***Andrew Clark**:* I just want to say hello. I'm Andrew Clark. That was the name at the bottom of the contact list. I'm the Director of the Humber College Comedy Program. Humber College has a two-year diploma in comedy that features writing, stand-up, improvisation, sketch. We started as a workshop in around '97 and it's been running as a two-year program since 2000. There are a lot of Humber grads working out there. I guess the most notable one at this point right now would be Nathan Fielder, with his show *Nathan for You*. One of the things that we do every year is a module on writing humor, or as we try to call it, "print humor", and for the last few years we've brought up the very funny Mike Sacks, to work with our students. And every year, when it's almost over, Mike and I have breakfast and talk about why there aren't any humor-writing workshops. And after about three years of wondering, we finally decided, why not? What the hell? And we decided to do this. And so I'd like to thank you all for being here today. It's fantastic. We're very thrilled to be starting this up. And on behalf of Humber College, on behalf of our dean Joe Kertes, I'd like to thank you for coming, and I'm gonna hand it over to Mike to say a few words.

***Mike Sacks*:** Thank you, Andrew. I took a few comedy seminars when I was out of college, and with all of them, it ended up being taught by someone that did not make a career out of what they were teaching. One guy had sold a spec script, or had actually just pitched a spec script to *Murphy Brown*, and that was the extent of it. But what I wanted to do with this (workshop) was to go to those people who have made a career out of it and continued to make a career out of it, and to pick their brains, to see how they did it, ask them what worked for them and what didn't work for them, which was sometimes

just as important as what works for them. So everyone here today is at the top of their game, whether they're agents, editors or writers. They're all making a living doing what you want to be doing, or handling those writers who are making a living in comedy. This weekend is about you. It's not about us talking, it's not about them talking. Throughout the seminar, we're not going to wait until the end to take questions. So if you have a question, we'll send it to the audience. Now it's really important for you to ask them anything that's on your mind… Oh, you already have a question! That's why they're here, to answer your questions. It's a very nuts-and-bolts operation. It's not about theory or philosophy; it's about how to get published, in print, online magazines, and books. So really feel free to ask them anything. Please respect the fact that these people took time out of their weekend to come here. One of my pet peeves when I go to a talk is to see people talking or on their phones, or doing whatever. So if you could just pay attention to what they say—and all of them have really important things to say, that's why they are where they are—I'd appreciate it. And I think what you're doing today is incredibly important. It's one of the most important things with writing, which is to network, and to leave your apartment, and to meet new people, and to take advice from those who have made it already. So for that alone, I think it's a great thing. So just have fun, and I hope it's helpful for you. (*applause)*

***AC*:** Great, thanks Mike. All right, our first panel today is on magazine and newspaper writing, humor for newspapers and magazines. And we're really, really happy to have two really funny and talented writers here to discuss it with us. The first is Larry Doyle. His first novel *I Love You Beth Cooper* won the 2008 Thurber Award for humor writing,

and he wrote the screenplay for the film, which came out in 2009. His second novel *Go Mutants!* came out in 2010, and he's adapting that as well for a screenplay. His new collection *Deliriously Happy (and Other Bad Thoughts)* came out in 2011. He was a writer for *The Simpsons* for four years, and wrote for *Beavis and Butthead*. He's an extremely versatile, funny guy. So please welcome Larry Doyle. Come on out, Larry. (*applause)* Have a seat anywhere you like. Yep, right there. Next up, someone you no doubt know and have read, is Teddy Wayne. He's the author of *The Love Song of Jonny Valentine* and *Kapitoil*, and he's got a third novel coming out in 2016 with Simon & Schuster. He's a recipient of the Whiting Writers' Award, and an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship, as well as a Pen/Bingham Prize, a Young Lions Fiction Award, and a Dayton Literary Peace Prize finalist. He's a columnist for the *New York Times*, and his work regularly appears in *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, *McSweeney's*, and elsewhere. So please welcome Teddy Wayne. (*applause)* Hey, Teddy. Thanks, guys. So, I guess Larry, first question to you. We talked a little bit in the back about how you got into writing, or how you got yourself into writing as a humorist. Can you talk a little bit about what it was like for you, and the process you went through to break into writing?

***Larry Doyle*:** Well, I'm gonna tell two stories very quickly. How I got in at the *The New Yorker* is really very simple. I wrote things, and I put them in an envelope, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and I sent it, and they sent it back with an unsigned slip. And I did that, I don't know, fifteen or twenty times. And then, eventually I got back one with a little bit of handwriting on the bottom, and Julie Justice sent that to me, so I started sending things to her. About a half-dozen pieces later, there was a piece that she thought

had promise, if I would make certain changes. So I didn't change it for like a year and a half, because I was afraid; I was the only person I knew who had *not* had a piece rejected by *The New Yorker.* And then, about a year and a half later, my life was going really terribly, and everything was really bad, and I had this one sort of ray of hope, which was this piece, and I needed to extinguish it so that everything would be fine. So I rewrote it, and they took it. So that's how I got in at *The New Yorker*. That way probably won't work anymore. I feel a little bit like I'm talking about people who don't do it anymore. I remember having a journalism professor who used to talk to us about how to mark up your typescript, and I go, "They don't *do* that anymore!" And then, very quickly, I like to tell this story because it aggravates people, how I got a job on *The Simpsons* was, I was out in California visiting a friend of mine who worked on *The Simpsons*, and he asked, "Do you want to work here?" And I said, "Sure." *(laughter)* What that leaves out is the fifteen years prior to that that I'd worked with him and other people on *The Simpsons* multiple times, and in fact had hired him for jobs before. But the important thing is, it's who you know, but it's also how you got to know them, and the effort you put in to get to know the right people.

***AC*:** Mm hm. Right. How about you, Teddy, how did you start out in writing?

***Teddy Wayne*:** I got into *The New Yorker* by collaborating with Mike Sacks, and I'm sure you'll all just swarm Mike after this, and ask to work on a piece with him. (*laughter*) I was not really doing this until 2004. A friend took me to the *New Yorker* festival where there was a "Shouts and Murmurs" panel, and I'd sort of dithered around with humor

writing a little bit in college, but not that seriously. And I was so taken with this event, and so blown away by how funny it was, that I decided to try to get in in earnest, and began reading the *McSweeney's* website every day, writing pieces in that vein, tailored to *McSweeney's*. And after a few months I started getting in there, and getting more things accepted, and then I think the editor at the time would occasionally refer me to other editors from other magazines who were looking for humor writers. And it kind of snowballed...that's maybe a little too grand a verb for it. It went up *slowly* after that. Then I branched out into some regular journalism as well. I was getting an MFA in Fiction Writing at the time, so different types of writing were all converging at the same time, but it began with *McSweeney's*.

***AC*:** Now, one thing about writing for a newspaper or magazine is, most people can get through writing a single newspaper column, or even a magazine story, or a "Shouts and Murmurs," length-wise. It's not as intimidating as doing a novel. So often, a new writer will do it, and then just send it out. And yet, you mentioned, Larry, the intimidation of rewriting. Was that something that you were just afraid to sort of dive into? Because I know you did a lot of other writing as part of your development, like writing for UPI, is that right?

***LD*:** Yeah, I wasn't afraid of rewriting per se. It's what I did all day. I used to work at United Press International, which is a wire service, and I was a desk editor. So all I did was rewrite pieces that came in to me all day, or rewrite my own things. But no, it really, literally just scared me, and I was preoccupied with some other things that were going on,

but I was afraid that if I rewrote it, it would get rejected, and then I wouldn't have it anymore.

AC: So it's your big shot at *The New Yorker*, and if you blow it, that's it?

***LD*:** Right.

AC: That's a real misconception, wouldn't you say, the idea that you get one crack at a magazine?

LD: Well, that had been my 15th or 16th piece, and it certainly wasn't the last one that got rejected there, either. I always harbored this idea that I wanted to be one of those guys that had a little squirrelly room at *The New Yorker,* and all they did was write humor pieces, and every five years one came out, but they were still back there somewhere. They don't have those guys anymore. They literally used to have them. There were people there who hadn't been published in years who had an office and a salary and they came in. I got to see, before they tore it down, Thurber's old office where he had just drawn on all the walls. I got that first piece in, and then two months later I got another piece in, and I thought, "Well, I'm moving to New York. I'm getting my little office." And then I didn't get another one in for four years. And there were plenty of rejections in between.

AC: So the question is, what's it like now trying to get published when you're doing it via e-mail or whatnot, as opposed to, I guess for most of us maybe, certainly when I started, you wrote a self-addressed stamped envelope and you put your story in?

LD: It's the same feeling when you put something in an envelope and you get it back, only it's a six-week wait. I know *The New Yorker* still has an active slush pile that they do. You can still send it to them, but you can also e-mail it to them, and I think it's just shouts@shoutsandmurmurs, right? You put that in the subject line. And there is someone there who will read it, maybe not right that day or something, but it will get read. You won't get that nice little piece of paper back, but you'll get something back. So it's the same sort of thing, I think. I also think that with the internet now, there's this whole other level of how you can establish yourself. Because there's no barrier to publishing. You can publish anything you write if you want. I know that when I was an editor, we would regularly pull people out from the internet and ask them if they wanted to write something for us if they were making an impression. So that's one way to do it now.

AC: Teddy, what was your experience with being rejected as a young writer? Your writing, of course, not you personally.

***TW*:** Frequent and common. For instance, I got some things in *The New York Times* when I was in grad school, and over the course of maybe two years got four or five humorous op-eds, and I thought this was gonna be a consistent platform. And then it took another three years, and I'm gonna estimate maybe sixty things I sent in, that were all rejected.

Many of those ended up elsewhere, but it was obviously dismaying and disheartening. And then it started working again. So it's a cliché, but you do need to have a thick skin, and to not view rejection as personal. I think they maybe made poor decisions sometimes, but you can't argue with them about that. And just to keep going, and not take every single setback as a major setback.

***AC*:** When you're pitching a magazine or a newspaper a straight piece of journalism, you're generally selling the story, like "I've got a picture of Rob Ford doing something he shouldn't be doing, and I'm a good writer," so that's how you're pitching, and you can go a long way on that story. When it's humor, you're often, if you have a relationship with the editor, they might say, "Yeah, give it a try," but it's very tricky if that editor isn't funny or doesn't have a good sense of humor, you're kind of up the creek. Have you cultivated editors over your lives that you kind of go to and work with?

***LD*:** Yeah, but on the whole pitching thing, I don't know if I've ever gotten an assignment to write a humor piece off of a pitch. You can always, if you have an editor, say, "I'd like to write something about that," and they might say, "I'd like to see it," but they're not buying it off of that. It's really how it turns out. So I wouldn't bother pitching, especially a 1000-word piece or an 800-word piece.

***AC*:** Just write it up and send it in?

***LD*:** Yeah.

AC*: (to audience member)*** Yes?

Audience member: The only place that I know that takes pitches, and possibly pays for them, is *Mad Magazine*. They allow you to submit pitches and then they pay for it. I don't know, have you guys ever submitted there? I haven't submitted there, I just know they pay well and that's always alluring, but I can never really think of anything I'd want to pitch to see turned into something real.

LD: I had no idea they took outside writing at *Mad Magazine*.

Audience member: Yeah. You can either pitch an idea for a cartoon, like you obviously wouldn't draw it yourself, so that's the other reason, probably, for why they take pitches, is because most of them are visual. So I don't know if there's any other...

AC: We'll also be talking tomorrow, I think, about online stuff, *Cracked* and all those places, so we can probably touch on *Mad Magazine* then, too.

Audience member: OK. My other question was, how do you submit to *the New York Times* for humor? It seems so daunting. *The New Yorker* is easier, because you just send it as a PDF, but I don't even understand how to submit something to be rejected. And I don't think they're gonna take it, but you know...

TW: There is a slush pile e-mail address, which I sent to in 2006...

Audience member: It's the same thing?

TW: Yeah, and I'd been sending for a couple of years with either no response or rejections, and then somehow got something in which was topical, which I think helped. We were talking about this backstage. Sometimes, a timely piece pegged to a current event can help you, because people always want something new, but it can also hurt you, they might not read it in time or they may have somebody else who's already working on something similar, but I think occasionally it can be useful to have something that's about a major current event, because everyone wants something, especially for a newspaper, that's fresh.

LD: And I just wanted to add to that. In *The New York Times*, there's two sort of fiefdoms there, and they're completely separate. One is the editorial page, which you can send stuff to. And two is "Week in Review." And believe it or not, they don't really communicate very well. So you'd want to submit to one or both of them in sequence if you were going to do that.

Audience member: I'm sorry, "Week in Review," and what was the first one?

LD: The editorial page.

Audience member: Don't you have to be a big name to write an editorial? Or will they just take...

LD: They won't *just* take, but they have slots that they regularly let people who are not their regular contributors fill.

AC: And that leads into the idea, and I'm curious as to how you guys decide this, when you've got an idea, you're able to look at it and go, "OK, that's timely, that should go to the *Times*, that's an op-ed piece because it's pegged to something," versus "Well, maybe that would go to *Esquire* versus *The New Yorker*." Do you do it more just on experience and instinct, or do you have a kind of checklist for what you do with the good idea that's gonna go somewhere like that?

TW: It's mostly about tone, I think. All those places have different writing styles that they look for. *The New York Times* has to be more accessible, it's got to appeal to both a 25 year old and a 65 year old, whereas *The New Yorker* is much more rarefied. It's still a major mainstream magazine, obviously, but has a much more self-consciously highbrow tone. *McSweeney's* is more pop-culture and has a younger demographic. *GQ* or something like that is clearly gonna be tailored to men. So I think understanding the place is the most important thing. I think a lot of times, people just send out things that are inappropriate for the forum. A *McSweeney's* editor tells me that they get short stories, for instance, which they don't run. The aim is to have a basic understanding of what they're

looking for, and a more sophisticated understanding of how this would fit with the publication's tone.

LD: That's a really important point. When I was an editor at *New York Magazine*, I wanted a rubber stamp that I could put on a manuscript that said, "READ THE MAGAZINE". *(laughter)* Because a lot of people would send poetry, and *New York Magazine* never printed poetry.

AC: That's like basic, 101. Is there another step up?

LD: Well, you have to closely read the magazine, not just poetry, but the types of pieces, the length of pieces. *McSweeney's* usually runs what I'd call bit pieces, lists. They're not usually the same format that you'd see a "Shouts and Murmurs" in.

TW: They run one a day that's bigger, but they run a lot of the small things too.

AC: You guys have both got experience writing front-of-book, lists.
With *McSweeney's* lists, it seems like bottling lightning or something, because when it's right, or when you read a collection, they all seem exactly right for the site, and yet they're difficult to write. Lots of people get rejected over and over and over. Is it something you should be toiling away at, like a haiku, or should you just whip one off, send one in, and see what happens?

TW: I'm not as good at "listy" pieces in general. I've just learned that over the years, and I don't enjoy writing them as much either. I prefer working with prose and full sentences and constructing a narrative and having characters. Lists feel more just like one-off jokes that aren't as satisfying to me, and I'm not as good at them either.

LD: This may seem like a really bullshit thing to say, but I think it's really true: you have to write whatever it is you're gonna write. And I really don't think that anybody who is going to be a writer is gonna sit down and try to tailor everything they write specifically to whatever they think is gonna be published. I think you have to write what you write, and then figure out what place might publish it.

TW: Yeah, and with what I was saying before about the magazines, I usually write something, and then at the end of it, figure out who it's best for. I'm not usually going in thinking, "I'm gonna write a *New York Times* or *New Yorker* or *McSweeney's* piece."

AC: Do you guys see any difference between writing humor and another kind of writing when you rewrite?

TW: I'm just gonna spout clichés all day. I enjoy rewriting, because the hard work is already done, the heavy lifting, and then you get to sort of chisel away and make this fine sculpture. And it's more gratifying from a craft standpoint to feel like you're perfecting this thing that was once a lumpen mass. So I'm sure there are different ways of approaching it, depending on the genre or the form, but it's exciting. If you don't like the

act of rewriting, you may want to question whether or not you want to do this at all, because that's the work that gets you over the top. Editors often tell me that ideas are not that hard to come up with, good ideas, and that gets you ninety percent of the way, but the other ten percent is the difference between publishing something and not publishing something. And usually that ten percent means putting in another three hours instead of looking it over once for typos.

AC: Any questions at the back? OK, right there.

Audience member: How do you... you were talking about submitting to *The New Yorker* and getting your story back in the mail with a rejection slip. It sounds so nice. (*laughter*) How do you handle rejection? I think our society is trending towards "'No' means you just get ignored until you figure out it's no." How do you handle that kind of rejection?

LD: Well, *The New Yorker*, I hope they're still good about, you know, they still...

Audience member: Oh yeah, they reject me all the time. (*laughter*)

LD: Yeah. Um, *The New Yorker* used to have stationery, a pre-printed piece and then they had a little piece like this, and then a larger piece of stationery, and I remember, in the period where I wasn't getting published, I was desperately writing a bunch of things, and at one point the stationery got smaller on me, and the message was sort of more curt,

and years later I was talking to an editor from there, and I said, "That felt like he was trying to insult me or say 'You take a step back.'" And he goes, "He was." *(laughter*) They had it for that specific reason. As you became more established with them, eventually you got up to a full-sized piece of paper. It meant you were in a different category.

AC: So you move up from "despite its evident merit" to...

LD: Right. So they were always very good about it, but I don't think the phenomenon you're talking about is by any means a new concept. Certainly, I think I've sent many things out into the ether and never got them back.

AC: What are your daily writing habits?

TW: Depends on if I'm working on a novel at the time, which then usually is the primary thing I'm working on. Otherwise, usually five days a week, not always weekends but sometimes. For fiction, I find I can only write three or four hours a day and then I'm kind of mentally exhausted. Humor pieces, it's not as draining for me, but three or four hours is probably the maximum time you'd want to spend on one. I found that often, with a short, "Shouts and Murmurs"-style piece, if it's not written within two hours, the first draft at least, it may never get written or may never be good. It'll come almost fully formed, and then there's some revision. Journalism work is much longer, but it's not as

mentally exhausting either. But it's a normal work day, but rarely nine to five in that sense.

AC: How about you, Larry?

LD: I have an office in my house, and I get up and I go in there around nine o'clock, and for example, the last time I was in the office, I'm writing a novel right now, and where I left off the previous day, the doorbell rang. And so I was trying to think of what kind of doorbell would be in this house. And about four hours later, (*laughter)* after studying the history of doorbells, and doorbells that might be used in a turn-of-the-century house, whether mechanical or early electronic doorbells, which were from the 1880's on, and it was something that had to be symbolically important to the character, and also to the back story of the thing, and it's gonna be "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star". So sometimes I'll spend a whole day doing something like that, and strangely enough a lot of that will come into play in that novel. When I'm writing a "Shouts", I do it very differently, which is I'll get the idea, and I'll write down the idea, as much as I have, and at some point, inevitably, about midway through, I'll think, "Well, this is a piece of shit," and I'll put it aside. And it'll only be when I figure out what is the interesting turn that it can take that makes it worthwhile that I'll finish it. So I have a bunch of half-finished ones, and I have some that I finished years later when I realized, "Well, I'm just gonna have Ben and Jerry walk in at this point."

AC: So when you say "turn", you mean almost like an actual, like a plot twist in the "Shouts and Murmurs", or do you mean an actual turn to the idea or concept?

LD: Well, a lot of times, a "Shouts and Murmurs" will start off on an idea that is simply off the idea itself. And those ideas will run themselves into the ground. If you can imagine it's a Roz Chast cartoon, it's not a "Shouts and Murmurs". If it can be done as a cartoon, it's not a "Shouts and Murmurs". And the best example, I can think of one that really works, is, this is a famous piece, "Dating Your Mom," by Ian Frazier. It starts out like a little self-help thing about, basically, it seems to suggest you're having sex with your mom, and what to do about your dad. And it's all very cheery and stuff. But about two-thirds of the way through, it starts taking this strange turn when you realize that what he really wants is that his mom will get a giant stroller for him to be in, with maybe a lap desk, and then she'll stroll him around town. And so it sort of takes the Oedipal thing and it gives him enough of a twist that if he had just run down the "having sex with your mom" gag, it wouldn't have felt satisfying.

AC: So it seems like, in a good humor piece, there's still that kind of narrative flow with a bit of a turn or a twist driving towards something, as opposed to what sometimes you can see people trying to do, which is just "joke joke joke joke joke joke joke."

LD: Variations on the idea until they're done. And sometimes that'll work, if the jokes are really, really good, but I don't think those are the most satisfying ones.

AC: Right. (*to audience member)* Um, yeah.

Audience member: So, how did you sustain yourself when you *weren't* selling pieces? Did you have a boring day job? Were you always making a living writing?

TW: I was doing bad jobs in my early twenties, then I was in grad school, then I was doing copy editing for a few years until I was able to make a living as a writer.

LD: I worked at a wire service for seven years.

AC: When you had those bad jobs, what did you get from them that helped you later as a writer, for instance? Like being a copy editor, or writing for a wire service?

TW: One of my bad jobs helped inspire my first published novel. At the time, I didn't know it was going to do that. It was only in recollection that I realized there was something in this that could be material for a novel.

LD*:* Writing for a wire service means that there's no such thing as writer's block. And in terms of deadline, your deadline is now. It just has to be done right now. And so I think, having done that for a number of years, I don't wave writer's block in the same way anyone else has writer's block. If I need to write something that's due that day, it will get done that day.

AC: Larry, I read in one of your articles, "If at first you don't succeed, quit." Maybe I'm paraphrasing, but am I right, more or less?

LD: I say that a lot about a lot of different things. (*laughter)* But what I may have been referring to is, if you write something, a piece, and you do your revisions on it, don't be the person who sends that out and then it gets rejected and then rewrites it again and sends it out and it gets rejected again. If it doesn't work after the first couple times, put it aside and write something else. Maybe you'll come back to it, maybe you won't. There are a lot of people who just have this one piece for a novel that they never give up on. I know a lot of people, very well established, published novelists, have at least one novel that they wrote first that didn't get published. And if you can't move off of that, you may never get anywhere.

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

Audience member: Hi. So, you talked a little bit about your writing process, but what about your reading process? Where do you get your inspiration? Are you reading all the time?

AC: What's your reading practice?

LD: You mean inspiration like some sort of thing to pull off for a piece?

Audience member: For instance, yes.

TW: I don't read the news like Will Rogers looking for something to pull out and then riff off of. If it happens, it happens. I think, for me at least, the important thing is to read widely, beyond your primary interest. I think a lot of people in comedy are only interested in comedy, and while you might get very good at learning the rhetorical devices and tropes of comedy, you may not be learning much about that side of the world. And I think it's useful to just read beyond what's right in front of you, or movies too, music, to just go beyond your comfort zone.

AC: *(to audience)* Yes, right back there, up top, in the darkness.

Audience member: So, say you're submitting to multiple places, right? And say you have an idea where you think, "Oh, this will fit these three different places." Do you send the piece to all three places at the same time, or do you wait for one to reject it?

LD: Never. Never ever do that. Send them in series. You can't do multiple submissions, especially starting out. People will hate you.

Audience member: OK. So just send it to one place, wait for it to get rejected, and then send it to another place.

TW: Which is why topical things can be difficult, because they might take a week to get back to you, and by then the news is stale. So when you're starting out, that's the reason not to do...

LD: If you do multiple submissions, say, and you get really lucky and one person takes it and then another person takes it, the person who takes it second and you say, "I'm sorry, I already gave it to someone else" will never hire you for anything, ever. And they'll talk shit about you.

AC: And that speaks to the business itself. I think it's fair to say it's a fairly, not small, but intimate group. It's not like editors don't know each other. You end up working and writing for people over and over. You don't want to start your career already having alienated an editor who liked your work in the first place.

LD: Yeah. And people who are just starting out, especially people who are super-talented geniuses, they don't seem to understand that they're dealing with human beings when they're dealing with editors. There are a lot of writers who are great writers who I would not hire for anything. A lot of writers who weren't the best writers I'd hire because they were easy to work with and I knew I could get what I needed from them.

TW: There's the Neil Gaiman quote, from a speech he gave a year or two ago, about how to make it as a writer, and there's three things. You could be very talented, get your work in on time, or be pleasant to work with. And you need two of those three things. If you

have all three, that's great, but two is sufficient. And the one thing you have major control over is being pleasant to work with. So try to cultivate that, and then hopefully you've got one or two of the other things too.

AC: Let's say a new writer has landed a piece at a magazine, let's say *GQ* or something like that. What is the most difficult period for that new writer? Because it's the first time they're going through the system of being edited, of having to rewrite according to someone else's dictates, and then you've written a humor piece and they're fact-checking it. Do you think there's a tough spot where some of those bad behaviors could come out if you're not aware of what's going on?

TW: The thing I found frustrating is that often there's a lengthy lag time between acceptance and publication. You can get a little anxious or impatient waiting for that. And you have no control over it. The editorial process has never been that agonizing (for me). If anything, I'm grateful they've employed people to look into the facts and improve the prose. But you're not in their office, you don't know what's going on, you're isolated from where the business is actually happening, and that can be difficult for a lot of people. Mostly the waiting on acceptance or rejection, that's also a corollary to that.

AC: What do you think are some of the misconceptions people have about what editors do? I think a lot of people who aren't familiar with working in magazines or newspapers imagine editors sort of sitting around not really working, or as having lots of power at the magazine, even though they might be a section head. Are there any misconceptions you

think people should be aware of when they're dealing with an editor, who's a human being on the other end of the phone?

LD: One would be, depending on the magazine, there are different things that are going to happen to your piece. I was an editor at *Spy Magazine*, and it was sometimes a shock to people who would submit things to *Spy Magazine* and get them accepted, because you would probably not recognize what was published under your name. That would never happen at *The New Yorker*. So there's a different level of expectation. I guess the biggest shock, or the biggest misconception is, if you have an editor who's a section editor, you honestly can't believe that that person is making all of the decisions that they're putting you through. And sometimes, if they can't quite explain why you need to change something, it means their boss told them it needed to be changed and they don't understand themselves. But it will still need to be changed.

AC: Ultimately, yeah.

TW: The other easy thing to forget is that they're being deluged with e-mails, not just submissions from outside, but internally. So if they don't get back to you within even a week, it's not necessarily a sign that they're ignoring you or rejecting you.
The *McSweeney's* editor has told me that he gets 300 submissions a week. That's a lot to read through. It's a full-time job for him. It might take him several weeks or even a month or something to get to your piece.

LD: And even when they're editing you, they're editing five or six different things at the same time.

AC: *(to audience)* Yes?

Audience member: Good morning. On the subject of daily writing/reading process, do you put time aside to watch movies, television, read books, and not for pleasure, but for research? Just to keep up and see what's going on? Especially in the beginning of your careers, would you do that? Because I often find that, while I'm watching a movie or reading a piece, I feel pressure, sort of like I'm "Am I watching enough movies like this, am I reading enough books, am I reading enough of anything?" And then I sort of get stressed out and think, "Well, now I'm reading *too* much, I'm not writing enough." So do you put time aside for that?

TW: I don't calculate it that way, I just go on the theory that, if you're sponge-like, you'll absorb anything, so even waiting at the DMV for thirty minutes might be as useful for inspiration as reading Tolstoy, possibly. Not as pleasurable, probably, but you can use that somehow. And I think to start strategizing about "Am I doing an appropriate ratio of TV to film" will drive you crazy, I think.

LD: This is also going back to a thing I was saying about trying to write who you are, not what you think people... I'm not sure you should construct this idea of who you need to be to be a writer. When I was younger and I got interested in humor, for example, I was

in college, and I spent days wandering around the stacks just pulling things out, I think it's A12 in the Dewey Decimal System, pulling out humor pieces and just reading them because I was interested in doing it, not because I thought, "This is a good way..." You know, when I read Salinger's *Nine Stories*, I thought, "Well, did he write any others?" So I went and found the old *New Yorker*s in the stacks where he had written unpublished pieces. Not as good. But you need to go on what's driving you or interesting you rather than homework.

AC: Larry, do you think there's any difference between being funny on screen versus the page, or is it just the same thing, just expressed in a different medium? With your experience writing screenplays, and even taking your own novels and translating them to the screen?

LD: That'll take a very long time. The biggest difference, of course, is that when you're writing, that's it. What's written is it. So you're responsible for the set design, you're responsible for the acting, you're responsible for everything, but you're also in control of all of it. When you write a screenplay for a movie, you're not even in charge of the screenplay. So it can go a lot of different ways, and you can get lucky and it can turn out much better than you would've done, or not as good.

AC: *(to audience)* Yes, Jared, in the back.

Audience member: A lot of young writers have blogs and places on the internet where they're posting their things for free. Do you think that could possibly hurt a writer's career in the long run...

LD: I think it'll help you in the long run. Especially if you're querying somebody about working for them. If they have someplace they can go and read your writing, assuming that it's good, then that will bring you... and even if it doesn't bring you the attention of someone, it can be the proof that you can write.

AC: Do you have any suggestions for self-editing? Because that does seem to be what is able to push some writers forward who are doing blogs or their own work. They're able to self-edit enough. Because they don't really have their own editors for the writing to have achieved some quality. Do you have self-editing tricks? You do have editors, obviously, but before it gets to them?

TW: If it's not something that's timely that you can wait on, maybe wait a week and don't look at it and then look at it again. I've written things that I thought at the time were great and I looked back at them later and they weren't. And I think that's the best way to see it with fresh eyes.

AC*: (to audience)* Sure, right there.

***Audience member*:** I have a question about subject matter. How do you take something serious but make it funny? I write about addiction. How do you make that funny?

LD: I don't even think about it that way. I mean, most things that are funny actually are serious underneath on some level. You're talking about the really funny Ebola piece we could work on today?

Audience member: I was actually thinking about an Ebola piece.

LD: Some of the problems that people have when they have something really serious is they can't leave the seriousness of it away when they're trying to find the funny thing about it. Jon Stewart has perfected this idea of, regardless of the subject, and regardless of the seriousness of it, what's ridiculous about it is the way the media is talking about it. So his approach is always dissecting what they're doing as opposed to the importance of the subject itself. So that's one way to look at it. I don't know, I've read a lot of people trying to do serious pieces, funny pieces about serious things, that fail, and it seems to me it's because they don't want to find the ridiculousness of it, they want to preach about the seriousness of what they're doing.

AC: *(to audience)* Uh, yes.

Audience member: You were talking about dealing with editors. If you haven't heard back in a while, should you send a follow-up letter? How long should you wait?

AC: So what's the protocol when you've submitted something to an editor?

TW: I think if you have a relationship, and it's long-standing, maybe waiting a week or two, and with a gentle nudge, but if you don't have a working relationship yet, or if you haven't published with them yet, just let it go.

LD: It's like if you went out on a date, and the person hasn't called you. I'm serious. It's like, how long do you wait to call them? It would depend on the person. Some people might have triggers of people calling them right away to ask them about something, and that could put you on a list that you don't want to be on.

AC: Do you think it could really hurt someone if they don't have that ability? I know most editors have people who are almost pathologically submitting and aren't very nice when they get rejected. In other words, good rejection hygiene. Don't leave angry messages, obviously, but is there anything else that you could do if things aren't going your way?

LD: Yeah, those people are toxic. There are enough people who want to write for you. If you get on one of those lists, it's hard to get off.

TW: When I get a rejection, I write, "No problem, thank you for the quick reply," or something like that, to acknowledge that they put time into it, and just thank them for it.

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

Audience member: So if you've submitted and you haven't heard back in a month or two, and you want to submit elsewhere, is there like a safe zone of when you can submit somewhere else?

AC: So how long should you wait after you've submitted a piece before you submit it somewhere else? And I guess that depends a bit on who you're submitting to, right?

LD: I mean, if you're submitting to a literary journal, probably not, but if you're submitting to *The New Yorker*, then yeah. I don't even know how you'd gauge that. What you're really betting on is that they haven't lost it behind a file cabinet and are going to look at it and take it. If you think they're never going to take it, then I'd take that risk, but there's no hard and fast rule.

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

Audience member: You obviously find out what your editors think of your pieces, but do you ever find out how the readers of the journal respond? And if so, does it have an influence on you?

***AC*:** Do you ever get reader feedback?

TW: Yeah. Often you'll get e-mails from people, or you can easily see on the internet what people are saying, if you choose to seek it out. Which can obviously be not so fun or nice at times. But with a lot of these sites, you can have your e-mail or contact info embedded in the bio or something, where not just readers can reach out to you, but also other editors who liked the piece. So I think it's important to have some dedicated website when you're starting out that has contact info available, so that you can hopefully get contacted. Because it's all well and good to submit things, sometimes you'll get lucky, but a much higher percentage of working relationships come from editors reaching out to And that can only happen, of course, if they have a way to find you.

AC: Comedians can test material out at smaller clubs or on smaller nights, and that wasn't something that was traditionally at the disposal of someone writing for a magazine or newspaper. Now it seems like some writers are using Twitter or their online stuff to float material, to see what kind of response they get. Do either of you guys use any of that, or do you just prefer to keep it the other way?

TW: I have a Twitter account, but I don't do much on it, and would never put out material that I would then want to turn into something. I would just make it on its own.

LD: I would think that with certain publications, that would be a big no-no, to take something that you've published online and then repurpose it.

AC: They want something that's fresh for them.

LD: Yeah, well, it's republication.

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

Audience member: I'd just love to hear what your favorite funny novels are.

AC: Favorite funny novels.

TW: I love *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby is fun, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, *Lolita* has a lot of funny parts, *Straight Man* by Richard Russo, although I haven't read it in a while.

LD: Um, all those. *(laughter) Dog of the South* by Charles Portis, *The Peculiar Memories of Thomas Penman* by Bruce Robinson, who wrote the hilarious *The Killing Fields (laughter),* but also one of the funniest movies I've ever seen, *Withnail & I*. If you like that kind of thing, there's *The Eyre Affair* by Jasper Fforde. Most of Max Barry's novels are funny.

AC: There was a heyday for magazine and newspaper humor. There was a time when people who were writing funny columns were making whole careers out of doing so. Now there are a lot of places for people to be published, and there are still the more

traditional ones, so what's your feeling about the future, if you will, of magazine or newspaper humor? It's always had its place. Do you think we're in a good time for that, or is it in a bit of a decline?

LD: Depends on whether you want to make money doing it or not. It's a better time to publish, and I think newspapers and magazines will continue to exist, whether on paper or not I don't know. But I think that the amount of money that people could make off of it is going down.

TW: Yeah. It's not possible to make a living solely off writing humorous pieces for magazines and newspapers. You have to have something else going on too. I foolishly moved back to New York after grad school thinking I would do that, and I quickly learned that's not possible. So don't attempt that. But it can be a supplemental income, that's basically the way to do it. And Larry's right, there's never been an easier time to get published, or a harder time to get paid well for it.

AC: Great. We have about five or ten minutes left, if there are any more questions. (*to audience)* Yes, sir.

Audience member: I was just wondering specifically, if you're primarily writing shorter pieces, and you hit on the ideas for your novels, how did you know that was material for a longer story?

LD: I didn't go to school, so I can't give you the classic definitions of the things, it's just like, "Uh, that seems like it's a novel." First of all, the "Shouts and Murmurs"-style pieces can't have much plot. If there's significant plot development, then you've got to write something longer, either a short story or a novel.

TW: My second novel came out, and Mike Sacks e-mailed me one day asking if I had any ideas for a short humor book we could work on. I quickly floated an idea for a parody book about a teen pop star, and then began writing a piece based on an idea, and within an hour realized this could be a novel if I treated it more seriously. So that was the one time, probably the only time this will happen for me, where a humor idea translated into a novel.

AC: Great. Time for one more question. *(to audience)* Yes?

Audience member: Two parts: is there an optimal word length for a humor piece? And second, and this is kind of subtle, but do you find there's value in sort of road-testing something by doing a reading, or is there something about the spoken word of an essay that makes it fundamentally different from the printed word?

AC: So is there a word count, and also, is it worth doing a public reading?

Audience member: Does doing a reading help or hurt or affect something you'd like to get published?

TW: For "Shouts and Murmurs" or *McSweeney's*, these things tend to be at 400-800 words. More than that is the exception. A thousand or over is almost never done, except on rare occasions. And I've learned giving readings that the funniest things that work on the page don't always translate to spoken performance, and sometimes the less funny stuff on page, the less clever things, do better because it's easier to understand orally. And the more sophisticated it is as a piece of prose, the worse it'll do orally.

LD: I also think it has to do with your process. If you're a writer-performer, you might get more out of performing something or feeling the work that way. I don't think anything that I said out loud would get that. *The New Yorker* used to publish pieces that were 2500 words long, like a lot of Garrison Keillor's early pieces for instance, but you're right, they're about 800 words now, right? They want to put it on one page with a column ad on one side, so that's why it is what it is.

TW: They also tend to burn out the concept. There's a reason why stand-up comedians don't do four-hour sets. You can't handle too much of it.

LD: Even at a thousand words, there better be a development and a plot to it.

AC: Well, Larry, Teddy, thank you very much, you've been terrific. (*applause)*