client that I just signed named Marissa Ross. She was doing these Youtube videos about wine, and it was an accessible approach. She would get on camera, and she was really funny. She was very accessible in her videos. Didn't even have a lot of views, but they were so good that someone at *New York Magazine* saw them and did an interview with her, and then she had like eight offers from literary agents. And then we got her. She's still kind of a build. Her numbers aren't quite there. But even with one *New York Magazine* profile and a good proposal that we helped her write, we'll go get her a book deal. That was someone who did it her way, as opposed to just sending out fifty e-mails to literary agents. Because she didn't want to write a book, but she chose that platform.

AC: Can you talk us through the idea of a book proposal, particularly for humor? I think people think about a novel, where if it's your first novel, traditionally you write it, it's done, you send it to an agent, and one of their readers gets to it, and maybe they like it, or maybe they don't. Can you tell us a little bit about how a humor book proposal works?

BL: Yeah. Well, I think the basic truth is that most humor books aren't actually funny, which is why that section's near the bathroom. So I'm always trying to actually do books that make you laugh. It's the most basic thing of how I do my job. If I'm reading it and it makes me laugh, then I'm immediately interested in that person. If I'm laughing at my desk working, and no matter how much you love your job it's still a job…With humor

book proposals, what I do, it almost always follows the same boilerplate. I'm gonna just say this, and I don't want to be too micro, but I'll go through it. It's a very simple process. It's a two-page overview. "Here's my book, here is who I am, here's why you should give a shit." You have to realize with these editors at these publishing houses, you can never reverse-engineer it enough. Everyone thinks their own book proposal is a special and beautiful thing, that people are gonna care about, and once you get to the reality of corporate book publishing, that editor got forty proposals that week, and they're just trying to find one book to get excited about that they can buy. You have to go in knowing that. That's why some people write 80-page proposals. I tell my clients to write 15-page proposals. Keep it short, keep it tight, and then talk about what matters, which is why your book will actually work, and will show why you are actually funny.

So the proposal itself: overview, quick author bio, chapter outline, comparison titles—and that's actually a really important thing, because comparison titles show that you have an understanding of where your book fits in the marketplace, and it shows that you've engaged with the marketplace, and you're not making this all about your dream of being a writer. Instead, it's all about showing that there's a place for this book, which is all the publisher really cares about. At the end of the process, if you've gotten them, what you're gonna do is they're gonna pull up a profit-and-loss statement, and they're gonna type in the sales for the comp titles that they think your book compares to, and if those comp titles are big, then you're gonna get a big advance. So it's about getting them to see it in that way. That's the marketing. Beyond that, the proposal section, which could be five to ten pages, you have your sample material. That's where you kill it. It's where you don't hold back, and you just really bring it, and you do something that blows them out of their chairs, because that's how you get 'em.

AC: So a sample chapter, really funny chapter?

BL Yeah, really funny chapters. I tend to push people toward the start of the book. It's the mindset of having read the start of the book, and then having to stop. It creates this mindset that you want to pay the author to read the rest of it. But the flipside of that is, a lot of people that I sign as clients, I just say, "Let's just write some funny stories." You can get too far into these stories…

AC: So a standalone…

BL: Yes, exactly.

AC: And when you say "comparison titles," would you literally just do a graph, or just a couple of paragraphs saying, "It's like *Shit My Dad Says*"?

BL: Yeah. A proposal is a conversation with an editor. People want to say, "Oh, it's *The Da Vinci Code* meets blah blah blah," and no one cares. Everyone uses *The Da Vinci Code*. If that were true, everyone's book would sell ten million copies. You have to actually use comparison titles that tell the story about where your book fits. It's good to

be creative about it, but let's say you use two or three books that have worked, and you show why your book would work even more than those have in a believable way.

AC: And do you stay in contact with your authors while they're working on the manuscript for a humor book?

BL: Totally.

AC: And what's that relationship like?

BL: People imagine agents wearing a suit, and forgive me because I am wearing a suit, but beyond that, the word "agent" tends to have a negative connotation, I think. I think when someone's onstage at some award show and they thank their agent, inside you're always cringing a little bit. But the relationship is, my clients are my friends. I don't have many. I really enjoy the creative process a lot. Any of you ever heard of the Instagram feed The Fat Jewish? So he's got a book coming out in October that is fucking hilarious. The language is OK, right?

AC: Oh, yeah!

BL: OK.

AC: You get fined if you *don't* swear! (*laughter)*

BL: I have no filter. I have a client writing the book with him that I use for a lot of my humor books because he's so good, he and his brother. We're just writing the stories together. They send me a draft, I'll edit it and I'll send it back to him and he'll edit it. It's the best part of my job, I really enjoy that.

AC: How important do you think that is in comedy? You mentioned once that Tucker Max will send out material to twenty friends or people while he's getting ready to finalize a manuscript. Is it a case-by-case basis? Or do you think generally, for comedy, it needs to see the air and get a lot of eyes to the page?

BL: I think so. I think it matters who you're sending it to, because you can get bad advice as much as good. Writing is such an interesting thing, because it's such a reflexive process. It's just you and the computer screen. You're just trying to figure out this very difficult art. Beyond that, I think having this feedback from seeing what's working and what's not is tremendously useful. When I edit, I'm no grammarian. I'm not putting the commas in the right places. It's much more about "This reads well, this doesn't read well." My main edit of my client's work is that I just write "kerplunk," which means "bad joke." I just find all the jokes that don't work. Because one bad joke will ruin a page. What you'll find with a lot of humor writing is that people are always going for too many jokes, and then trying to create the laughs in their prose, which I'm not in favor of. I think you create the laughs in the actions. I think that's really key. I think if you're trying to have the perfect line that gets people laughing from your descriptions, it's very difficult. I

think that instead, if you're describing a scene or something, it's making people laugh. That's where the humor is.

AC: Yeah. It does seem like a lot of successful humor books revolve around family or friends who are like a family. Tucker Max's first book, his friends were like a little weird dysfunctional family.

BL: Totally dysfunctional.

AC: *Shit My Dad Says* has a sort of family thing going on. All of David Sedaris's most successful work comes out of family. Do you think that's true generally speaking, or are those just a couple of exceptions?

BL: I think the main thing is all good humor has a heart. That's what I've been telling my clients, is it has to have pathos. It's true, it does. It has to have that. If you don't have the substance, it's just glib. You're not ever gonna do that well. So I'm always trying to push my clients toward whatever the relationships are. *Shit My Dad Says* was a love letter to his dad with curse words. That was why America loved that book. And also, by the time it went up on Amazon, it was like six dollars. Amazon's using it as a loss leader so you buy your vacuum cleaner there. It's an amazing thing. He's still making the same amount of money, and everyone else is buying that book for six dollars. It's amazing. My point is that even with a book like Josh the Fat Jew's book, I'm pushing him, like "Why don't we actually make your brother not a cardboard cutout? Let's make him a real person. Or your grandfather." Give the reader these touch points so they actually give a shit about you, as opposed to just trying to make them laugh all the time. We're talking about Tucker Max's friends, that's his family, because his own family is so terrible, you wouldn't even believe it, which is why he is who he is. You know what I mean? That's such an important thing for all my clients. You've gotta include that, or else you're limiting what your reach is.

AC: Great. Maybe we have time for a question. There might be one right now. *(to audience)* Anybody yet? Yes, Dion.

Audience member: What did you read growing up?

BL: That's a good question. The real answer to that is I read Stephen King. I read a lot of stuff, but I worshipped the ground he walked on. I read everything twice. In high school, I read *The Stand* three times. That's the first thing I always think of. I read a lot of stuff, but he was like my guy. Of course I read the classics and things like that, but there wasn't a lot of humor. I don't even know what you would read back then that was humor, you know? He's

AC: There was *National Lampoon* and *Spy Magazine*…

BL: But I was in redneck Virginia. We didn't have that stuff. For me, I always loved to read. That was always my thing, which is why I think I ended up in book publishing. We

had television with two channels I wasn't allowed to watch, and I just read all the time. In retrospect, that was the best thing my parents ever did for me. I should have a better answer than that, but really that's the first thing I think of. I loved Stephen King.

AC: What do you like to read now?

BL: I like to read literary fiction. That's really what I like to read. I just read *The Bone Clocks* by David Mitchell, which is totally amazing. I could keep going. *The Goldfinch*, amazing.

AC: So you have the humor at work, and then for relaxation…

BL: Yeah, we were saying this at dinner last night. I find that for me, it's really important to be reading fiction all the time. I'm overly involving you in my life, none of you will learn anything from this. *(laughter)* For me personally, I really find that working in book publishing, if I'm reading great books, then I'm inspired to do my job. Not that there aren't great books within the commercial stuff that I do, but I really enjoy reading the kind of literary side of things and really getting into it. Great sci-fi, things like that. There's this great guy Patrick Lee, you guys should read him. *The Breach*, it's an amazing series.

AC: *(to audience)* Is there another one out there? Not yet. *(to Leavell)* Do you find that the Kindles and the scalability of publishing is gonna be a really good thing, in terms of the future of humor? I know that about two years everybody was saying, "I'll do my Amazon Single as a humorist, and I'll cash in on my seventy percent of everything." It hasn't quite worked out that way. Humor still hasn't really…

BL: I do have one really successful Kindle Single writer, Mishka Shubaly. He's not really humor, he's more of a tortured, 6'6 brooding Russian. (*laughter*) But he did a book, he's done a bunch of Kindle singles, and he did a book called *The Long Run* that was about him being a crazy drug addict, alcoholic, and then just running a hundred miles a day, and that transition. The good thing about the Kindle single is that it teaches you to write in under 30,000 words, which is a real art, to do that well. He leveraged that. He was one of the most-read Kindle single authors, and he had a great deal from Public Affairs, and he's writing his memoir now. So it is possible to go from one to the next.

With humor itself, what I talk a lot about is that what you have to remember is that no one cares. If you are writing a Kindle single, it's all just about finding an avenue, a pathway to eyeballs, getting people to engage with your material. If you put it up as a Kindle Single, why is that any better than putting it out anywhere else? In the end, how does anyone know about it? Here you guys are at this amazing program, and you're learning how to refine your craft and hopefully point it in the right direction. It's also about starting from the understanding that you need to find ways to get it out there. The Kindle Single can be a way, but it's just another way among many, I think.

AC: It used to be that people who ended up doing books start out doing a lot of magazine work, and that's how they kind of learned how to do a 3000 word story and work with editors, and that could lead to a book. And now with magazines having issues, to put it mildly, that apprenticeship for the writer is gone. It seems like Kindle singles are taking up some of that, but the problem that's missing is the editor. I don't know what you see with the submissions or the stuff that you're looking at, but so many people aren't getting that traditional experience of working with editors over years to learn how to write. They're self-publishing, which is fine…

BL: Yeah, but the quality's less.

AC: It's 6000 words, and there's almost no interest in the reader because there's only one or two. Do you find there's a way that writers can go out and look for editors, or is that just sort of gone, and you just have to find friends who are good readers and hope they can give you feedback?

BL: That's a really good question, and I don't really know the answer to it. The thing you run into is that everyone everywhere is desperate for content. We live in a content-driven world, and people are desperate to pay for it, and you have *Business Insider* or *Forbes* and these other websites where their mindset is to put everything up, and then they see what works, which is why I think this is a great program, because it's teaching you how to not suck, basically to be good at what you do. If you are good at it, and you go to places like that, then you'll see the numbers, because you're so much better than anyone else that's writing this 6000-word drivel. I don't know the answer to the question, but editors are interesting, because where else can you find someone to teach you?

AC: Well, you must have someone where you say, "OK, that's the right editor for this project." Editors are quite unique. They're almost as unique as writers, really, right?

BL: Oh, totally. Within book publishing? Yeah. Book publishing is an interesting world. There are certainly positives and negatives about it. Because of that apprenticeship that you go through where you don't make any money for so long, it does have its issues about diversity and things like that. For a lot of people, it's a long time to wait. Beyond that, what I love about publishing, in terms of the editors, is that it's in many ways a thankless job to be an editor in corporate publishing in 2015. You go to these endless meetings all day long, and you're just supposed to edit on your free time, and it's just a lot of bureaucracy.

But beyond that, within that kind of Bartleby the Scrivener soul-destroying world are these really driven, impressive, brilliant people, and the people I work with are people that want to fuck with the system—Ben Greenberg at Grand Central. Jeremy's, I shouldn't say this, I'm being recorded, but he's lost his edge a little bit, I think. He's not as aggressive as he used to be, and I'm always teasing him for it, like "Dude, why are you rejecting this? This is what we do!" But the point is, there are great editors out there where, when I call them up, we have these really long phone conversations about how we're gonna do these really edgy humor books that are gonna work, and they're so

excited by that, that we're gonna do something that's different and better and show people that these books can work.

AC: Do you find that publishers look at a big hit like…how did Lena Dunham's book do? Did it do alright?

BL: Well, I'm sure everyone in this room has an opinion about her. I haven't read it, so I have to be careful about my words. I do watch *Girls,* and I think it just had its best season yet, I'll say that. I didn't like the other seasons, but I was into it. The thing about that book is, she got a huge advance, and it got out, and it became another way for people to hate on Lena Dunham, which is unfortunate, because then people aren't reading it with an unbiased eye. They're like, "This is a four million dollar book, and I hate Lena Dunham because I don't have four million dollars." That's unfair. What I always tell my clients, I wish they got four million dollar advances, is don't let the money get out.

AC: In television, it used to be that one *Seinfeld* made up for all the pilots that didn't go, one big hit. And I'm wondering if that's still the case with humor publishing, where as long as you have one huge book like, I guess, Amy Poehler's book…

BL: It's done very well, yeah.

AC: That's a current example of that, paying for all the other ones that don't really hit or connect with an audience. Her advance did get out, and it did have an effect, I think, on how her audience embraced that book.

BL: That's right. They won't make money on that one. They would've had to maintain a rate of sale for that that would've had to have been really high for a really long time, and it hasn't done that. Amy Poehler's has, but this is another thing about book publishing. I have this map in my office, and it's a map of the United States *and* Canada, *(laughter)* and beneath it it just says "The Waxman Leavell Target Audience." *(laughter)* And instead of Manhattan, it says "Overly Focused-Upon Tiny Island." Because everyone in New York thinks we're the center of the universe, and that's a classic…the *Girls* advance, that's what drives me crazy. *Girls*' viewership is not very high. Compared to, like, *CSI:Miami* and the 400 billion people that watch that show, twelve people watch *Girls*. All right?

But New York, with its whole different mindset, because Lena Dunham wrote an article in *The New Yorker,* gave her four million dollars. And that book was doomed from the start, because America doesn't give a shit about Lena Dunham. Not on that level. America loves Amy Poehler. *Parks and Recreation* is a nationally syndicated show, and she's out there and she's lovable, and she and Tina Fey with the national elections and "bitches get shit done." She speaks to women, and people love her. The editor who did Amy Poehler's book, Amy Thorn at Harper Collins, is completely terrific, and she and I will go out to lunch, and she's from Virginia also, and sometimes we just feel like we're these two people in publishing just trying to do books that actually reach outside Manhattan. That's her mindset as well, just to try not to get sucked down this whirlpool

of self-congratulatory Manhattan-ness, and instead do books that people in another part of the country want to buy.

AC: So if you're a writer, stay away from Manhattan? Is there somewhere else that's cheaper?

BL: Well, no, I love Manhattan, I've lived there for fifteen years. You just can't forget, and you've gotta get off the island occasionally and see the rest of the world. I love coming up here and seeing Toronto for a day, it's nice for me. Just to get out of it and remember that it is just a very tiny place and not the center of the universe.

AC: There's another aspect of humor writing that doesn't get covered much, which is ghostwriting. There's a person who's got a high level of celebrity or profile, and they're gonna do a book, but they're not necessarily a writer. Is there any advice you'd give to someone who'd love to try to do a bit of ghostwriting?

BL: Totally. Being good at that and having a literary agent you're connected with can be a very lucrative career. Right now I have three guys that are just really, really good at it, and they do great book proposals. Nils Parker, who originally wrote some of Tucker Max's books, he worked with Tucker, and he's just such a pleasure to work with. So someone will float me a Youtube celebrity who can't write her way out of a paper bag, but she has numbers, and she has a story to tell, and she's trying to figure the book out. And I can just connect her with Nils, and he'll come back to me with this full-formed, amazing idea, and we'll work together, and the book proposal will be very easy, and then we'll go out and get a big advance, because we're giving them a book that makes sense.

I also have two brothers, David Oliver Cohen and Tanner Cohen, they have a Twitter feed called White Girl Problems. They were going around meeting literary agents, and all these literary agents were like, "You should do a book of White Girl Problems," and when they met me I was like, "We should actually take this…" Sorry, I'm telling the story in a way where I sound amazing. (I said) "You should take this Twitter feed and actually make it a person, and then write a real book that people actually want to read." That's always what I say to my clients. "Let's make a real book, let's not just make a bad humor book that leverages this small thing you've done into small book sales." So we created Babe Walker, and then we wrote her memoir, and we sold it to Hyperion, and then it sold like 250,000 copies, and then the next book called *Psychos*, they got a new book deal from Simon and Schuster, it comes out next year. Because Babe Walker has become a best-selling novelist, and most people who buy her books don't know that Babe Walker isn't even real.

AC: Really?

BL: Yeah. It's fascinating what you can do these days. The important thing also with David and Tanner now is that they're so great, they're working on the Fat Jewish book, and they wrote a book called *Dirty Rush* that we did under the name of a woman named

Taylor Bell, who doesn't exist. Once I have these people I have a really good working relationship with, I just staff them everywhere.

AC: Can you tell us a little bit about the Goldman Sachs book, what it is and how that's coming about?

BL: Never lie to *The New York Times.* Just write that down. So he started a Twitter feed, there was this one Twitter feed called Conde Nast Elevator, and he saw that, and he had worked in banking in Hong Kong, and so he created a Goldman Sachs Elevator, which was just making fun of the douchebaggery of wealthy finance bros. It was just a huge hit. It became a phenomenon in the industry and outside the industry. And right when it hit, he did an interview with the *New York Times* blog, and the guy asked him if he ever worked at Goldman Sachs, and he was trying to cover his tracks, so he said, "Yes, I worked at Goldman." And then, after we did a huge book deal for him, he was outed after the book deal as never having worked at Goldman. And *The New York Times* decided that this was a representation of moral decay of society, and they had to destroy this guy, which they then did over three editorials. When you're on that side of things, and you see people get all indignant about everything in the world, and you're the one getting the phone calls, it's sobering. It makes you feel bad for the people who go through that, because you realize that the huge backlash in the media is often not based in anything true whatsoever.

Because this guy was just doing a funny Twitter feed. It was clearly farce. And the book was 100% nonfiction and was very true, and we never lied in the book at all. After a very intense week, we lost his book deal. On a very personal level, I lost $45,000. That's a lot of money! I shouldn't say that. We should delete that off this. *(laughter)* Then what happened, which was totally amazing, was this editor at Grove Atlantic who worked for Morgan Entrekin, who is a legend, one of the reasons I love being in book publishing, he did *American Psycho*, he's old-school in all the right ways. They reached out and they essentially bought low. We agreed on an advance. They were one of the only publishers left, and now the book comes out in July, and it's totally amazing. It's like turn-your-hair-white. He's standing up and just saying everything he's ever done that's truly terrible, and you can't stop reading it, both in terms of financial improprieties and moral improprieties, and of being male in Hong Kong in your twenties. It's gonna be a hit, I can't wait for that to happen, to succeed after so much pain. I'm already assuming it's gonna be a success, because apparently it's the most sought-after book you can't buy yet on Amazon. When you hear something like that, you know you've got a runner that's gonna work.

AC: Is Amazon, for an aspiring author, the affordable research and development department as to what's of interest or what's selling?

BL: Yeah. It's fascinating. If you follow the rankings, you can see what people are buying in relation to other things. They have all these algorithms that we don't know. But just from a purely resource level, you can see when something is moving the needle, just through that ranking. And people always want to ask about the rankings. "Oh my God,

they went from 800,000 to 400,000! What does that mean?" I say, "Well, it means you sold four books." A lot of the time, the causation is not that dramatic, but when you see someone go into the top hundred on Amazon or top ten, then that's someone who has a real pull with their fan base, just by announcing their book they sold thousands of copies. If they can do that, then you're on your way.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* Uh, yeah, Joe, and then in the back. Oh, OK, yeah, sure.

Audience member: I was wondering, you were talking about Kindle Singles. If an author had everything you were looking for from a proposal, but then they're already had a Kindle Single made, would that decrease their value as far as getting an advance?

BL: No. Especially if the Kindle Single is good, then that's only a positive. You don't have to succeed on all platforms to be exciting. If you just succeed on one platform, then the Kindle Single becomes another part of the conversation you're having with whoever you're speaking to. Does that answer your question? I feel like it's unfair that I have the microphone. "Does that answer your question???" *(laughter)*

Audience member: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about online platforms like Cracked.com or CollegeHumor.com.

BL: Yeah, those are great ways up these days, because those people need writers, and most writers they do have are terrible. That's not fair, actually, for *Cracked*. I've done a lot of book deals for *Cracked* writers, and the numbers for *Cracked* are crazy. One guy, I have, he's got 80 million views a month on his pieces. It's true. There are ways into those places. With some kind of chutzpah and sending the right thing to the right person, I think they're very accessible, because they're all desperate for people that can write. These guys down in Texas that I represent, because I like poking fun at fraternities, because I was in one. I hate to even admit that these days, they're apparently the source of all evil in our society. But beyond that, they run the Total Frat Move website that gets a gazillion views, and they're desperate for writers. They're desperate for them. They'll e-mail me and ask, "Is there anyone you can suggest we can pay to write for us?" So there are sites like that now. You just have to find the right one and find the right way to approach them.

AC: *(to audience)* Was there another? Tanis, yes.

Audience member: This is kind of the same question. A lot of the people here are doing standup. What would be a progression from standup to writing a book?

BL: That's a good question. I went through a phase in my career where I spent a lot of time in comedy clubs listening to good and bad standup, and I'd go up to these guys afterwards, give them my card and try to work that world. I get so much energy out of that. I think it's so amazing that people get up onstage and do that. It's a really remarkable thing. It comes back to how I kind of crassly started this about having a platform., right? With standup, I think one way to answer that question is that when you see really successful comedians like the Jim Gaffigans of the world, A, they're getting a

gazillion dollars for book advances, and B, they're just taking their standup material and putting it into their book, and it's working. It's really this refined thing that they've worked on again and again and again in front of a live audience. What could be better than that? So that's one aspect of it, is that when you do make it and you have this material, it works really well for a book. But beyond that, going from doing standup in various comedy clubs to a book deal, you've just gotta keep working it until you have things to point to. But the other thing also in the end is that it's about the quality of the material. I don't mean to focus too much on platform. If you're a standup comedian and you've got a couple things to point to, and you've got famous people to blurb your material, and you go to agent with these really good twenty to thirty pages you've poured your heart and soul into that you've refined in front of a live audience, that's a very impressive package. That's not a guarantee it's gonna get you an offer from an agent or a deal, but it's certainly a lot better than most of the things that person's gonna see that day. Does that help?

AC: *(to audience)* Uh, yep, Brett, and then Rob.

Audience member: You were saying that you're always looking for an edgy book that will go against the grain and get people's attention. Do you think a humor book needs some kind of edginess to get people's attention?

BL: That's a good question. I don't think so. When I think of edge, I think that's one form of humor. Now humor by definition has to press some buttons to illicit a response, but I think that as someone who, after doing Tucker Max, has had so many queries, like, "Dude, I banged so many girls, you gotta do my book," I just wanna kill myself. *(laughter)* That's not a world I want to pursue anymore. I never want to do those books again. *(laughter)* But there are so many forms of edge. I think that with *Shit My Dad Says*, there are so many curse words in that, but done in a certain way. That kind of was its own form of edge. I think that with the *White Girl Problems* books, I think one thing that's underestimated, certainly on our side, on the supply side of publishing, is women's comfort level with R-rated material. I think you see it in films, but within publishing, certainly within humor, I think the one thing I like about these Babe Walker books and other books like them is that she's so in-your-face about who she is in this new way, and I think there's room for a lot more of that. That's another kind of edge. I could keep going on that and not really answer your question, but I like the edge, but I think there are so many different ways of creating a response.

AC: Sure. *(to audience)* Robbie?

BL: Great material. That's another path to greatness. You know what I mean? It's not just set in the way where you have to have 300,000 Instagram followers. The teeter-totter's not in your favor, but you can totally make it work. I firmly believe that most material on the web is poor, and especially humor. It's not actually funny. When you do put good material up, and you put it up in a creative way…this is not really humor, but a client I wish I represented, but I don't, is Hyperbole and a Half. She (Allie Brosh) did stick figures, and wrote the most powerful post I've ever seen about her depression, and

just nailed it. It had something like 6, 7 million views, and then she did a book that was a huge success. That was someone who just found her own way with clip art to tell her story. She didn't have big numbers, I don't really think, until she put up that depression piece.

AC: (*to audience*) Andrew, you had a question?

Audience member: What would you say is a common mistake that new writers make that you see?

BL: A common mistake that new writers make…I would say approaching a professional too early is one thing. Don't make your move until you're ready, until you've really refined your craft, and you've built your numbers up as high as you can. If you go out early, then you're just gonna get forty rejections, and you're gonna be depressed, and you're gonna give up. So it's better to wait and just stay within your own unit, and just kind of get good, and then make your move. That's one thing I think about. I think a lot of people go too soon.

AC: There's been a lot written about the end of the midlist author, so to speak, which is someone who's not selling a bestseller all the time, but who's making enough money to stay in it and learn. I think of John Irving, who said that if he was publishing now, he never would have got to *The World According to Garp*, because he was a midlist author for many years. Do you think that's in fact happening, and what kind of pressure is that on a first-time humorist if their book doesn't sell immediately? Is it boom, done, see you in ten years?

BL: I also read *The World According to Garp*, and I love that book.

AC: That's why I brought it up.

BL: That's a good question. Part of my job, this is part of what you're asking, is when I have an author whose book hasn't work, and you're having a conversation with them about, "What do I do now?" And it's a difficult conversation to have, because most books don't work. Can you keep going? There are a couple answers to that. One is that in the world today, writers are not as dependent on book publishers in general. One difficulty that happens is with agents now, where you go to a really successful self-published author, and you say, "Let's do this, let's go to blah blah blah," and the author may be a *New York Times* best-selling author, someone who's making a ton of money, 70% of every sale of their own book self-publishing it on Amazon or in other ways, and they don't care about book publishing. "I made $300,000 dollars this month. What are you gonna offer me?" And that's a very difficult question to answer. "Uhhhhh…I'm wearing a suit?" *(laughter)*

What we do have to offer is the X factor, the airport bookstores, the distribution. This is kind of a roundabout answer to your question, but with these midlist authors, to me, to a certain extent, that indicates too strong of a reliance on book publishing in

general, right? Because if you've tried one way and maybe it hasn't quite worked for you or your audience, you haven't found your audience, with book publishing sometimes you're gonna have four editors, because there's turnover and you have some 22 year old publicist who's chewing gum on the phone and has no idea how to break your book. It can be a very dark thing, being published, especially in the middle. Then just find other ways, because there are other ways to get your books out there. It's difficult, and it's a battle, but you can then go a totally different way and have your book work, and then come right back to book publishing and get another huge advance. One good thing about non-fiction is that your book deal is your next great idea away. You can always reinvent yourself a little bit. If your sales weren't good but you have something else to point to for your next one, a lot of times you can get a book deal. As a novelist, in some ways it's the same thing. Inevitably, as a novelist, your sales are going to fall. It's the darkness of this BookScan program, is the reality of the world we live in now…

AC: Can you tell everybody what BookScan is?

BL: Sure. In book publishing in 2000, there was no such thing as BookScan, so these agents could just bullshit their way through everything, because no one knew how many sales any book actually had. But now, there's a program that everyone has. When you type in the book, it immediately shows how many print, they don't have electronic sales, they're not really with the current world, but you could see how many books it sold in print. And there's no way around that. So with a novelist, f the last book sold a thousand copies, then they have to be able to really make a very compelling case for why their next book is not gonna sell a thousand copies. And you can do that with quality. You can say, "It's so good that it changes the conversation," but the best place you can ever be in to go to publishers is to have it be your debut. Then you're just as pure as the virgin snow, and you can just say, "This book's gonna sell a million copies," and there's no evidence out there to disprove that.

AC: What are some of the misconceptions authors have about what a publisher can do for them, do you think?

BL: My clients, when I talk to them, I say, "Let's start with the expectation that your publisher's not gonna do anything for you, and let's work from there." Especially on the publicity and marketing front. The good thing about a lot of my clients is that, by definition of what I do for a living and how I do it, a lot of them already have a certain level of platform, right? So they have a certain ability to move copies on their own. So you start from that. And then it becomes this kind of team approach with the publicist and the marketing person and the other people your publisher is gonna start bringing in on these conference calls to lay out their plan for how they're gonna break your book. I'll get off the calls, and then we'll get on a private line, and I'll either say, "Well, that actually sounds like someone who's creative and driven and is actually gonna have a really good idea for breaking this book out," or "That someone who just read from the same list they've read for all of those calls for the last five years, and nothing good's ever gonna happen." And you have to actually know that going in, and operate within whatever you're getting back from your publisher, right? Because again, it's up to you to

make your book work. It's not up to your publisher. It's up to you, if you have a publicist and a marketing person, to essentially use them as interns. "All right, here's the address, here's the name." Mike Sacks is amazing at this. "Send it out, here's the letter that I wrote for this person, please put it in the book." You have to do all of that, which is shitty when you're a writer, and you then have to be everything to everyone in the whole world. It's unfair for me to say that, but that's where it is now. You can't just write a great book and then expect the publisher to be good at their job, because it's a corporate bureaucratic nightmare. Sorry.

AC: *(to audience)* Uh, yeah, right back there.

Audience member: So now, with technology, there are a lot of e-books. Does that change the way you publish something other than, let's say, paperback novels?

BL: Yeah, well with e-books, here's why I love e-books. Someone's like, "Oh, you gotta read blah blah blah blabbity blah," and I'm like, "OK, boop boop boop, I just bought it for $10." Didn't have to go to a bookstore, I bought it on my phone. And then I come back to my clients, the *White Girl Problems* people, and they have huge Apple sales, because all of these girls are just buying it on their iPhones. It's amazing. You can see the ratio. Unlike the music industry, that just had to totally shift how it does everything, because now all the artists make all their money from live performances, because Spotify pays you three cents for 14 million plays, publishing has dodged that so far. If we don't dodge it, I'm gonna have to figure out a new profession, and it's gonna be very tricky, because it would change. Amazon has this program now they're pushing where it's a subscription-based model. You pay $15 or $20 a month and get access to 10,000 books. If something like that catches on, I'm fucked, because then authors aren't being paid per copy sold anymore. They're getting it out of a pot, and inevitably that's nothing. So that's a threat. I really hope that doesn't happen, because I really like doing this job, but beyond that, e-books are an amazing thing, because people are buying them, they're reading them, it's just another way of consuming the content.

AC: Do you think that with humor, people are exploiting them, in terms of, I know there are e-books now that come with a soundtrack, right, where you can listen to music that the author's chosen?

BL: Yeah, as someone who's tried to push forward on various levels, whenever I get something that's creative like that, I just shut down. I've had pitches like that, and I just don't…I think being too far ahead of the curve is its own form of failure. I think that there are people who are trying to get really creative, but I don't think people want to read like that yet. Maybe they will down the line. I don't. I just want to read the book.

AC: *(to audience)* Sorry, is there another one? *(to Leavell)* Is it hard for you to keep up on the different technologies, like Snapchat and all that kind of stuff?

BL: It is.

AC: You're on the curve with Twitter, and blogging with Tucker Max.

BL: Yeah. I feel old. I feel like they have all these young agents coming up now who are just more and more tapped into that, and it's difficult for me to kind of stay on it all. I want to. Like Wattpad. I would love to be able to tap into Wattpad. I think it's a fascinating place. As an agent, you have to be positioned where you get the most successful books. There's an agent who represents the *Fifty Shades of Grey* (author). Think about what that means. That agent read that novel on a fanfic place, and that's where she was. I think it's a she. And that agent has $20 million. That's crazy. That's an amazing thing. And it's just not a world that I exist in, and I want to be around stuff like that. So mainly what I do now is I hire young agents and then hope they go figure it out and then teach me.

AC: Well, that leads me to a question: there are people who go through the program who then decide they don't want to be onstage, they want to be on the opposite side of writing or whatever. What advice would you give someone now who wants to be an agent, who wants to follow what you've done and get into publishing?

BL: Well, publishing is a penetrable barrier. You see a lot of competition for the jobs that come up, but you can get them. If you push hard, you can get a job in publishing. I'm overly biased, but you people gravitate toward what you want to do, I guess. So if you want to be an editor, go be a great editor. I don't mean to be too dark about corporate publishing, because I know people who really love those jobs still, and there's a safety net there, because you have a salary and a company that's hopefully looking out for you. But being a literary agent, you've gotta be ready for the apprenticeship level of it. You go in and put your time in, and in terms of getting that foot in the door, I think a program like this certainly helps. You've shown that you've refined your craft and dedicated your life to getting better at it.

Beyond that, the best way to get jobs is to have relationships. Now, what you all have now is you've met a literary agent. You can e-mail me down the line and in the subject line, in all caps, you can put "HUMBER COLLEGE-HEARD YOU TALK," and I'll write back. There's a start. It helps to find any way into Manhattan or other ways, if you have a relationship and then you can build off that to get into being a literary agent. Because there aren't a lot of jobs, but they are gettable. Does that answer your question?

AC: Yeah, for sure. And do you think that, in terms of someone who wants to be an editor, you mentioned just go out and edit, but can you just go out and find authors and say, "I'm an editor, let me help you out?" Those are very hard jobs to get. Editing jobs are very coveted at any level.

BL: If you're gonna go to an author and say, "I want to edit (you)…" It's interesting. I guess you can do that if you're good at it. I think in publishing now you have a lot of editors who are burning out and then signing up for freelance, so it's a kind of vague thing, freelancing. But they find ways to make a successful career out of it, because there

are a lot of people who'll pay for that. If you're putting yourself forth as an editor, I guess it's a difficult thing to start on your own.

AC: Most editors work their way up through the different ranks.

BL: And in book publishing, there are a lot of really highly educated, impressive people who go to really impressive schools, and they go take these jobs that don't pay much money, and that's just where it is, because so many people want to work in book publishing. But there are also a lot of cool places out there, literary journals that are getting started and things like that. There are all different ways to do it.

AC: Are there programs you can point to in the States that you think are good? You went through the Radcliffe program…

BL: Radcliffe, which is now the Columbia Publishing Course. No, I think for me that was great. There's a high turnover, a high flow-through of those grads into publishing.

AC: And do you find that's a good chunk, like 2-3 months? We have a program here which I think runs over three or four months, right? Four months? Which seems to be an ideal amount of time for someone who's probably got a degree, and they want to sort of get set and ready to go into the business.

BL: For me, it changed my life, personally, and I would say a much better amount of time to actually learn about the business and figure out where you want to be within it, which is the most useful thing you could really learn. And then ideally, there are a couple of relationships that grow out of a course like that that can at least get you the interview. I think there's one in Denver. For me, I'm a huge proponent of it, which you do see…I came in in 2000, and there were a hundred people in my course. It was like 90 girls and 10 guys. I think fifty of them, let's say, probably got jobs in book publishing, and four years later there were like five of us. It's a dark story in a sense, but I think a lot of people kind of dip their toes in the water and don't like the water, or else just burn out on it. There were some dark years for me trying to get through that time where you're just so tired of not making any money. But then when you do get through it, you get to do this. I love my job.

AC: Was there a book that you really wanted that got away?

BL: It happens all the time.

AC: You don't have to name names…

BL: We call them "bake-offs," or "beauty contests" now. It used to be, when I was coming up, there were only a couple agents who were looking online. There was a stigma around that still, back then. It was me and Kate Lean and Judd Logi, and Kate Lean now runs Medium, the website. But now, I'm fighting tooth and nail against people I met five years ago, these young hungry agents who are always there first, and refine their pitches

to get these people, because I lost a beauty contest for *Thug Kitchen*. It killed me. Any of you know *Thug Kitchen*? Essentially it's a vegan blog with a lot of curse words. "Cook this fuckin' taco," but it works, whatever it is. It just works. You knew there was something really good there, and it felt new, and I had a really great phone call with the people that did it for an hour and a half, I thought we connected on an emotional and physical level *(laughter)*, not physical, that'd be gross. And they went with some young agent at Inkwell, my old agency, and now that book is selling a gazillion copies.

So I look at the Amazon top 100 every day, and I see books.. I lost a beauty contest for, I'm trying to do more health (books) now, and Vani Hari, the Food Babe, it's all about Big Food and the chemicals in your food and blah blah blah, and I just didn't get her, and her book sold 100,000 copies the first week.

AC: What should a writer be aware of if they're meeting with an agent? When you're starting out as a writer, you always think, "Oh, I just want to have a day where I can say, 'I'm having lunch with my agent.'" It sounds good. What should they be aware of when they sit down with an agent, red flags that maybe they're not telling you everything they should, or they're sending you a line?

BL: It's about a personal connection, you know what I mean? Sitting down and talking about the books that you've read, and not orienting everything around this professional thing like "Here's me being myself, blah blah blah." Instead, it's just sitting down and forging a connection with that person, and hopefully having a creative conversation about how you're going to make something special, and that comes back to my point about having a sense…it's not just about your dream of being published. If an agent's picking that up, the agent is pulling away, because it's a wonderful part of our job, that dream does happen, but it's not our job to make that happen. It's more about if you sit down with a writer and the writer shows a really well-informed understanding of the marketplace and has read the comp titles that their book is like and knows what's working and not working. It shows an agent that they can have a creative conversation and they understand what the agent's job is.

AC: What's an appropriate expectation for a writer? I know some writers say, "Well, I e-mailed my agent and he didn't call me right away," or "she didn't e-mail back right away." What's an appropriate expectation? People look at the model for TV or film, where there's so much work, and an agent really is staffing you. They're not your manager, they're putting you in a room, they're attaching you to a project. Publishing is not like that.

BL: Yeah. I think there's a huge divide between West Coast talent agents and those who staff people on shows like that. I have some engagement with those people, and it's just a much different thing. They have a lot of clients. I'm judgey of the West Coast, and I shouldn't be, but a lot of agents just glom onto people and just kind of leverage their commission out of them and not do enough. There are great people out there, but I think there's a lot of that, and I think that within book publishing…what was the question?

AC: Basically, what I should expect. You're an agent, you've got my book. Should I expect you to read everything, call me back all the time?

BL: Ah, right, what to expect. The great thing you can do, really, is have…I think there are a lot of good agents and a lot of terrible book publishing agents. The great thing you can do is have a great young agent that's on their way up, and maybe I'm just talking about the agents we have at our agency, and I might point to me too *(laughter)*, but I think it's because they're totally accessible. They're always going to return every phone call, return every e-mail, read everything you send right away, because they're as hungry as you are. If you get one of these well-established people…I'm still a small fish, but if you get one of the big fish of publishing, then they're just gonna take whatever they can and they're gonna move on, because they're big fish, and that's the way their job is set up at these agencies. They just have to create these huge amounts of revenue to justify their salaries. They're just operating at a much higher level. What you should expect from your agent is everything. You should expect them to be right there with you and be your friend and be with you all the way through the process. If it's less than that, then that relationship is not what it should be.

AC: *(to audience)* Cynthia, yeah.

Audience member: So, connecting that to something you were talking about earlier, the Goldman Sachs example. I'm thinking about the moral and ethical responsibilities on both sides. If you had known he was going to reply, I'm presuming you would've counseled him very differently.

BL: No, it's a really good question, because I've run into that. As agents, we are exposed in a way that is really difficult, and I'm still kind of learning that in my career, because he lied to me and told me he worked at Goldman, and I lied to editors, passing forward his lie. And it was really, really difficult for me to get past that and not fire him immediately. That's the other part of that too. I'd never run into that in my career, but I so believed in him and his book that I just tucked that one under the rug and said, "Don't lie again." And it was really, really tough to do that, because then I kind of failed morally. As agents, we don't have a fact-checking department. My fact-checking for John Lefevre, the Goldman Sachs (author), was to Google him to see if he'd received an offer from Goldman Sachs at some point. And I stopped, because there it was in print. "John Lefevre, offer from Goldman Sachs." I didn't know the offer fell apart. I didn't know that. One of the editors I worshipped in book publishing was an editor named Gerry Howard. He did books like *Trainspotting*. He's one of the reasons I'm in book publishing. *Fight Club*. I'd sent him the proposal, and he turned it down, and after all this blew up in the press, Gerry Howard called me up. I'm like, "Hi, Gerry." "What the fuck do you think you're doin'?" "Gerry, what's going on?" And he was furious with me. And I had to tell him, "Gerry, it's inappropriate to get this upset with me, because he lied to *me*." I was trying to cover my territory with this editor who I respect so much, and I lost him. I don't know if I can get him back now. It's tough. I'm exposed in this. It's very difficult as an editor, because you're vouching for these people, and it's very tricky.

I had another client, this happened recently, a kid is in Slovakia, he does these beautiful hand-drawn maps. Some of them are humorous, some of them just take some sort of interesting graphic and put them over these kind of old maps that he then adjusts. I saw him online, and I saw there was this humorous atlas there, and I reached out, and we put this submission together. He told me he was 22 years old. We sold the book here in the States and in London with Holt, with these two editors I really like and admire, and then over the course of the contractual process, he admits to these editors that he's 16 years old. And he can't even sign the contracts. *(laughter)* And there I am exposed again, and I have to navigate this thing with this 16 year old whose Slovakian father won't sign the contracts. *(laughter)* It was awful. *(laughter)* It was really awful, and we just worked it out two days before I got here. I had to agree to this insane thing with his dad just to get him to sign. I took all liability for the book personally. I said, "If anything goes wrong with this, I will personally be responsible," just to get his dad to sign. I was letting this deal fall apart because a client of mine had lied to the publishers.

AC: *(to audience)* We've got time…yep, one more.

Audience member: As someone who's been exposed to a myriad of writers, you've seen them rise and fall and everything in between. Is there any behaviour that you can say are good things for writers to do?

BL: Professionalism. The thing is, most people are not professional, and they're not on it, and they're unable to meet a deadline. It's an emotional thing, but it's also not an emotional thing. It's a creative process, and if you want to work with the big dogs, the big six publishers, then you have to be able to kind of turn your material in and turn it in well. I think that's the one thing I run into with my clients. The ones who stick around and succeed are the ones who are innately talented and driven and professional. That's one thing I always run into. Be a professional in the world.

AC: Would someone like the memoirist and the humorist Cat Marnell?

BL: Her book is amazing, can I tell you that?

AC: Can you tell these guys a bit about her? They may not know her…

BL: The other thing about what I do, when you do the edgy clients, is you have very dramatic clients, and I roll with that, and I'm fine with it. But Cat Marnell is someone who is this very beautiful, very tortured…she worked at this website called *xoJane*, and she had a real media moment where she was profiled in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* and all these places, because she wrote this piece about Whitney Houston's death that worked in Sigmund Freud's thoughts about how we embrace our death impulses. It was just a brilliant piece that she claimed she rattled off in five minutes, so high on Adderall that she couldn't remember it, which is not true. She covers for herself like that.

But she had a proposal that we had a year to do, and got a great advance from Simon and Schuster. She's a year late on her delivery. A year late. But you know what? She's also two chapters from being done. It's be one of the best books, in terms of just pure brilliance and power, that I've been around. Her publisher is fine waiting, because they've seen the chapters that she's delivered. It'll come out next year, and it's gonna be huge, and you guys are gonna say, "Remember when that agent was talking about Cat Marnell, *How to Murder Your Life*?" It's gonna be big.

AC: That's the title, right?

BL: Yeah, *How to Murder Your Life*. And so she's just a really brilliant, tortured person who then eventually, over the course of that year, got clean. That was the thing, she had to get clean to be able to write it, because she'd done a lot of drugs.

AC: *(to audience)* I think we have time for one or two questions, if there are any. Yeah.

Audience member: Any future projects for you?

BL: Always. I mean, I think I've kind of listed…yeah. No, I'm just gonna stop.

AC: No, that's it.

BL: Thanks, everyone. I'm out! *(laughter)*

AC: This is it. *(laughter)*

BL: I said a lot of them. Certainly for this year, I'm very excited about the Goldman Sachs book, very excited about *Money, Pizza, Respect*, which is the Fat Jewish one, and some serious goth books, I've got a thriller coming out. This is a big year in publishing, but for me, as an agent, full disclosure, there's pressure to always find the next thing. Right now I'm desperate to find the next thing. I really am. I can't wait until it happens, because I'm hungry.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* Oh, Anne, yep.

Audience member: Is there a barrier for Canadian humor writers in the American market? I can't think of one who's had a bestseller. If a Canadian writer sent you a great proposal, do you think bestselling success is possible for them?

BL: I would hope that wouldn't be the case. What you're talking about in a larger way is a kind of conversion of Canadian culture to American culture. There is a little bit of a speedbump there. There's no doubt about it. There's a little bit of a speed bump. But I don't think it's that bad. I think in some ways it's all about turning your weakness into a strength, right? So if you're a Canadian writer, that just becomes a way to sell yourself. There are some great Canadian writers in this room who our agency is working with now. It's part of his calling card, his success up here. I guess it depends on who's reading that

submission, because if they're seeing it as "They're Canadian, that's a negative," then that's not someone you want to work with anyway. Who doesn't love Canada? Come one, geez. Fuck you, people. *(laughter)*

AC: I think we're good. That's it. Byrd, thank you so much. *(applause)*

BL: That was fun! I love that my last line was, "Fuck you, people." *(laughs)*

AC: Thanks a lot, that was terrific.