

Joe Kertes: Hey everyone, welcome back. I'm Joe Kertes from Humber College as well. It so happens I'm a novelist, so I'm appropriate for this panel. Let me introduce our guests. Byrd Leavell is a literary agent and partner with Scott Waxman at the Waxman Leavell literary agency. A graduate of the University of Virginia and the Radcliffe Publishing program, Byrd has been an agent for twelve years, and in that time has represented two of the most popular humor books of all time, Tucker Max's *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell* and Justin Halpern's *Shit My Dad Says*. He handles narrative non-fiction, sports, humor, and commercial fiction that reads like you've just grabbed hold of a speeding train. His clients include Scott Sigler, Drew Magary, Cat Marnell, Babe Walker, "Weird Al" Yankovic, Pete Sampras, George Karl, Mike Sacks, *(some laughter, applause)* John L. Parker Jr., and Josh Ostrovsky. Please welcome Byrd Leavell. *(applause)*

To his right is Jeremie Ruby Strauss, who is a Senior Editor at Simon and Schuster. Since 1995 he has specialized in celebrity authors, from Marilyn Manson to Motley Crue to Ace Frehley, from Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson to Tucker Max to Marilu Henner. His interests include blockbuster non-fiction and celebrity pop culture, diet fitness, internet and television tie-ins. Authors include Tucker Max, Brandi Glanville, The Betches, Oliver Stone, Kevin O'Leary, Ace Frehley, Marilu Henner, La Toya Jackson, and Jesse James. Please welcome Jeremie. *(applause)* And we have the inimitable Mike Sacks with us here.

So this is a great country for humor, not as great as Canada, but it's pretty good. *(laughter)* You have a great tradition of humor with Mark Twain and the Algonquin

Round Table and Dorothy Parker and Harpo Marx, I think was one of them too. And these days, Woody Allen and David Sedaris and wonderful people. What attracted you to this world, particularly the world of print humor? Should we start there?

Byrd Leavell: Yeah, I'll start. What attracted me to print humor? I kind of fell into it a little bit, in that publishing is an apprenticeship-based industry, so you make pennies while kind of scrounging for years. I swore to Jeremie we wouldn't bring Tucker Max up continuously, so this is my one Tucker Max story and then no more Tucker Max stories. He was a friend of a friend of a friend, and he was posting these kind of blog posts online, and I was getting them in e-mails. And I had this very strong reaction to it, which was that there's nothing like this out there, and this will work. This is how guys talk to each other when no one's looking, and I think that this can sell a lot of copies. Long story short is that it eventually got published, and sold almost two million copies. And then when you're 26 years old and you have a book that works like that, it sort of orients you in a certain direction. And I realized that I liked kind of saying "Fuck you" to publishing and doing these books that other people wouldn't do, and I also really liked doing books that made people laugh, and I just kept doing them.

Mike Sacks: Can I ask a question? Had he been approached by an agent yet?

BL: No, I was the first person there. He was a crazy person even then, and was sleeping on his friend's couch, and was penniless, but would get on the phone and say the book would sell a million copies. He just had this mindset from the get-go.

MS: How many times was it rejected?

BL: It was turned down... well, I'd sent it out once, it was my first ever submission. I spent like three hours just crafting each sentence of the cover letter, and I sent it out, and was rejected by everybody. And it was going to like Grove Atlantic, the *American Psycho* editor, being like, "This is a new thing, this will work," and everyone was turning it down. I got one offer for thirty thousand dollars I took back to Tucker like this returning hero, and he said, "You go turn it down. Tell them if I want to be treated like a Haitian boat person, I'll go to Haiti." (*laughter*) So he turned that down, and one of the people who turned it down at the time was Jeremie. And so then I was at another agency, and Jeremie called and said, "I've got a \$7500 offer I can give you for Tucker." I said, "Well, he already turned down thirty, so you're wasting your time," and he said, "Let me get on the phone with him." And they talked, and then Tucker came back and said, "I'll do the deal." Jeremie pulled it off.

MS: What did you say?

Jeremie Ruby Strauss: He sort of started with, "I'm with Lulu and I'm getting 85% of net received, and you're offering me 7.5% of net received. Why on earth would I do that?" And I said, "Because 100% of zero is zero. So why don't you get some distribution, and let's see where this could go." Tucker just did a self-published book called *The BookStrapper Guide to Marketing Your Book*. If you're counting on your book publisher to make you famous, you're making a grave mistake. If they could do that, all of their authors would succeed. So what we're doing is, is we're looking for people who know how to make themselves famous. And I told him, "Look, what we can do, what we're good at, we can print, bind, edit, we'll fix your grammar errors"—

of course, he rejected most of our fixes—“we can distribute you, we can support your touring, and that’s kind of it. And if you can take that onus onto your shoulders, and just let us do the things we can do and not count on us to do the other things, this might sell fifty-thousand copies,” is what I told him. I was wrong by 95%, as usual. I don’t know why it worked. He described it as, I broke him down like a pimp. *(laughter)* Which, if you have any clue as to what his ego looks like, that I think was a small miracle. But it worked out to everybody’s benefit. I’m glad he allowed that to happen.

JK: So while we’re on the subject, how is it editing a humorist like that, or a humorist in general?

BL: I’ll start that one. What Tucker does is interesting. Tucker will send his manuscript out to...

JRS: We’re failing completely at not focusing on Tucker. *(laughter)*

BL: I know! I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’ll get it out of the way. He’ll send it out to...twenty people?

JRS: Yeah.

BL: Twenty people.

JK: Before it comes to you, you mean?

BL: I'm part of the twenty. You may have more. And then he will take all of those responses, and just incorporate the ones that are consistent and that he agrees with. So he has this kind of approach that really catches all of the rough points.

JRS: Right. But by the time he gets to me, he'll take some of my suggestions, reject most of them, and then by the time it gets to the copy editor... He famously wrote, "Stet all, copy editor sucks." And my managing editor actually had this on her bulletin board. *(laughter)* "Stet all." And "stet" is "I reject all of your suggestions."

JK: Wow. What a guy. *(laughter)*

BL: Tucker is the godfather of Jeremie's child, I should throw that in there.

JRS: So he has redeeming characteristics.

JK: *(To Mike Sacks)* Did you want to comment on that?

MS: Well, where does he get the balls to do that? *(laughter)*

JRS: You can't learn that.

BL: He is a man without social graces

JRS: It's not rooted in anything. It's who he is. He couldn't change it if he wanted to. And it has worked.

MS: When he got rejected so many times, how long did it take before this book was a success before you got publishers saying, "Listen, I want a Tucker Max-esque type of writer, I want something just like him"?

BL: Well, they still don't. That's the thing. I've had probably ten thousand submissions saying "Tucker Max," like "Whaddup bro?", I get a lot of those. And publishers still are not very receptive to that.

MS: Are you receptive to pitches that have that?

JRS: Well, most people don't understand what that means. When I was at Kensington, the reason I was able to buy Tucker Max was because I did a book called *Real Ultimate Power*. And this was a book supposedly by a ten-year-old kid who wanted to teach the book about ninjas, but who knew nothing about ninjas. So all of the information was misinformation. And when it worked, I went back in and said, "OK, now you have to let me buy Tucker, when before you made me pass." And after *Real Ultimate Power* happened, they said, "OK, more books about ninjas," and I was like, "You idiots. No." (*laughter*) "What you mean is, 'More books by highly-trafficked humor websites,'" right? So when people say, "I'm the next Tucker Max," I'm not looking for more ninjas, I'm looking for more traffic. The reason I knew Tucker would sell fifty thousand copies was that that's how many daily visitors he had to his website. So if you're going to tell me you're Tucker Max-esque, what you should mean is that you have fifty thousand daily visitors to your website, not that you're a dude bro.

MS: So the marketing is as, if not more, important than the subject matter?

JRS: For me it's paramount.

BL: What I say often in terms of the submissions that I get is that you could have this perfect, amazing book idea that everyone reacts to, like “Whoa, that’s a great idea.” But the way corporate publishing is now, and this is a pragmatic view, it’s just how it is, is that if I send that out without numbers to back it up, or some sort of platform within traditional media or anything that they need to feel comfortable, even this most perfect, beatific idea would not be enough to get a book deal. You’ve got to have the bells and whistles that they want, which are Twitter, Instagram, X million visitors a month, and there’s no way around that. That’s just the way the system seems built.

JRS: Every editor has fallen in love with something based on the quality. And one of my mantras is that quality is job three. First you need an audience, and then you need salability to that audience, and only then does quality come into the picture, because if it isn’t there, you’ll still fall flat, despite having the first two. But without the first two, you could have the most perfect book...My favorite books were flops. Mikey Ruffino’s *Gentlemanly Repose* is one of the funniest books I’ve ever read, much less had the pleasure to edit and publish, but it didn’t have one and two. So three was irrelevant.

MS: Did he have Twitter followers?

JRS: No.

MS: So if one of those students want to get published, they need to have a Twitter feed, they need a Facebook feed...

BL: Well, getting something started on social media is like climbing Everest. It's so tricky, you have to keep doing it. But there are other ways. You can put something up somewhere that catches, and then you can point to that catching, and then say, "Because that caught, now we're going to distill this into this perfect book." You know what I mean? So you don't have to have great numbers, you just have to have a moment. Or it could be traditional media. Your *Vanity Fair* platform and things like that help tremendously, I think, in terms of when we sell your books.

JK: So how do our participants break into this industry? How do they reach you? What's the best way to reach you?

BL: Sorry, I'm starting all of them. I talked about this a bit in Mike's book. It's such a copout answer, but just put great content up. Just find a place and put great content up, because most content out there is not very good, and you as a writer need to develop anyway. All literary agents immediately talk about their most successful books, because that's what we do, so now I have to talk about *Shit My Dad Says*, but with Justin Halpern, he was out there for years putting content up that was funny, and kind of figuring things out.

JK: Where did he put it up?

BL: Well, he was kind of getting paid pennies to write for *Maxim* and stuff like that. You can find those jobs out there. People are desperate for content. I did a great deal... is Dan here? I did a great deal for a *Cracked* author who was a *Cracked* intern, and got them to start putting pieces up, and he started getting material up on *Cracked*, and now he has sixty-four million views a years. It's insane. But if you really

put thought into it, and commit yourself to it, my mindset is that you can always find a way through.

JK: How about you, Jeremie?

JRS: Well, if I knew how to do it, I'd be a rich and famous author. What I do is I try and identify people who have done it. I don't know that the people who have done it even know why it happens. Sometimes it's lightning in a bottle. An entire, very successful and profitable genre of book publishing is, we call them "indie authors," and they do new adult. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is sort of the pinnacle of this. But the ones that work have a robust social media following, and it's a community, and they help each other out, and they have a fan base, and they're highly accessible and communicative. There's a green smoothie book by J.J. Smith which all came out of a Facebook community. And that's really the key. Each of these successes, there's a community or a tribe or an audience. There's salability to those people, which involves a couple of things. Being able to reach them, an avenue to reach them, let them know that this is available, it isn't a demand that's already been satisfied or oversaturated. And that, no matter the genre, whether it's health or romance or humor, it follows the same pattern.

MS: Well, I think what you said is extremely important. And we touched upon the first part, which is that you just have to write, and you have to get your work out there. A lot of people want to go straight from being a student to writing for *The New Yorker* or *Esquire* or *GQ*. The great writers write every day, and they put up pieces, and no one may read them at first, but like Dan O'Brien, if it's good enough, and you

do it consistently enough, you will find an audience. And not only will you find an audience, but you'll find people who want to publish you in other forms, like agents and book publishers. So write all the time for anything, and just keep going.

JRS: A great example of that is Allie Brosh with *Hyperbole and a Half*. She just put out great content consistently, built this enormous community of fans, and then when her book got shopped, I took one look at her traffic and I went to my CEO and said, "I need a small fortune for these stick figure drawings. And you just need to trust me on this." And it wasn't just because I loved her content, I love a lot of things. But the traffic was there. So I felt safe to extend a healthy six figures.

MS: You worked pre-internet. How did it work pre-internet?

JRS: I was not pre-Internet. My first acquisition was a book called *Shaken, Not Stirred*. It was a book of martini recipes, and I got an illicit copy of Netscape, went onto AltaVista, typed in the word "martini." There were six hits on the internet, *(laughter)* and one of them turned out to be the content of the book. It sold a hundred thousand copies, most of them at Crate and Barrel because they were using it to move stemware. And that became sort of my blueprint. Some people had forwarded to me some haikus about spam, that was kind of a hip thing in 1995. So I went to John Cho, the "S.H.A.M.", the spam haiku archive master, and offered him pennies, and that was my second acquisition, *Spam-Ku*. And that did well enough that I just sort of kept going. I did one called *Grudge Match*, which was the Internet version of *Celebrity Death Match*, really, except it was just two guys arguing back and forth, and it was not nearly as successful because the visual Claymation really

made *Celebrity Death Match*, but it was the same idea. And really, *Real Ultimate Power* was just going back to my blueprint. Tucker was just going back to my blueprint. Maddox was just going back to my blueprint. And it's always been looking for highly trafficked websites.

BL: There's another side of that, though. There are a lot of sites that have a shit ton of traffic that have sold fourteen copies of their book.

JRS: Yeah. You've gotta dance with the one that brung ya. I met with Ricky Van Veen in the early days, and they thought that the *College Humor* book was gonna do gangbusters. And I said, "Your whole site is videos of people getting hit in the nuts with a football. How are you going to make a book?" And he sort of waved me off, and the book did all right, but when you look at their traffic, it should've been insane, and it wasn't. And it's because there was a disconnect between why *College Humor*'s popular and what they were offering. They had the audience, but they didn't have salability to that audience. And then quality, of course, didn't matter, because they dropped the ball on step two.

JK: (to audience) Yes.

Audience member: What about this idea that, in this new internet age we all exist in, you have some specific idea that maybe isn't going to hit everybody in the malls across America, but is a specific comedic idea. Is that something you're open to, where there's maybe a community for it, but it's not going to hit everybody?

BL: If I send something out to fourteen editors, fourteen publishing houses...

JK: And you do it simultaneously, right?

BL: You do. So you package it all up in a proposal, and you send it out. All these editors are overworked and underpaid, and they want front-of-the-airport-bookstore kind of books. That's just where the submission level is.

JRS: You've gotta feed the machine, right? We're paying rent at Rock Center, we can't sort of putz around with these little projects, even if we love them and want to do them, there's enormous pressure to keep the lights on.

BL: Now the flipside of that is what you're talking about, which is that sometimes those little projects, when exposed to a larger audience, are these amazing things that translate perfectly. So it's...

JRS: The sleeper.

BL: Yeah. Totally. If something's working in a simple population, can that then work for everyone else?

JRS: But to address your question directly, some of us will surmise that this could work for a limited audience, but most of us have been wrong about that enough times that we no longer do that. It's really, "Show me. Show me your traffic. Give me proof of concept." And the exciting thing about that now, with the internet, is the barred entry doesn't exist. If it's good, and if people like it, there is nothing stopping you from putting it up and proving your concept.

JK: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about e-books.

JK: The question was, "Can you talk about e-books?"

BL: I think this is all part of a larger discussion, which is that now there are so many different ways of doing it. Some people are still so oriented toward getting this publishing deal, but the truth of it is that being published by a publisher can be a brutal process. You get this advance, and then maybe it's not very much, and it's allocated over all these different ways, and then you're waiting for your publisher to make your dreams come true, and you have some twenty-two year old publicist who leaves at four o'clock every day. Traditional publishing can be excruciating, even if I'm involved in trying to make it not suck. There are so many different successful ways to do it now. So if you're talking about e-books, you can package it up and put it on Amazon and make seventy-nine percent, I don't even know, you make that much more of it, and you can push your thing yourself, and then you can be self-publishing phenomena now, those exist. My partner has a digital publishing company where they split it with you fifty-fifty, but you get some services. It's a wide-open landscape, and I think that certainly, for what Jeremie and I do, we're just there kind of picking off the ones that I know I can go get a deal for. You can start self-publishing, and you still have all your rights; you don't have to give them away to self-publish e-books, is what I'm saying. So then, if it goes well, then you can take all the momentum and then go to a publisher.

JRS: We're happy to pick up the current book. We're happy to pick up the next book. We're looking for something that's going to sell some copies, because as a rule,

ninety percent of books fail. So if there's heat on something, we notice immediately. I just published a book by Jude Angelini called *Hyena*. He's a Sirius XM radio host, and he was moving eight hundred copies a week POD, didn't have any book...

BL: Print on demand.

JRS: Print on demand. And so I picked up that book. So he forfeited nothing. In fact, it got him a major publishing deal. And then we were able to double those numbers, and then half as many again in E. So it worked out for everybody.

JK: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: Hi. So I've been working on a book, I've been trying to make sexual assault more humorous. *(laughter)* And I've been working on it for a couple of years, and I already had a book published, but it was a Tumblr book, and it wasn't anything serious, and I have a literary agent who helped me who I don't talk to anymore. Anyway, my question is, I have ten thousand followers on Twitter, and I've been working on this book. Should I just submit it as a book proposal, or should I start a blog with the different essays I've been working on, and break that up into sections, and give the material out for free first?

BL: Come up to me afterwards. We'll talk it through. Let's do that.

Audience member: Oh, OK. Sorry.

BL: No, don't apologize.

Audience member: I just want to know how far to go.

BL: We'll talk it through.

MS: If someone out there has an idea, not similar to that, but another funny idea, and maybe five to ten thousand followers on Twitter, but they have, and I used to feel this, a feeling that they're lost, that there's no connection between me and a publisher, then how does one make that connection?

BL: OK. I think whenever you have your content out there, and people are responding to it, that's a positive thing, because you can incorporate their responses into your writing. You can put it up all these different places. And making that jump from where you are to a publisher, I'm kind of fumbling this, but ten thousand Twitter followers is great, that's a lot of Twitter followers.

Audience member: It's been stagnant for a while.

BL: But that's great. That's a part of the conversation. "This is working, I have this many."

Audience member: How much work do you put in on Twitter, to have like a...

BL: Well, ten thousand Twitter followers isn't going to get you the deal, right? So if you're putting longer-form content up, because Twitter of course is just 140 characters, so of course the book is fifty-eighty thousand words, so if you're putting your longer-form pieces online, then you're that much closer to showing that you're getting closer to a publisher. Does that help?

JRS: Well, like Halpern for example. He had this massive Twitter following, and then a great proposal, and then that's what it took, right?

BL: Yes.

Audience member: I didn't mean to ask such a specific question, but I felt like...

BL: It actually wasn't such a specific question.

JK: Is an agent absolutely essential here?

BL: Well, it's almost like you could turn the system on its head, because if you go out and you do something and it's working, then you're going to have fourteen agents coming after you. There are all these starving young agents who are desperate to find something that they can sell, right? I said this the last time we did one of these, and it was probably not a good thing to have said, but I have, I think, eight thousand submissions I've never looked at. That's not how I engage with the job.

MS: Eight thousand over a period of what time?

BL: Years.

MS: So how many do you get a day?

BL: Sometimes you get five, sometimes you get fifty. There are ebbs and flows.

JK: And do you kind of ignore them?

BL: I have an auto-reply that says if I'm interested I'll get back to you, but for me, it's so bad, but my whole approach to the job is to go find people, not be found. Because people who are out there creating something that's worth finding, and so many of the qualities I'm looking for have already been established. So this kind of, I think of

it as an old-school mentality, where you're just going out and querying all these agents and working on your cover letter and getting the commas in the right places...

JK: That's not a good approach?

JRS: I'm reminded, actually, in *Lean In*, she says, "All these young people ask me how to find a mentor." And she says, "Don't do that. Don't try to find a mentor. Do great work, and then people will take an interest in you."

JK: But not if they don't open their e-mail...

BL: But I'll go *find* them, because I'm pouring through stuff all day.

JRS: If you are attracting attention, people notice. But when you say "Look at me, look at me, look at me," you're one voice in a sort of chorus...

JK: But what if you're a brilliant person and you're not attracting attention yet?
That's my question.

JRS: How would that happen, though? If it's screamingly funny, it's going to get word of mouth. It just is.

BL: Yeah. That's the question in many ways. And if you think about it, you've got two people up here in publishing who've built their careers on a lot of social media. But publishing has a lot of people in it, a lot of people a lot smarter than I am, who are much more focused on a certain approach that's much different than mine or Jeremie's. We're talking a lot about the internet up here because that's who we are,

kind of. But publishing has thousands of people in it, and for someone like that who's brilliant, and then maybe they get something in... name your literary magazine. We just hired these two young agents, and with one, her first approach was to come in, and I couldn't believe she did this, she ordered two thousand dollars worth of subscriptions to literary magazines. It turned my hair white, but that's her approach to the job. She's going to pour through those literary magazines, find people that write stories that she loves, and then reach out to them and try to get them to write a novel. You know what I mean? There are just so many different approaches.

JK: (to audience) Yes.

Audience member: I had a pretty popular blog for a number of years. And then I ended up hating it. (laughter) I was trying to put new content out there, and some days it was good content, and sometimes it felt like I was pouring diarrhea from my fingertips, and it was embarrassing. So when you put out good content, that really means putting out a lot of content, and then a bunch of it kind of sucks. And I used to do Time Warner Cable's social media, so I'm so thoroughly fucking sick of social media at this point, and I want to be a *real* writer. How do I balance this?

BL: There are all these places now that you can write for, right? You just develop those relationships. There are so many places that are desperate for contact. My client Dan O'Brien's going to be up here tomorrow. He runs *Cracked*. He's gettable. And all these other sites, there are so many, like *Splitsider*, that are just desperate. And I think that's a good place to focus your efforts, because if you're putting your

blog up, it's a certain approach that can work, but if you're taking your best content and getting that to places where people are going to see it, and you know it's your best content, you know what I mean? You could even take it off your blog, like, "That was a good one." And this applies to the world in this way, and then you go out and go to those places.

JK: How many followers did you have, by the way, on your blog?

Audience member: Well, this dates it, but at its best it was getting on the front page of *Digg* regularly. There were peaks and valleys, but I would say I was getting about six to ten thousand views a day.

BL: That's great.

Audience member: Then I wrote one that pissed off my in-laws...

BL: *(laughs)* Yeah, you've gotta watch that. I know. You can always work the system, though. You know where people are looking.

Audience member: Have you ever read that book *Trust Me I'm Lying*, by Tucker's PR guy?

BL: Yes. I know Ryan (Holliday). I've read part of it.

JRS: I haven't read it.

BL: I don't approve of that approach, just for the record. I think trying to lie to people and get them to whatever, it works... Ryan's a brilliant guy, he can do

Wikipedia pages. Like how do you, it's amazing. So part of it is good, but the other part is that I think that people know they're being too manipulated.

JRS: And also, congratulations to him for the success he did create out of not that much, that's brilliant, but if you compare it to Maddox or Tucker Max or just Halpern, it's categorically smaller. If you're talking about how to game the system, sure, but if you're providing something with real pass-along value, it's a bigger thing.

Audience member: But he's talking about how to game the system in order to help Tucker Max sell a lot of books.

BL: But he came along long after Tucker Max had sold two million books.

JK: Has there ever been anyone either of you has championed who you thought was fabulous, and nothing happened? You're the only one in your company...

BL: Well, we have submissions that don't sell. That's the brutal part of the job. And you have books that you get published that don't work. Jeremie mentioned a couple. One of my favorite clients, even though he's not in the public favor right now, is Gavin McInnes, who cofounded *Vice Magazine*. I love the guy like a brother, and worked on his book more than any book I ever worked on, really, and it didn't work. I have theories on why it didn't work. It's educational for me too, the job. You do a book and think this is how you have to do it, and obviously it isn't.

JK: It's a guessing game, isn't it?

BL: Well, it is. There's so much rejection that we all have to process. The people querying me are processing rejection, I'm processing the rejection of people who I

reach out to who have other agents or want to self-publish, and then I'm submitting to publishers and sometimes they go for fifteen, or then it does get published.

JRS: And then the buying audience rejects it.

BL: It rejects it all the time. You almost have to learn how to process that without it being an emotional thing. Because if it becomes an emotional thing, you can't really do the job.

JK: Jeremie, did you want to...?

JRS: Ninety percent of books fail, right? So ninety percent of the projects I loved have failed.

JK: What does failure mean to you?

JRS: Financial loss.

BL: One to four thousand copies. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work.

JRS: Net loss is failure.

JK: Was there someone you thought would be sensationally great and then nothing happened?

BL: He's got like two-dozen answers to that.

JRS: Ninety percent of what I thought would be sensational was not.

MS: There are different options, too. Not everyone has to get published at Random House, especially if you're a first-time writer. There are small publishers, like Tin

House, McSweeney's, that are more approachable than Penguin. There's a lot that can be done out there. You may not sell a million copies, but you'll get what you want, usually in a very nice product. McSweeney's books are beautiful. So you can circumvent agents. It's not like if you don't get an agent, you can't ever get published. It can happen. You just need drive, and also an idea that fits with that specific publisher.

JRS: With Tucker, that was published by Citadel Press, which was a company that had gone bankrupt, and then was picked up by Kensington Publishing, we often joked for pennies on the dollar at a garage sale in Paramus. Citadel was the opposite of Random House in many ways, a stepchild, really. But all they had to do was print, bind, and distribute the book, and they were able to do that. And he took it from there. And when people fantasize that Random House is going to make you famous, they're not. They can't. Otherwise, they would not have any failed books, and they also have a ninety percent failure rate. We all do. That's industry, that's not my personal batting average, that's books. If you have what it takes to make your book a success, you can do it as easily at Citadel, which unfortunately is now defunct, I think, as Random House.

MS: Well, look at *Harry Potter*. That was with Scholastic. It was rejected many times, but it just hit, and it didn't really matter who published it.

BL: That's right.

JK: (to audience) Yes.

Audience member: I was under the impression that if you put something on a blog, or if you had your book on Kindle, or you did a hard copy of your book, that then you couldn't turn it over to a publisher...

BL: Could not? Could not turn it over?

Audience member: Yeah.

JRS: We do it all the time. It doesn't bother us in the least.

BL: Yeah, you just have to worry about who you sign that contract with. There are lots of people looking to take advantage of people who want to get their book published, but there are lots of good companies also. So you just have to know that, in order to be published, you don't have to give your rights away.

JRS: Wait, are you talking about being with a small press or something like that?

Audience member: No, I'm talking about self-publishing.

JRS: If you're doing strong numbers in self-publishing, that is an asset, that is not dissuasive.

Audience member: But then I did self-publish a book, and I had five hundred copies, and then I sold all of them, and then I needed some more, and that's really expensive.

BL: So John Parker is one of my clients, he wrote a book called *Once a Runner*. He was a four-minute-miler down in Florida, and he wrote it while he was at the peak of physicality, so you could actually feel what it was like to be in that kind of shape.

You don't need to hear all of that. The point being that he sold a hundred thousand copies of that book essentially out of the trunk of his car. He published it the year I was born, 1978. So when I submitted that to publishers—he already had the rights, he was doing it, he had an audience, he was working it—the initial bid is tough, like, “How am I going to write this check,” but if you sell them, you're going to make money on it. So I went out to publishers, and it was a legendary book at that point, it was the most sought-after novel about running. So then we sold it to Scribner and now everyone makes money.

MS: You said you had actual hard copies in your basement?

Audience member: Yes. Well, I don't have a basement.

MS: OK, so in your apartment. *(to panelists)* What's the difference between that and POD? Can you explain it?

Audience member: Yeah, I don't know what POD means...

JK: Print on demand.

Audience member: Right, but I don't know...

JRS: I only have the foggiest notion of what it is, but the consumer orders it on Amazon and then someone, some lightning source, I don't really know, but someone prints either one copy or a small batch of copies, and they just sort of handle fulfillment for you without an outlay. And then they take a percentage of net receipts. So you're not outlaying cash. It gets around the problem you're describing.

MS: Should a writer ever pay an agent to read the manuscript?

JRS: No, no. That's a red flag.

BL: Yeah. Never pay an agent (for that).

JRS: Scammers.

JK: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: I just had a question about, if you wanted to write humor essays, and you're developing your platform on traditional media, is there any disadvantage to, say if you have a collection of essays and you keep publishing them, would a publisher or agent balk at the fact that a lot of these readings are actually available online, whether it's a great outlet like *Salon* or *Slate* or *The New York Times*, or if it's a smaller literary site? When do you know when to hold them, or do you just put everything out that you can?

BL: That's a great question. I get that a lot from clients that I sign. I think that the short answer is that you put everything out there. Then, eventually, if things go well, then you can just put in the proposal, "The book will have fifty percent new material," and you can just go write the fifty percent that you're going to write later. Because the publishers, I find, do want to hear, and Jeremie is probably somewhere on the same page that I am, if it's all mined somewhere, if you package that up and it's all really good, those are two totally different worlds. One shouldn't poison the well of the other. But publishers don't always agree with that. So when I have

clients, I tell them, "Say it's going to be at least fifty percent new material, so they feel like they're buying something that hasn't been out there."

JRS: Fifty percent, I think, is universally accepted, even among most conservative publishers. Because you want the best, most classic material in the book, but then you also want to incentivize the consumer to buy the book, because it's hard to sell what's free. Although I read an interesting sentence recently, which was, "Books don't fail due to piracy," which is this idea of it being free, "they fail due to obscurity." So there are best-selling authors out there who are giving away the e-book to avoid obscurity, because that's the real enemy.

BL: That's right.

JK: When you spot a talented writer, where do you send them to hone their craft, or do you do that?

BL: I like to do it. If they have something that's good, that's my favorite part of the process, is getting into it and working on it with them.

MS: You mentioned comic essays. It seems like most people who want to publish humor want to publish humorous essays. Those are extremely difficult to sell.

JRS: No.

BL: No. *(laughter)*

JRS: Humorous essays, by women especially, are one of the strongest, most attractive categories out there. Chelsea Handler, Sloane (Crosley), one of the speakers you guys have. Some people describe Tina Fey's book as essays.

MS: But these are all big names.

JRS: Yes.

Audience member: Ellie Kemper. I mean, I know she's a big name now.

MS: I thought it was a tough sell to agents.

BL: Well, it comes back to the platform. That's it. Another thing about humorous essays is that if I have someone who's an Instagram success, we're not going to go do an Instagram. So you bring in a writer a lot of the time, and work with them to do humorous essays from real stories in their life, so you make a real book. So I actually point things toward humorous essays, because if they're good, that's a great book.

MS: Who are you hiring? Could one of these guys (in the audience) work as a ghostwriter for you guys?

BL: Yes. Usually, it's brilliant people like Mike Sacks or someone that we bring in, but if someone has a platform and they don't have the ability to write the book that needs to be created, I have various people I bring in to make it good.

JK: But if they don't have a platform, is it important to get a champion like Mike Sacks to call you?

BL: Yeah. I know it's lame to talk about platforms, I must apologize. Like, "go build a platform." But it's just an inevitable part of the conversation now. I would backtrack off a bit, I don't mean to be pessimistic. If you have something that's totally fucking brilliant and everyone that reads it thinks it's great, it'll blaze right through the process. You know what I mean? Nothing is hard and fast.

JRS: Well, the co-writer path is worth talking about, because in that case, you're unburdened in having an audience and being salable to that audience. That's now the job of the famous person. You only have to provide quality now. And I have taken many unknown writers whose work I liked, paired them with someone famous, and said, "You're going to create something worthwhile, and then *you* are going to go sell it." And there's absolutely a living to be made as a co-writer.

MS: These are people that you published but were lesser names?

JRS: Or I just liked their proposal, and I say, "Love the writing, can't do a thing with you, you're not famous, but I'll keep you in mind if I chase somebody famous who can't produce a book and needs someone to help them."

MS: So that's another option.

JRS: Yeah. It's a career. Our co-writers are gold. When we find good ones... Every agent has two or three in his vest pocket.

BL: Yeah, my guy David Oliver Cohen, with his brother and a friend, did the "White Girl Problems" Twitter feed, so we turned that into a fictional memoirist, Babe Walker, who sold two hundred thousand copies of her book, and then she did a

sequel called *Psychos* that's doing very well. And then David and Tanner and I are writing a book for the *Total Frat Move* website called *Dirty Rush* that comes out in January, and I think is going to do really well. And then he's the co-writer on the Fat Jewish Instagram. So he's just a professional, talented guy that I work with on all these projects because it always goes well.

MS: And he makes a living.

BL: Yeah.

JRS: Any book where it's "Big Name" with "Little Name," that's their livelihood, and you can do well.

MS: How about non-fiction about comedy? Essays about comedy films, a book about Bill Murray?

JRS: Not unless it's *by* Bill Murray. I guess (Bill) Cosby did all right, recently, but almost never. The *Saturday Night Live* oral history did well, but how long ago was that? I'm aging myself by mentioning it.

JK: I often get questions about memoirs, people want to write memoirs. Can a memoir sell if the person is no one you ever heard of? I very often get that question, by the way.

JRS: Statistically, no.

BL: Jeremie is so dark. *(laughter)* You're all screwed.

JRS: Well, miracles happen. Someone wins the lottery. There are examples.

BL: The trick about memoirs is story and the ability to tell it. With memoirs, there are very literary memoirs, the Mary Carrs of the world, that's a whole thing. And if you can perform on that level, a hundred percent. You're essentially writing a novel, but it's true. And then the more kind of commercial memoirs, it's like, why are a hundred thousand people going to want to read a book about you? And if you can answer that question well, then that's possible.

JRS: Your life would have to be so jaw-droppingly extraordinary.

JK: Like your parents are homeless people...

JRS: And even then, you need to be Jeanette Walls to put it out there. It would have to be *The Tender Bar*. Although I'm sure he (J.R. Moehringer) was somebody before he...

BL: Who then co-wrote Andre Agassi's book, one of the best sports book ever.

JK: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: What is your favorite part of the process? Is it finding someone like Justin Halpern, like, "I discovered this guy, I found him," or is it just working with them and seeing the finished product, or is it selling it? Byrd, I know you mentioned your favorite part...

JRS: I like hitting the best-seller list. *(laughter)*

BL: The very best moment in the whole world is calling someone and telling them, "You're number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list." That's amazing. But

that's actually a really good question. There are a whole bunch of great moments. There's the moment when you get a deal, and you can call the client up and say, "We're in, here's the amount." And it's not even about the money. The money is part of it, but the money almost becomes stressful, because you get a bunch of money and then you get this pressure to perform, so it's not even about the money. It's getting the deal, and I work with all my clients on their books, but the best part is getting the first copy of the book. Because then it's this beautiful thing, it's this dream that's realized, and then it has so much potential, and you have that for the rest of your life, and I love that part of it. And then after that, you hope for some level of success, or even just positive Amazon reader reviews, or anything like that. There are all these great things that can happen if you don't get so fixated on being number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but approaching the process in a way that you take the positives. With Mike's book *Poking a Dead Frog*, I'm sorry Mike, I'm going to pimp you here, but I called him up and was like, "This is one of the best books I've ever worked on, it's totally amazing." Knowing that book was so good, and then having it come out and see this outpouring of positive response to it from these reviews and all these things, was so affirming about the job, because you got to work on something that so many people liked, even if he is grumpy. *(laughter)*

JK: You talked a bit about trends in publishing. I remember very distinctly when one of my favorite books, Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* came out, no one wanted to publish a Civil War novel. And then, two years later, everyone was publishing Civil War love stories. There's *Harry Potter*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*...

BL: It's a lot of chasing.

JK: But can you foresee trends, or do you follow trends? What excites you?

JRS: I don't foresee trends. I attempt to notice them before the competition, which is becoming increasingly impossible, because there now seems to be an army of 22-year-old agents out there combing the web sixteen hours a day.

JK: Looking for *50 Shades of Grey*? Is that what they're doing?

JRS: It used to be candy from a baby.

BL: There was a glorious period when there were like four of us. *(laughter)*

JRS: And you and I would continually be on the same things. But our jobs weren't competitive, directly.

BL: People used to sniff at it, like you were a blog-book agent. And Kate Lee now runs Medium.

JRS: And now nobody turns their nose up at anything that might sell. But the thing about trends is that the next one won't look like the last one. It's falling into that trap of saying, "We need more books about ninjas." The next book that works will not be about ninjas. But there will be some less obvious quality that does get repeated, which, in the case of the ninja book, was highly trafficked humor websites. But then the next one was a highly trafficked non-humor website, maybe it was a cookbook, blog-to-cookbook, which is very hot right now.

BL: Yeah, cookbooks are amazing. One thing I tell my clients about that may be useful for you to hear is that when you do have a submission, you have a program that I would say we were in favor of called BookScan. Before there was Bookscan, these agents could be like, “He’s great and he’s done really well,” and no one knew.

JRS: It was all adjectives.

BL: But now everyone looks on BookScan and they’re like, “Well, you sold fourteen copies last year, so go fuck yourself.” *(laughter)* So with BookScan now, the end part of the process, which I always try to get my clients to do, is to frame your book in the marketplace. Is there a justifiable argument for why it fits between these books? What editors like Jeremie are going to do to put their offer together is, if they buy into your comparison titles, then they’re going to pull up those comparison titles on BookScan and use those numbers to figure out what advance they’re going to give you. It works in myriad ways. I had a client who had these amazing photos of wet dogs. I’m sorry, I know it’s not high art, but she had amazing photos—she was a professional photographer—of dogs. She’d go to the groomers and take photos of them coming out, and you would see this soulful look. *(laughter)* I just packaged it up, and then we sent it out, and the publishers ran *Underwater Dogs*, and they ran a book called *Shake*. And she got a hundred thousand dollars, because both those books worked, and we were early on in the trend.

MS: And when she started, she had no idea it was a hundred-thousand-dollar idea. She was doing it because it interested her.

BL: Yes. She started it because she felt like she was on to something. And she was, because I thought that book did really well.

MS: Sometimes simple and visual is more effective than something you labor on for ten years.

BL: Totally. Totally.

JK: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: So are wet cat books coming out next? *(laughter)*

BL: Been there, done that.

JK: That's harder, that's harder.

Audience member: How do you research that? I guess that is super important for you guys, obviously, but I don't have BookScan...

BL: BookScan is expensive. Amazon. You can tell. If you pull something up, you can get some sort of feel.

JRS: And everything in the Amazon Top 100 would be very interesting as a comp to any publisher.

BL: It's hard to tell from their rankings. It could be ranked two million but it's sold fifty-thousand copies. But if you look a little bit, you can usually get a feel pretty quickly. If you don't know, it sold fifteen thousand copies.

JRS: And also the *Times* list. Everyone in publishing is obsessed with that list. If you can compare your book plausibly to anything that was ever on that list, we'll take a very serious look.

MS: Has anyone ever figured out the Amazon ranking? Does anyone know?

BL: Sometimes they don't update it, sometimes they do. Sometimes someone's on *The Today Show* and then it goes backwards, and you don't even know what happened. Sometimes it's easy to fall in love with it, especially if you're checking your client's rankings. I check the top 100 every day.

JRS: I do too.

BL: I check the "Movers and Shakers," in case I can find someone who's self-publishing, someone who took a big jump, and then try and go get them.

JRS: But a big jump can be fifty copies if you're talking about going from eight hundred thousand to two hundred thousand. That's a lot of thousands, and you can get very excited, but it might be fifty copies.

BL: If you're in the top 100, you're selling a lot of copies.

JRS: That is very meaningful.

BL: We cracked that with yours, didn't we?

MS: I think it hit 100.

BL: Yeah. Damn right!

JK: (to audience) Yes.

Audience member: I was curious. You mentioned the role of having an agent and all these things, but also saying that that wasn't the be-all end-all for producing content. Let's say you have someone, a good writer, putting out good content that does well, but without the sort of schmooze aspect. How do you find someone like that, or better yet, how do we find you, or how do we connect to the right people? Because some people are great both at doing the work of writing, but then also pursuing those parties or networking events, etc. For those who aren't, what's the sort of middle way to reach agents without sending things to *The New Yorker* in the abyss or sending things to publishers in the abyss?

BL: That's a good question. You're speaking to two people who I would describe as anti-schmooze. I think that in book publishing, there is certainly a social element to it, and I think a lot of that is a lot of... I come out on the negative end of it. It's not fair. I went to my first ever PEN Award ceremony this year, and I had a blast. It was so fun. I was rooting for everyone. So that was great. But there's a literary aspect to publishing where there are a lot of people paying too much money for a book that will never sell copies because it reflects well on their intelligence that they do those books.

JRS: It's a prestige thing.

BL: It's a prestige thing. What you're talking about, you don't need to do any of that to exceed on any of the levels we're talking about up here. You can do it, and you can have, I won't say her name, but a friend of mine who works that scene really well,

and has her Tumblr page, and got a six-figure book deal because she knew everybody. There's a way to go that route. But the flip side of it is, if you can point to any of the things we've talked about up here, if you have something really good that goes up and it's on any number of the popular sites and all of a sudden you have fifty comments beneath it, you're into something. You've just circumnavigated all of that, and gone directly to people and showed them you have something that works. Is that a good answer?

JRS: Plus, your book's gonna sell. If you've developed an audience, your book's gonna sell. If you make best friends with an agent or an editor or a publisher or a CEO of a publishing company, maybe they'll give you a big fat advance. Maybe they'll give you a ton of marketing. But if nobody's heard of you, nobody's going to buy your book.

BL: Look at Lena Dunham. *(laughter)*

JRS: You can spend a million dollars on advertising. Now everyone is aware you have a book for sale, but they don't care. But if they're part of your following, if you've built a community, then they care. And that's what matters. Advertising for books does not work. It works if you already care. If you're a fan, and you don't know the new book is out, advertising tells you, and that's meaningful. But to tell me something's for sale that I don't even want? OK, thanks for the information.

MS: You can schmooze without going to parties. You can be anywhere and schmooze online.

BL: Twitter schmoozing. Twitter relationships.

Audience member: Sorry, but with Twitter, I'm new to it, and I find it sort of consuming, I can tag people, I can tag articles with things, like, "OK, this seems relevant for this audience," but it doesn't seem like you're really making a dent unless you already come with that network or that platform. I guess I'm sort of questioning how much we can actually build, and I think we're told to keep building our networks, but I'm not sure anymore.

MS: A lot of it is reaching out to people who you like on Twitter and creating a relationship with them, and making your name recognizable. I think that's extremely important. And that's schmoozing, that's going after what you want and making connections. When I first started, humor writing to me was competitive, and it quickly became apparent that it shouldn't be, because you're all going through it together, and even those people who you think won't get back to you, they might not, but they probably will. And you may give them a job in the future. Everyone needs everyone else. You go through it together. So I would reach out to as many people as possible who are not famous, but who are going through what you want to achieve, and create a sense of community and keep it up, reach out to them, keep talking to them. It's much easier to go through this process with others than it is to do it alone. It's very difficult to do it alone.

BL: Mike gets to people that other people can't get to, but I think it's because you engage them on an intellectual level. You can talk the talk.

MS: There are plenty of people I didn't get. I could take you through the whole list. It's just a matter of getting them at the right time. But I did try to reach out to people whose work I admired when I first started. It's much easier now. Everyone has an e-mail, even David Sedaris has an e-mail, although he doesn't admit to it. *(laughter)* So you can get to these people.

BL: They're reading it. People don't realize that all these authors are reading, to a certain point, until they burn out, their Amazon reviews.

MS: Even a big name who's reachable, I would suggest reaching out to anyone.

BL: If I read a novel and I really like it, and I'm not a huge Twitter proponent either, I find it exhausting, but you can get on and be like, "Love *Station Eleven*, great novel," and (Emily St. John Mandel) is like, "Thanks so much!" And I love that! It's just like, "All right, that makes me feel good."

JK: *(to audience)* Maybe one last question? Do you have a question? Yes.

Audience member: I was wondering how often you guys rep somebody where the book sells really well, but you're doing it almost a hundred percent from a business perspective? How often do you say, "This is going to sell really well, but it's really not that good?"

BL: I shouldn't answer that. *(laughter)* I got three kids, man. I try to sell these very nice people who put all these pictures of gross food up, and would do an interesting blurb under it, and I went 0 for 20 with it. No one agreed with me. I shouldn't

answer this, but you just want to find something that is even outside your own taste that you think people will respond to.

Audience member: So it's less personal, but more for the masses...

BL: You just want to find books that work. That's the charge. My goal at my job, the money is nothing. It's being a tastemaker. It's being involved with something that people respond to. If you have a book that sells sixty thousand copies, that's Giants fucking Stadium. That's an amazing feeling, to know that that many people walked up and bought a book, and we've done books that have sold millions. That sounds really self-congratulatory, I'm sorry.

JRS: I remember my first boss did a book that sold a hundred thousand copies, and he described the feeling as being "The King of New York." If that's the goal, putting out books that you love personally that lose money, you never feel like the King of New York. *(laughter)*

BL: You don't. You just feel sad.

JK: Do you feel more like the King of New York if you publish a book by Drake versus someone you really love but didn't do very well?

BL: The Drake books are always so stressful. They're never positive experiences.

JRS: I love hitting the list. So, to me...

BL: That's Jeremie. That's Jeremie.

JRS: So I can't parse that question. To me, it's an indivisible thing.

Audience member: I'm not sure what a "trade book" is?

BL: A trade book is a book that's published by a traditional publisher.

JRS: Not academic or children's.

BL: Yeah.

JK: Please help me in thanking Byrd Leavell and Jeremie Ruby Strauss. *(applause)*