

**Andrew Clark:** We are honored to have Sloane Crosley, who is a fabulous author of two collections most of you are familiar with. The first is *I Was Told There'd Be Cake*, the second is *How'd You Get This Number?*, as well as the e-book *Up and Down the Volcano*. She's a frequent contributor to *The New York Times*. She worked as a publicity director at the Vintage Books division of Random House, and is now an adjunct professor at Columbia University's Master of Fine Arts program. And she's currently working on a novel, which we're going to get to talk about. So please, a big, warm, PIT round of applause for Sloane Crosley. (*applause*)

**Sloane Crosley:** Yay! Hi. Here?

**AC:** Please, yeah.

**SC:** OK.

**AC:** So I'm thrilled to have you here.

**SC:** Thank you for having me here.

**AC:** We're going to talk about how you got started, but I have to tell you that you write the most magnificent opening lines.

**SC:** Oh!

**AC:** And the way I would define that is, once you've read them, you have to read the whole story.

**SC:** That's good!

**AC:** Let's see if I can read one and butcher it.

**SC:** You could—well, it's in English.

**AC:** This is from "The Pony Problem" in *I Was Told There'd Be Cake*: "As most New Yorkers have done, I've given serious and generous thought to the state of my apartment should I get killed during the day." I gotta read that.

**SC:** Thank you!

**AC:** I gotta go all the way.

**SC:** I hope so.

**AC:** Do you work really hard on these? Because authors often talk about first line, last line. Do you labor over them, or do they just kind of appear fully formed on your breakfast table?

**SC:** *(laughs)* They just appear. It's just so *easy!* *(laughs)* No. I think that they're all different. Usually, I don't remember, is the truth. That makes it sound like I did it in sort of a fugue state.

**AC:** That would work.

**SC:** I once read an interview with Bret Easton Ellis where he talked about not remembering writing *American Psycho*, and I'm like, "That makes sense." *(laughter)* That makes total sense. But these aren't quite so traumatic. I think they come from a different place every time. So sometimes I'll actually have the last line in mind, or the last paragraph, or a note I want to end it on. And sometimes the first. But for this

one, that particular essay I think did come in the order in which it's presented on the page.

**AC:** But sometimes you've got the last line or the idea of where you're going...

**SC:** Sometimes the last line, exactly, or the idea of where you want to go. So in my second book, the last essay has two very different ideas that I combined into one, and one is a story about how I was sort of pilfering or accepting stolen furniture from a very shady gentleman. And the other is about heartbreak. But it turned out the guy had a girlfriend the entire time. So I knew from the beginning that I wanted the last line to be something about other people's stuff.

**AC:** Yeah, and like I said, it's amazing, it's wonderful.

**SC:** Thank you! That's so nice!

**AC:** And they're very funny. They've got a laugh right off the top, which is nice. I read somewhere, you talked about something you sometimes struggle with—now we're gonna get hard.

**SC:** *(laughs)* I should be paying you for this time.

**AC:** This is a quote: "Plot's the hardest thing, and then structure's the second-hardest."

**SC:** I said that?

**AC:** Yeah, in an interview you probably don't remember. So that's why I ask you, is that in fact true, and if so, why?

**SC:** Again, a fugue state. I think plot's the hardest thing. If your natural inclination is towards humor, I think plot can sometimes be very difficult, unless you're a screenwriter. That's very different. You're sort of born and bred to think, "What are the beats? How long do I have to do this thing? There's a half-hour, I have to make it funny." But if your inclination is just general observation, observation and plot do not go hand in hand. It's not the same thing. Weirdly, I think that humor in general is changing, and even comedy is changing, where it's less Borscht Belt zingers and more like Louis C.K. is telling you whole stories, and that's what makes them so funny. I would love to see him write fiction.

**AC:** Your writing is very revealing. You take the reader to lots of different parts of your life, and we get to know your family, and that kind of thing.

**SC:** Much to their chagrin.

**AC:** I think it's something that other writers deal with when you're using family, which is a wonderful choice, because all readers have one in some form or another, and they're going to relate in some way or another to that humor. So do you sit down with your family and say, "I'm writing about you?" Do you set up lines or parameters? Because I think, for a lot of people wanting to do humor, they're going to need to write about themselves or their family at some point.

**SC:** Right. Well, you live in the world. You can't pretend that you don't. That's where the one-liners, the observational comedy, come from. How do we first begin to covet what's around us? One thing I would say is that if you're writing essays, it's too complicated, but they end. I didn't write *Running With Scissors*, so I didn't write

something where I have to warn an entire segment of people that there's going to be this concentrated spotlight on them for a huge duration of time. So it's little sketches, and I think they come off OK, but they work as a nice checks-and-balances system without me. So my dad will be like, "I never said that," and my mother will be like, "Yes, you did."

**AC:** So you give it to them beforehand, or do they get to see it in print like everybody else?

**SC:** Oh no, I give it to them beforehand, but it's a sort of ruse, because it's more of a warning, not an asking for permission. *(laughter)*

**AC:** So if they say no, you'll be like, "Mmmm, well, sorry."

**SC:** If they say no, then it's like, "Well, Thanksgiving's gonna be awkward. I don't know what to tell you, but this is it."

**AC:** But even a line, like in the story about going to camp, where you end up playing the Virgin Mary...

**SC:** I did.

**AC:** And your mother going, "What the fuck is this?" when she finds out.

**SC:** She just said, "What the fuck is this?"

**AC:** That's a great moment, but was she OK with that moment, having it in print, saying "fuck" and that kind of thing?

**SC:** Oh yeah. I think I painted her probably as a little bit more...she's started to curse a lot more, actually. *(laughter)* Yeah, she's fine with that. I think you also know inherently when something doesn't pass a smell test. A lot of times this comes up in a conversation about truth in memoir, and things like that, and what you can get away with and what you can't in terms of bending the rules. And you know, in your heart... it's like a diet book where people are like, "Guess what? It's good to eat salmon and blueberries." And you knew that. You needed a book to tell you that? You know what's kosher and what's not.

**AC:** Well, we'll take a step back...

**SC:** Sorry.

**AC:** No, no...

**SC:** You don't want to talk about salmon?

**AC:** No, we'll put the salmon aside. Were you a budding writer all your life? I know a little bit about that journey. Because you didn't go right into journalism, you didn't go right into publishing, as a writer. Can you talk just a little bit about that leap that you made?

**SC** Well, I always wanted to do it, and I think that a larger answer to your question, and then I'll zoom in, is that people talk a lot now about privilege, and then what people grow up with, and if you grew up in a household of artists, are you exclusive, or whatever it is. What you get by doing that, by growing up around artists, or if you're the son of a famous director or actress or daughter of a famous writer, is just

the idea that it's possible to do that. I don't think it's money, I don't think it's privilege, you just get the idea that that could potentially be your job. And my father used to help run an advertising agency, so it's a different kind of creativity, but he won't watch *Mad Men*, he thinks it's unrealistic. I beg to differ (*laughter*). But I grew up with the idea that you could write, and it could be more than a hobby. That's my long and meandering way of saying that. But still, I grew up as a suburban kid, "Go get a job," "Go to college," or reverse, health insurance. And so I got a job working in magazines, for internships, and then I couldn't find a job in magazines, and I remember the year I graduated, there was the cover of *Time Out New York* where it was like, "No Jobs, No Apartments," and I'm like, "Oh my God! I know! I really know!" (*laughter*) And I found a job working in book publishing, and I don't know if this is interesting or not...

**AC:** For the infamous Ursula, is that who you're talking about?

**SC:** Yeah, I saw her the other day, and I got really scared. She scares me. My first boss...

**AC:** She has a brilliant essay about one of the most abusive relationships between an intern and a boss.

**SC:** Yeah, it's funny. Anyone in Hollywood or L.A. who reads that, who reads that this woman threw a manuscript at my head, is like, "So?" (*laughter*) "It was unbound, what do you care?" So then I got a job working for a literary agent. And then I moved to the PR side of things, because I kind of missed magazines and the speed of that. The PR side of book publishing is sort of the most social end of this incredibly dorky

industry. And it was great, and I absolutely love my job, but then I started writing on the side. I was writing little reviews for things, I wasn't really writing humor that much. I think things might've had my voice still, but a music review is not meant to be humorous. Most are really bad. And then I had one day where I was moving apartments, and I locked myself out of two apartments in the same day. So I shut the door to the first one, and knew immediately, the way you know when you leave your cat or your wallet in the back of a cab, you're like, "Uggh, this isn't gonna open when I turn the knob." And then I managed to get a locksmith, move, and then took the first box out in the second apartment, shut the door, and I'm like, "Jesus!" Eight hours later, and I figured it was a story that all my friends were going to know eventually, I sent an e-mail, and I lucked out, really, where I had a friend who did the Books coverage, this ties into my day job, at *The Village Voice*. And I forgot that he even did the essays section. And he said, "You know, if you clean this up, and you make it not stupid, I'll print it." Because it's a New York kind of story. And so I did, and I started writing for them. And it's funny how things end up in such a strange way, because then the *Village Voice* was acquired by this rather fascist, militant newspaper group, who decided that no one in New York listened to music or read essays, and cut half their coverage. So I was rendered homeless. So then I started writing for *The Observer*, and then *The Observer* changed to a broadsheet format—this might be intensely boring, I'll speed it up.

**AC:** No, no.



**SC:** So *The Observer* changed to a broadsheet format, and then ironically, I was homeless again. And then I started writing for the “City” section of *The Times*. It was still something that I was doing on the side, and wasn’t really indulging in. By the time I started writing the books, I was like, “I need to quit the day job.”

**AC:** How did the first book come about?

**SC:** That was the longest story, and it didn’t even answer your question. *(laughs)*

**AC:** No, I think what people can take away from it, we’ll start taking questions too, is that people generally, I think, with any career but particularly with writing or comedy, want to believe there’s a straight line, that there’s a point A and a point B, and if you just know the directions, you can make it like so.

**SC:** I think that for other things. For other people...

**AC:** Want to be a doctor, go to medical school. There’s a point A and a point B.

**SC:** Or even if I think about anything like screenwriting or playing the guitar. Even though I know it’s not true for me, I assume it’s true for other people, which is sort of a weird psychological problem I should work out some other time. But I think the book happened because... I’m trying to think. *Gawker* was very popular at the time, I guess it still is, but it was popular for different reasons. And they linked to a piece I wrote in the *Village Voice*, and then they linked to another one. And then an editor at a publishing house called and said, “Do you want to turn these into a book?” And I had no intention of doing that, because I had a secret novel under the table. But

you're 25 years old, and someone says, "Do you want to turn this into a book?" and you're like, "Yeah, whatever, I'll weave it out of balsam wood, I don't care."

**AC:** Was it simultaneously the greatest day of your life and the most frightening?

**SC:** Yeah, so frightening. Frightening because at first they wanted me to do a book because due to the nature of the pieces they'd linked to, they wanted me to do a book on etiquette. And I was like, "Oh, are you barking up the wrong tree. I don't know anything about that. I can't even do a spoof book on etiquette." You have to love something and be familiar with it to lambaste it like that. So I didn't know, but I could just start writing other essays. So that's more or less how the book came out.

**AC:** Were you kind of on the outside looking in? Are you an observer? Because even though you're the character, the main storyteller in your work, you definitely are observing quite judiciously. Were you like that as a kid or a teen, stepping back and watching what's going on?

**SC:** Oh yes. There's always a root, right? I'm the youngest in my family, and all my cousins, and so I was left out of everything. I think I was a very unpopular kid until fourth or fifth grade, when I hit my blossoming stride—not really—but you have to have something where you feel that there's something almost profoundly wrong with you, and simultaneously that there's something profoundly wrong with everyone else, and you can sort of watch it like that.

**AC:** Yeah, you don't really get a feeling reading your work that you're looking down on the people you're writing about at all.

**SC:** Oh, well, *some* of them...

**AC:** Ursula, perhaps.

**SC:** Right. There are a couple of essays in the first book where, I didn't expect anyone to read it, in a very fundamental way. I was told that essays do not sell. It was a paperback original, which suggests a youthful market, certainly, but doesn't suggest a huge amount of faith. I got no money for it. Now, thinking about it, I probably would've written some of the things a little less harshly.

**AC:** When you're putting these essays together, do you pick a topic going in and say, "I know I'm going to write about this, I'm going to Lisbon"? That one maybe you knew for sure, "I'm going to write about this."

**SC:** I did not.

**AC:** OK. (*laughter*) That's what I'm wondering. Do you live and then go back over it and go, "That might be one," or "That might be one," or do you tend to say, "I'm going to go do these things and then I think I'll probably write about it"?

**SC:** It's a good question. I feel like it's slightly different now, but not even really. There's a great James Thurber quote where he says something like, "Humor is..." I'm trying to remember it, I'm going to butcher it. "Humor is chaos remembered in tranquility." You don't go into it thinking, "I'm going to write about this," because I think it kind of sullies the experience a little bit. But you can think of it as sort of a gift, so from now on there are two possibilities, right? There's a good, seamless experience where nothing happens, there are no observations made, you have

dinner with your friend, you go home, you go to sleep. You do your laundry, it's fine. And then, there's something ridiculous that happens. The restaurant catches on fire, and the washing machine spits coins in your eye, and then that's not bad either, anymore, once you become a humor writer, because you have material. There's almost no such thing as a crappy experience.

**AC:** So for you, the more things go wrong, then the better it is?

**SC:** Yeah, I guess so. It depends on what it is. I have to say, there is something that comes out in the essays where they may look like an experience where it's like, "Oh, this is a story that I was going to write about," but very rarely is that the case. They get framed that way. So in other words, generally for me it's more that I'm thinking about something largely and think, "What are times in my life where this has happened?" I find it sort of detrimental both to the writing, weirdly, and to the actual real-life experience.

**AC:** So you'll look back on almost moving to Australia, and that leads to the idea that if I have kids, I'm going to make sure they're born in Belgium.

**SC:** Exactly. That particular essay is sort of a hodge-podge of things. And that actually started with me seeing the movie that I'm named after for the first time, which is a terrible movie starring Charlton Heston. My mother was just really pregnant...*(laughter)*

**AC:** Yeah, I think in that scene, you do feel a bit of pregnancy brain. *Diamond Head* it's called, or something like that?

**SC:** It's called *Diamond Head*.

**AC:** It's set in Hawaii or Maui or something?

**SC:** It's about the downfall of the pineapple industry in Hawaii. *(laughter)* And I was grilling my mother, and I'm like, "Nothing? You've got no..." So yeah, that's the reason why. And I'm Jewish, and I ended up with the WASP-iest name on the entire planet.

**AC:** It's pretty WASP-y, for sure.

**SC** And they're both Jewish, my parents.

**AC:** In the chapter, you incorporate lists where you're comparing qualities of the character Sloan that you wished to emulate, ones you don't want to...

**SC:** Because at a certain point, and that's the other thing, you were asking about the motivation for writing essays or comedy, and I do believe that your job at a certain point is to entertain. I think that people sort of forget that, and not just in comedy, but that's where you get a novel that has a forty-page description of an oak tree, and I'm like, "You self-indulgent bastard, I can't believe I'm still reading this." And yes, it's the most beautiful description of an oak tree, but... So in general, I try more for the tap dancing routine, because I think people deserve to be entertained, but at a certain point you are trying to explore something. So in that essay, my mother had no information for me, so I was like, "Let me try to figure it out. Let me see if I have anything in common with this fake woman."

**AC:** You use digression in your stories, where you'll start it off and then we go off on a tangent and then we come back nice and then we go back and we come back. Are you just comfortable telling stories like that?

**SC:** I'm getting nauseous just thinking about it. *(laughs)*

**AC:** The ocean is rocking. No, don't worry. Again, is that just your natural inclination when you're telling a story, or is that something over time that you've found, "That works for me, and allows me to bring in..." One of the things that's so important in humor is surprise. And you are able, in your stories, to always kind of keep us guessing a little bit off the foot, so we can't keep it coming, whatever it might be.

**SC:** Oh, thank you. I think that might be kind of a flaw that worked out somewhat in my favor, at least in print, that maybe doesn't work out in person, which is that I do go off on quite a digression, but you just have to hold on to where you are. I feel like I'm fairly decent at being in a conversation where someone says, "What was I saying?" and I'll be able to tell them. You know what I mean? You just have to hold your place a little bit. But I actually sometimes think they're too long. But sometimes when you're going on the tangent, you're on your own sort of exploratory mission, and you surprise yourself with what you find there that you can sort of bring back.

**AC:** Is there an experience that you've had that you've looked at and said, "God, I want to make that into a story or an essay," but you just quite haven't found the way into?

**SC:** Wow. That's a very good question. Sure, but the thing is, it's anything that's really sad or really dark. I try to do that a little bit with the second collection, where I thought, "What are some subjectively funny things? One, seeing a bear get killed in front of me in Alaska. How do I make that funny? How do I make a heartbreak funny? How do you do these things? How do you make feeling lonely or whatever it is amusing?" So whatever is dark, I feel is a great way to do it. There's not something that's coming to mind. The other thing is, I'm not assigned these essays, you know what I mean? So I would have to sort of think of it naturally.

**AC:** How many do you write to do the book? Do you just say, "This is it," or do you have a whole bunch of excess pieces?

**SC:** There are a couple that I cut out, just because they seemed, especially if you're writing personal humor, personal essays, if you think of threading a needle, and you start with your own experience, and the prism of your own experience, and if you can't pull it out the other side to something universal or bigger, then it's just you talking about yourself for a while. I remember I wrote an essay for the first book about how I got a speeding ticket in Connecticut, and my interaction with the cop and stuff like that, but there was absolutely nothing larger to it, it had like two or three great lines which I then surgically removed and put somewhere else....

**AC:** Never leave one behind.

**SC:** ...and I discarded the trash. You do that.

**AC:** Right. We should take a question. Is anybody ready to do one? *(to audience)* Yes, sir, or ma'am.

**Audience member:** I was just wondering if, when you approached either book of essays, if you had an argument in mind, or if you just let yourself find your way as you were writing?

**AC:** So I'm just going to repeat the question for the honor of our podcast listeners, which was do you have a unifying thought when you're looking at the collection of essays?

**Audience member:** Do you have an organizing principle you fit your writing into, or do you just write and see what comes out of what you've written?

**AC:** An organizing principle.

**SC:** So you're repeating a *portion* of the question...

**AC:** That's right. I'm repeating it for the listening public.

**SC:** I do not have an organizing principle. The thing is, well, two things. One is that there is a pressure to have an organizing principle, which is quite irritating, a sort of sing-for-your-supper reason for being that you're pressured to have for a publishing house, where a theme is what you're talking about, the pressure of a theme. A, you have to sort of rely on the fact that you're telling all these stories, so your own narrative threat is the theme. But a giant ME in capital letters is a really disgusting theme. So eventually, you have to see what comes out of in terms of what you're thinking. I think part of that is just time. If you write something over the course of



two years, your perspective on life is changed slightly. Your experiences have changed slightly. I've never been one for writing about dating very much, but even if I was, I think that it changes from wacky single girl to relationship stuff to not-relationship, you know? I think it changes over time, what you do. You change jobs, you move cities, something like that. But there is a pressure for an organizing principle in general that I try to avoid, because it just narrows what you're most meant to write about. I sort of lost my train of thought slightly, but...

**AC:** Do you have a writing schedule that you like to keep to when you're working on a large piece of work like this? Do you like to write morning, night, something like that?

**SC:** These guys I wrote while I had the day job still. And so, I had no organizing principle except for preservation of sanity. Basically, every vacation, weekends, sometimes in the morning, which sounds hellish, but actually I kind of miss it. I miss having that structure, because you definitely give yourself enough rope to hang yourself if you don't have that structure, and all of a sudden you're eating cheese doodles and it's three and you're still in your bathrobe, and it's really bad and dark. But now, I tend to write in the mornings, is the answer.

**AC:** You do a fair bit of journalism too. You were the travel writer/correspondent, right, for the *Telegraph*, you write for *GQ*. Do you find that helps the larger stuff? It's still funny, but there's definitely some reporting there.

**SC:** Well, it's the contact; it's the ability to bounce off something. I think, especially for non-fiction essays, you have to have some sort of relationship to the world. Any

humor writer I respect or love, they have an anti-social streak. However, if they lived in a cabin in the woods, it's not the same thing. And in fact I think the weaker essays, and I won't name them, of people I admire tend to be the bird-watching essays.

**AC:** Who are your favorites, just to bring it up? We've got the tape rolling. We won't ask you to say the ones you don't like, but who are some of your favorites?

**SC:** There's no one where, universally, it's like, "I can't stand that person's writing," it's just weaker than the others. My all-time favorite for this particular genre is David Rakoff. I adore him. Also James Thurber I brought up, Dorothy Parker, Megan Dom, David Sedaris, obviously, for this kind of thing. And then, unexpected ones: weirdly, I've read a lot of really great... they're not mean to be funny in the same way, but Adam Gopnik is funny in that way. Weirdly, Laura Hillenbrand is funny in that way, which you wouldn't expect.

**AC:** Are you ever tempted to write something very, very dark with absolutely no humor whatsoever?

**SC:** Yeah, but then it comes off as satire. Then you're stuck. If you're a comedian, I'm sure every comedian has to do that thing where they're like, "No, I do like you. I'm not kidding. I really love that sweater." You have to issue all these disclaimers. I think that I'm working on a novel that's pretty much done, and obviously in the course of the novel you have more real estate, and if you lose all jokes like this (*snaps fingers*), it's no good. Like with Steve Hely, who wrote *How I Became a Famous Novelist*, which is a great novel, that's a hilariously funny novel, or Sam

Lipsyte, a hilariously funny writer of fiction, but also very dark and sad, you have to spread it out.

**AC:** Let's talk about writing fiction. Was it a bit intimidating to start, and how was it different than writing, say, non-fiction, where you can go back to the truth? That's one of the things about non-fiction. When you get stuck, you can say, "What happened? What really happened?" And that can be your saving grace.

**SC:** Part of the work is done for you in non-fiction by the reality of the world, and fiction is a huge pain in the ass because everything... can I say "ass" on this?

**AC:** I think, if I had to tweet something from this entire day, "Fiction is a huge pain in the ass" would be the tweet. *(laughter)*

**SC:** That's all I've given you? That's not good!

**AC:** *(to audience)* Thanks, everybody!

**SC:** Well, because it's all your fault. Everything is your fault. Every choice you make, every decision. You can't go back. And then you're sort of beholden to these characters you've made up, in a way where you can't just be, "Well, I'm sorry, but I only spent an hour with them. This is all I have." No. You made up the kind of toothpaste they use, so you know everything. And so it's a lot of pressure in that way. But I always wanted to write fiction. I always wrote stories. And as I described before, I sort of fell into the non-fiction as sort of a happy accident, and I'm not implying that it's not work and I don't love it, but it wasn't my first impulse.

**AC:** Can you tell us if your novel is also in the first person?

**SC:** No.

**AC:** OK. So it's second? Third? There's only three, so I guess we'll just work our way through.

**SC:** I broke the eighth wall.

**AC:** Yeah, you have an eighth wall.

**SC:** It's just a symbol.

**AC:** It's just an amorphous presence.

**SC:** It's third person. Second person would be a neat trick to sustain for the course of an entire novel, and people have done it, but I'm not one of them. It's from three perspectives, two guys and a girl, which is very interesting, spending more than half your day for three years in the mind of two men, two man-children.

**AC:** A lot of authors treat characters like, "Well, it's just a person." Is that how you approached it, or were you very conscious of their gender?

**SC:** What do you mean?

**AC:** Well, when you're writing from a male point of view, as opposed to a female.

**SC:** Well, it's funny you should say that, because at first I was nervous that I wasn't doing that enough. So suddenly, I would just sort of snap out of it and be like, "Oh, should I have him touch his penis?" (*laughter*) Because there's a penis. And then I'd think, "That's probably not right." Especially in public, just errantly doing that.

**AC:** I would say, if you tried to do it in a way that represented reality, it would be in the book a lot. So maybe just once...

**SC:** Unless I'm actually giving him some kind of a neurological dysfunction. He can't control it. It's there all the time.

**AC:** Some kind of penile Tourette's.

**SC:** And then I sort of let that go, literally, and just proceeded under the assumption that if you are someone who's generally observant or can generally be empathetic towards people, that wall breaks down very quickly. I think that part is the easiest part. Every once in a while, you're mindful of what they're wearing. You have them take off a jacket or something.

**AC:** And how long have you worked on it?

**SC:** Three-plus years, I guess.

**AC:** Do you think, when it's all over, you'll miss them? I've talked to authors who miss their characters when it's over, because they've seen them every day, almost every day, for three years.

**SC:** There's an interview with Fran Leibowitz did with the *Paris Review* when she was trying to write a novel, which I don't think ever came out, and I related to her so much in that moment when she says, "People talk about their characters talking to them. I made them up! They're not talking to me!" And I used to think, "Uh oh, she didn't finish hers. What's going on here?" But I think about them in the negative, almost, which means that I don't know if I will miss them, but I know what they

wouldn't say. I don't necessarily think, "Oh, it's writing itself for me, they're coming through me," but I know, like, "That doesn't sound like them anymore." You live with them long enough, and it's like living with a person for long enough, and you think, "They would never like that. They're not going to want to go to see a Broadway show. I'm not gonna buy them tickets to do that." But you wouldn't necessarily know exactly what they were thinking then either.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Another question, perhaps? Yes sir.

**Audience member:** When you're writing a non-fiction essay, and you go through, and you're writing and remembering things that happened, and you hit a point in the story where you're like, "Well, it happened this way, but I see this kind of being cooked if I take it that way," do you ever let yourself kind of fabricate a little bit for the sake of the story, or do you always try to stay as true as you can to the non-fiction aspect?

**AC:** So as Robert Gray said, "Never let a story go unimproved." So the question is, do you ever change things for the benefit of the story?

**SC:** Yes, of course I change things for the benefit of the story. But I never change the truth of what happened. I think that's, again, the smell test I was referring to. I will compress timelines, or I will make someone sound much better or much worse than they actually were, as long as I feel, with my own sort of barometer, that I'm still under the umbrella of "We both were there, we know what happened." You know what I mean? And if they were to do the same to me, if you want to do the life-moral test, would I have the same read on the situation? I'd probably be like, "No, I don't

enjoy how you depicted me,” or “I don’t think this necessarily happened.” But a story or an essay that takes place about this, right now, me sitting here, I’m not going to suddenly say I was in the audience. It just doesn’t make sense.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Yeah.

**Audience member:** How do you stay calm in the darkness? Because I write about a lot of really dark stuff too, and then I get really worked up, and I was just wondering, do you meditate, play an instrument? What do you do to keep yourself calm?

**SC:** Oh wow. *(to Andrew)* Do you have to repeat...

**AC:** The question is, how do you keep your calm or your sense of balance when you’re dealing with stuff that is not pleasant?

**SC:** It very much depends on... well, you’re not writing it in one sitting. That’s one thing. I think that’s a different answer for a poet, not that poets write in one sitting, but there is some sort of core impulse that comes out of poetry, which is structured differently. Or even very dark comedy. But I guess the answer is I kind of don’t. I think that the darker essays that have kept me up, the things I think of, like, “This is actually very revealing about myself” or revealing about something else, I just think, “How do I attack it so that it’s not...” And maybe this is how I keep calm. The technical part of your brain kicks in. When I said before, “Oh, I regret some of the things I wrote,” part of my reason for regretting them is not because I offended people, part of my reason is that I don’t think they were good enough. They weren’t worth the squeeze. They weren’t worth offending someone for the joke that I made.

So whatever it is you're experiencing, chances are that other people have experienced it and other people have written about it. So you have to think, "Why is my take different?" And that can sometimes be very calming, when you feel like you're just successful at the actual writing of it. And then you sort of work out the emotional havoc that you have wrought, either on yourself or other people later. I guess the other answer is to think of the technical aspect of it, I guess.

**AC:** *(to audience)* Yes.

**Audience member:** Did working at the literary agency help before your book came out, in that you kind of saw how the sausage was made, so to speak? Did that give you sort of a leg up?

**AC:** So the question is, did your literary agency work help your career later as a writer?

**SC:** Right.

**AC:** I feel odd, I feel like I'm translating English for you.

**SC:** *(laughs)* No. Not the literary agency part. I'll replace your question with the part where I can say yes. *(laughs)* The literary agency part didn't help very much at all, except to give me a perspective on how many people try to get books published, which is only sort of paralyzing. I won't tell you how many query letters we got a day for an agency that wasn't too big. But the publicity part inadvertently helped. I didn't think it would, because I'm working behind the scenes for other people, and it's the opposite end of the industry, speaking about how the sausage gets made.



How a book becomes a baby and then grows up and gets pushed out into the world by the publicity department. So I'm not part of that construction of the book experience. But inadvertently, it did help, because if I hadn't met a wonderful editor and writer named Ed Park, who worked at the *Village Voice* at the time, by pitching him books, other people's books, and then by naturally becoming friends with a couple of those people when you're on the phone all the time, the ones who don't treat you like the Avon lady. Basically I got hung up on for ten years. If I hadn't sent him that note about being locked out, maybe I would've become a writer in some other way. I like to think that I probably would have. But my specific sort of trajectory is because I knew his e-mail, and he's the one who said "Turn this into an essay and I'll publish it." And I only knew him because he handled books at the *Village Voice*. And I only knew that because I have my day job. So the answer is, yes, it helped in a very direct way, and no, I could not reproduce it for all the world.

**AC:** (to audience) Yes, right over here.

**SC:** God, it's so dark.

**Audience member:** Sorry!

**AC:** Yes.

**SC:** Hi!

**Audience member:** Up there it must be so bright!

**SC:** It's so bright! (to other audience member) When you asked your question about the darkness, I was like, "Sing it! I can't see!"

**Audience member:** So the question you mentioned in terms of free-writing or editing, it was about this sort of sweep in terms of who was it worth insulting insofar as... I mean that in the best way, but who was worth, long-term, in terms of the way you portray them, how generous you are with friends or acquaintances or people you sort of randomly meet and you can pull the juice out of them in terms of this funny thing happened, but in terms of how generous we can be, I'm wondering, where is that line between that push to publish more, to write more... Whenever you're successful or people like your work, their next thing is always, "You should be writing more. I want one every week." And that's super-flattering, but where is that line between generosity to others and generosity to yourself, meaning giving yourself the time to resolve these questions that your writing is really about, versus output?

**AC:** So where's the line between continually feeding those magazines or publishers who want more and more of the same kind of thing, or the same kind of observations, and saying, "No, I can't do it, it's not worth the squeeze." I like that. "It's not worth the squeeze."

**SC:** Oh gosh. I feel like "I don't know" is not an acceptable answer. *(laughs)* It's a complicated question, because I think that, A, you might have a different story that I do, but there's the perception that people are constantly demanding something from me, and I don't necessarily think they are on a magazine basis, and if they are, the good news is that the magazine is different every time, so you're going to be writing about something very different that you write about for *GQ* versus *The New York*

*Times* versus, I don't know, *Upstairs Medical College Magazine*, whatever it is. It's all very different. But I think your larger question is about, how do you decide, and I think that time is the best thing you can give yourself, and if you don't have time, then just don't do it. Just don't do it. If your writing is sort of mired or murky because it's some sort of revenge fantasy, which is sometimes the fiction-writer game, the non-fiction writer game, or if you're writing because you are just making fun of someone, which is different than having heart to it, it won't be good anyway. It won't be good.

**Audience member:** I guess I mean that push to publish versus the fear of almost some kind of spirit. Because there are lots of other things, when you think about what you've written and you think, "Did I need to do this? Yes, I needed to, perhaps for myself, but do I need to publish it?" And it's in the not-publishing that there's one more article...

**SC:** Well, maybe, then, the answer is to think long-term about it. The answer is that if these are things where you feel like you're constantly feeding some sort of machine, maybe you can give whatever machine that is, be it internal or external, your B material, if that's what you're looking for. And if there's something larger that you're questioning, save it for something longer. Maybe you're writing a longer essay. Maybe you're writing something else. I don't know if that really answers your question either. I think if it's coming from the right place, I don't know how to sing, really, but I take it it's from your diaphragm, I don't really know, but I think that maybe your question is, are you going to tap out? If you're mining your life so

frequently, what's going to be left? It's similar to your question about approaching an experience thinking you're going to write about it, but the thing is, I think that's singing from the wrong part. I think it has to be the prism of what you see in your observation, and then you'll just never run out and it won't be wrong.

**AC:** You had a novel going when you were asked to do the book of essays. Is that correct?

**SC:** Yes.

**AC:** And what happened to that novel?

**SC:** It's terrible.

**AC:** OK. *(laughter)*

**SC:** It's true. It's a dark comedy about a couple's relationship disintegrating in New Hampshire, and it's got a magic realism thing, and they buy a plant that's like the one from *Little Shop of Horrors*, and it's terrible. *(laughs)* I like how I'm saying this to you as if you've read it, like, "You should know better!"

**AC:** Well, I wasn't going to bring it up...

**SC:** But I'm happy I wrote it. I'm happy I wrote...

**AC:** That's part of being a novelist, you need to get one under your belt.

**Sloan Crosley:** Yeah, that I knocked the first one out, and then I realized, no, I don't need to write a book that's like eight generations of a Scottish family, and it takes

place in outer space, but at the same time, this was very small. And when there were five characters in it, there are authors that can do that, like Rick Russo can do that and make it funny, but I can't do that.

**AC:** *(to audience)* We've got time for maybe a couple more questions. Yes, right here.

**Audience member:** You said that sometimes you'll make something up, but it's not too far away from what the story is. Do you ever have a hard time drawing a line where you'll think of something that's great but it's too far from what the actual story is, and have you ever written something and then realized, "This is too far from what happened"?

**AC:** So have you ever written something and realized, "This is really almost fiction," I guess is kind of what you were saying?

**SC:** Actually, no. I haven't. I think that if it's in support of what you started to write about, because again, I think this is almost related to your question as well, where it comes from the germ of whatever the idea is. And part of that is just a structural thing as well as an emotional and moral thing, where you're thinking, "Well, if it's zooming off into something else, I've lost the thread of whatever it was I wanted to write about anyway." And if it's zooming that far off into something else that you're making up, then put it somewhere else. Either write fiction or realize that, "Oh, this other story about this person was really interesting. This other story about this experience is really interesting, but that's not what I'm writing about." And if you find yourself consistently going there, maybe that *is* what you're writing about, and you should drop the training wheels of the first idea.

**AC:** Have you ever been surprised by something that people really end up loving or thinking is funny, that when you wrote it you thought, *(in blasé tone)* “That’s good,” and then they just go nuts, and if so, can you name one for us?

**SC:** Oh my gosh. All the time. It happens at readings, where I’ll read from something and I’m like, “Ah, this is a gem, boy are you guys in for a treat,” and silence.

*(laughter)* It’s not mine, so I don’t feel any ego in saying this, this will be funny when I say it even now, but I do not think it’s funny as part of the essay at all. In the Alaska essay in the second book, I talk about the Anchorage airport, and how wacky it is, and I have a description that is true, it definitely happened. There was a man in a polar bear costume, and a Native American headdress, who was greeting people and passing out flyers, and I make some David Lynch crack. Which is fine, but I think this is like, “Aaaah, it’s wonderful.” And a paragraph later, I mention that there is a gift shop in the Anchorage airport called “Moosellaneous”. *(laughter)* This is what I’m telling you! Much funnier, not mine, I don’t think it’s funny, and everyone thinks that’s much funnier. I also set it up to be funnier, but it is objectively funnier, so I’m always surprised. But it’s usually in a little thing like that. You know when certain essays are better.

**AC:** But that, I think, is part of what you do. You have that observer being able to see something, almost like a miner can see where the gold is, or a farmer can see where fertile ground is. You can experience something and know that, that, that, and that are probably the funny, ridiculous things when you reach back. You can do that. *(to audience)* You had a question, yeah.

**Audience member:** I know that you're working on a novel now, you don't just do personal essays. But when you are writing about your life, do you have specific events, or maybe members of your family that you know you won't write about, and if so, if you experience writer's block, do you ever struggle with that? Like, "I know there's a lot here, but I just don't want to share that part of my life."

**AC:** Is there anyone in your life that's out of bounds?

**SC:** Untouchables.

**AC:** Untouchables, yes.

**Audience member:** And you don't have to share who that is, if that's true, but when you make a career out of speaking your personal truth, is there stuff where you just say, "You know what, I'm not gonna go there"?

**SC:** This is better than therapy. *(laughter)* This entire thing. This is great. It's a good question. I mean, I feel like so much of the writing is a maneuver around those problems. A lot of it is interactions where you're sort of the control in the experiment, right? And so a lot of those interactions are with strangers, things like that. And you can write whatever you want about a stranger. And then it only comes up on that one-off basis, and again this goes back to your question too, with the one-off, you don't feel like you're mining everything, because you've had interactions today that you could write about, with people you didn't know on the subway or whatever, that you could probably do. It only comes up when you actually compile an entire book, and it's suddenly like you're meandering through the world without

a root system, and you have to start writing about the root system. You have to start writing about those people. I think there are things I wouldn't write about them, but I wouldn't leave them out entirely. There are things that I won't write about my parents, but it would be very strange to just sort of cut them out as if I was raised by wolves. So it's that kind of thing. And if it's somebody specific in your life, I think it has to be up to you about what you're comfortable doing.

**AC:** Is there any advice, and this will be our closing question, any advice you might give to people who are aspiring to do humorous essays or to be published, or even something you might've said to yourself? Could you go back in time to when you were in the same boat? Is there any advice that you'd give to upcoming writers?

**SC:** Well, a couple of things. Three things. Can I do three?

**AC:** Absolutely.

**SC:** OK. One is sort of an analogy that I always think about. If you've ever seen the setting of a pearl, it's not the same as the setting of a diamond, because a diamond grips to it, it touches it, but you will scratch the pearl and mess it up. A pearl you can actually turn, it's a fun jewelry fact.

**AC:** OK.

**SC:** Sorry, the novel has a jewelry theme to it. But you can't hold on to any idea of comedy too tightly. A lot of the questions are the idea of what's OK, what's not, and if you're so worried about the boundaries of it, then I think you'll sort of screw yourself. I think you need to sort of, it's hard to explain, but loosen your mind, which



sort of leads me to the second thing, which is not mine, it's Annie Dillard's. It's about writing in general, but to me it always struck me as being pertinent to humor. She's like a woodsy woman, and she says, "You should always aim for the chopping block when you're chopping wood. Otherwise you'll miss." Weirdly, there's this thing where you have to aim for the stump, not the actual wood that you're splitting. And I just feel like that's the best way to describe good writing, is to just aim a little bit past whatever you're going for, to some larger theme. If you just get too bogged down in the details of what actually happened, or what actually is the most funny, or what actually is this, just have a general faith in your voice, and a general faith in it.

And then the last one, which is probably the more concrete one I can give you, is also not mine. I interviewed Bill Hader for *GQ*, and he was talking about the *SNL* writers' room, and it's only about that, but I thought this applied to all writing. He said that when people tell you something is wrong with something you're doing, 90% of the time they're right. And when they tell you how to fix it, 90% of the time they're wrong. So just as you go forth, and people are looking at your writing, and you're showing it to people or whatever it is, and they say, "Yeah, it would just be so much cooler if that person was an alcoholic," you're like, "Well, OK, so you need her to be darker, but no, that's a terrible idea." So just sort of have that sort of balance of listening to criticism, even if it's coming from yourself, but also you being flexible on the solution.

**AC:** Great. Well, it's always wonderful when a writer turns out to be as funny and intelligent in person as they are on the page.

**SC:** Thanks!

**AC:** Sloane, thank you so much for being here.

**SC:** Thank you for having me! That's really nice! Thank you!

*(applause)*