

Andrew Clark: Good morning, everybody. Give yourselves a nice warm Sunday morning round of applause for coming out. *(applause)* All right. This is one of the panels I've been really looking forward to. In fact, it's the one that I was maybe most looking forward to, without casting any aspersions on the other ones, when we planned this whole thing. It's a panel about writing humorous non-fiction, or, as one of our panelists terms what he does, "investigative humorism," which I think is a wonderful phrase. Our first panelist I had the pleasure of meeting in August. I've loved his work since he worked at *Spy Magazine*. His name is Henry Alford, and he's written for *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker*, and he's the author of many funny books, including *Would It Kill You to Stop Doing That* and a book about the wisdom of people over the age of seventy, *How To Live: A Search for Wisdom From Old People While They're Still On This Earth*. He's a really, really funny gentleman, so please welcome Henry Alford. *(applause)* Our next panelist... *(to Henry Alford)* Please have a seat.

Henry Alford: Do you care where I sit?

AC: This will be mine and you will have your choice, since you're out first.

HA: I'm gonna sit here.

AC: Our next panelist I just met, but so far I've been very impressed. *(laughter)* She's terrific. I've been going through her work as a writer and seeing the kind of articles she commissions as an editor, and there's no question that she has that wonderful mix of great journalistic skills and a wonderful sense of humor. She's now an editor at *GQ Magazine*, but before that she was at *Vanity Fair*, and prior to that she was also

at *Newsweek*. So as we mentioned backstage, on the spectrum of funny, *Newsweek* is button-down journalism, and then you're getting more and more into the area where you can have more and more leeway. So please welcome, Senior Editor at *GQ Magazine*, Sarah Ball. *(applause)*

Sarah Ball: Right here?

AC: Yeah. When we had Sloane Crosley here yesterday, she mentioned that for her humor, she lives her life, and then kind of looks back and tries to figure out where the funny is. So what you guys are doing when you're working at a magazine that has very specific deadlines and processes is kind of the reverse, if you will. You decide on what you're going to cover, and then go there with the intent of getting the story, while at the same time being funny. So I guess a question I might put to you is, how do you pick your subjects? In other words, when you're assigning a story to a writer, how do you know, "Well, this is a story that will benefit from a writer with someone like, say, Henry's skills as a humorist"?

SB: There are a couple different scenarios where topics even come up as an editor. I was talking to Mike about this earlier. The Editor-In-Chief at *GQ*, Jim Nelson, started in TV writing and sitcom writing, and so he spent five years doing that, working in a room, before he transitioned to magazines and then eventually became the Editor-In-Chief at *GQ*. So when he has story ideas meetings, and when we meet about each issue, he likes to cultivate a room sensibility. And often, that can be really daunting compared to the way Sloane is talking about being able to just think in your own mind what jumps out as funny. He'll be like, "What's this funny take on this thing, or

is there anything in this funny topic?” And you sort of have to be ready to react, or have a great stable of funny writers where you can say, “Well, actually, Mike Sacks has this amazing thing on that exact topic, and I think we should do it.” So it’s less about scrutinizing—although the news can be what the editor saw on the way into work that day—it’s less about that as an editor and more about thinking about an issue that’s going to happen two months from now, what is going to be evergreen and funny, and what suits your editor’s sensibility.

AC: So is that where something like your “Emmys Telecast Drinking Game” came out of? Was that out of a room?

SB: Yes, that was, in fact, out of a room. What you’re referring to is the back page of the magazine, which is a humor page that I edit and help steer, and we do a different topical-humor thing each month, but it’s very hard to plan several months out. And at *GQ*, one of the challenges of being funny for *GQ* is that it has to have a hugely visual element to it, because we’re so obsessed with visuals.

HA: Because you’re so looks-ist. *(laughter)*

SB: We’re so looks-ist! We’re so judgmental about how you look.

HA: You’re such bitches about how people look!

SB: So we did this drinking game that we thought enabled us to illustrate different famous people in a really caricature-y way, and have them doing goofy things. But yes, it was totally that. We were sitting around talking about the Emmys coming up

in three months, “What should we do? People drink during telecasts.” It enables you to tell twelve, I think it is, or nine jokes that are easily greenlit.

AC: So someone who’s going to pitch that back page to you, if they were doing it now, has to be thinking “Big event three or four months from now, Super Bowl, St. Patrick’s Day,” something that they can peg it to?

SB: Yes. It’s so funny, that’s what actually gets greenlit very easily, or finds traction with the art department and Jim. But then you have this thing with grumpy magazine editors where they say, “Ugh, we can’t always just do the season, or the holiday,” even though that happens to have the biggest success rate. So I would say that the thing that wins the easiest is just something simple that you haven’t necessarily seen before.

HA: But that’s in the air somehow, that people are talking about.

SB: Yeah, that people are talking about that will hold, or that people will be talking about, which is the hard part of it. Or just something that’s funny in a vacuum, that has a hugely visual side.

HA: I sort of feel like what you’re saying, though, is slightly specific to monthly publications.

SB: Totally. Absolutely.

HA: I’m also writing for *The New York Times*, very occasionally *The New Yorker* or its website. So in my case, stuff really does have to be topical. And so I’m someone who spends probably three hours a week where I sit down and actually scroll through

this website called *Gawker* that's sort of like gossip and media crap, and then some issues of national interest. But I go through that; I'll spend like three hours a week and look at all those stories, because it's very hard to pitch an idea that doesn't have some...

SB: Urgency to it?

HA: Yeah, topicality or urgency. I think if you're a publication sweetheart, if you've been writing for them for years, they will let you do a story about the time I went canoeing with my friend down the Delaware water gap. *(laughter)* But if you're not a pet yet, you really have to...

SB: Earn that leash? *(laughter)*

HA: *(laughs)* If you will. You have to go out of your way to say, "There's a new website that blah blah blah blah," or, "In China now, people are killing their children," or whatever, *(laughter)* in order to make the point that this is something that needs to be addressed right away. When I was starting out, that was the hardest thing in the world for me. It's not that it's at odds with the comedic impulse, but usually you laugh at something because it's happening in your life. You don't laugh at stuff because everyone in the country is talking about the iPhone.

SB: You have to laugh at this now.

HA: Yeah. You laugh at the iPhone 6 because you own one, not because it was just released and everyone else is talking about it.

AC: Is that where your recent article “The Bro Hug” came from? You were searching *Gawker*, right, and *The New York Times*...

HA: How did the “Bro Hug” article come about?

AC: Good title, “Bro Hug”, but yeah, it was a September article...

HA: Oh, that was actually another guy who writes for the *Times*, he wrote an e-mail to my editor and said, “Every time I go out, I get accosted by dudes who I don’t know very well who want to hug me.” (*laughter*) So that was the genesis of it. And he said, “Maybe Henry should write about it,” because I wrote about manners. So I saw that, and I sort of thought, “Maybe I’m a big slut, but I kind of like the hugging.” (*laughter*) So I was not really on board at first, but the more I thought about it, I thought, “Oh, that is actually interesting,” and when you think about it, yeah, it does feel increasingly like you need less and less friendship or intimacy with other people for them to hug you, that everyone’s hugging now, that it’s become sort of a default greeting. So then I realized, “OK, well maybe I don’t have to write this in the first person.” So I found a bunch of people, including a guy who teaches in a high school in South Philly, who said that his students want to hug him all the time. He’s a beardy, good-looking dude, (*laughter*) and he said, “You know, I just stand bolt upright when they do it, and I make it as alien as possible for them.” And yeah, that’s a big turn. We’ve all hugged the scarecrow, or some kind of skeletal person, and yeah, you don’t want to go back to that.

AC: I think one of the neat things that I find with non-fiction, where you’re going out and getting a story and then being funny while reporting it, is the advantage that

you have of people who are not trying to be funny, often the people you're interviewing and the subjects, being incredibly funny and kind of insightful. I'm thinking of some of the people that you have for your book about aging. And just to read a couple, one of the quotes that you got from a retirement home: "If you're an old man, and you go into a bar wearing pajamas, people will buy you drinks."

(laughter)

HA: Right. I actually didn't get that that's from...there was a very cool zine in the 80's called *Duplex Planet*.

AC: Oh, that's right.

HA: Yeah, and a guy named David Greenberger would go around the country interviewing people in retirement homes. And yeah, that was one of the great things. But I actually got a story out of that, because I read that quote, and then two weeks later I read that there's a Mafia chief who's since passed away, this guy Vincent "The Chin" Gigante, who lived in the West Village and who was obviously suspected to be the head of a major crime syndicate, was feigning dementia by walking around the neighborhood in his pajamas. And it was pretty clear to everyone that, "Oh, that's sort of his front for not having to go to trial." So between that David Greenberger thing about if you go into a bar wearing pajamas, people will buy you drinks, and knowing that Vincent "The Chin" was doing this, I could put those two facts together. The back page of *The New York Times Magazine* used to be a funny essay, and I pitched it to them and said, "Can't I walk around in my pajamas every day and see what happens?" And I did. *(laughter)*

AC: And how'd it go?

HA: It was good. *(laughs)* It was fun.

AC: When you're thinking of an idea, do you have a sense for that kind of story that can work and one that's maybe trying too hard? Do you know what I mean? Because sometimes we do see sort of stunt journalism in other areas, other people doing it, and it feels so much like just a stunt, as opposed to revealing some kind of humorous truth, if you will.

HA: I'm trying to think. Usually, if I'm nervous about it going into it, that suggests that there's something amiss, which is to say that if it's the kind of experience I might do anyway—like I'm enough of a slob that I might actually walk around in my pajamas, that's not a huge stretch for me. Whereas if that idea had made me really anxious, then to me that's a bellwether or a red flag that maybe this is a little stunt-y. So I think you want the idea to feel comfortable, and also if you look at the idea and suddenly your mind starts reeling off things from your life that are like that, or things that you might do with that idea, you get a sense that that's something that is probably right for you and isn't going to seem like a super awkward...

SB: We do so many of those. As a magazine, I would say we do maybe too many of them. But they're great, and people like to read them. But I would say that you have to have full confidence that whoever you're sending out there is going to be funny if nothing good happens. That's the risk you have to take. We tend to assign those kinds of things to people who can really make something out of nothing. And that is a really hard assignment to get.

AC: Are there rules, almost, that you have made, not that you give out, but like, for instance, when people go into an area, the easiest thing to do is just make fun of whoever you're around. But it tends to not work.

SB: We like this kind of humor where you tend to be on the side of the person...this is more like when you're doing a stunt with somebody. So we've had writers...there's a karaoke night in L.A. at a karaoke bars that a ton of porn stars go to just to unwind after a long work week. *(laughter)* And we sent a very funny writer there to sing karaoke. The headline was, "Deadbeat Does 'Don't Stop Believing'" or something. *(laughter)* So we tend to be on the side of the subjects, and the stunt tends to be almost self-effacing. There are some really famous ones. John Jeremiah Sullivan, for *GQ*, went to a Christian rock campout festival. It's in his book of essays, and it's really funny. You think he's going to go in at the beginning of it as this funny magazine writer and have this holier-than-thou attitude, but he ends up being on the side of these really weird characters who issue these amazing quotes, and that's one of my favorite types of humor, is that unexpectedly hilarious quoter-anecdote factor in a more serious conceit.

AC: One of the things that people who do non-fiction humor kind of do a lot is use the tropes of journalism to be funny. For instance, when you did a piece on Seth Meyers, Sarah, you said, "The guy can't sing. The guy can't dance." And then, quote, "I can't sing or dance,' he confirmed." *(laughter)* Which is using journalese, but to make it funny or rebrand it. Is that something you think people just intuit coming out of journalism, or do you think you can pick up these tricks? You do it as well,

where you parse quotes and put them together in a sentence to make it funny even though there's not necessarily a joke or a punch line there.

SB: We were just talking about this. I think some of it is, those are jokes that, and maybe this isn't a good thing, but those are jokes often that the people editing you think are funny, because they come out of a journalistic background too. It's making a joke to yourself in a way. For me personally, I've always found it funny, I started in a very newsy, serious place that often scrubbed jokes and humor out of things, or didn't necessarily want, like I cover a lot of entertainment and TV, they didn't necessarily want the subject to be just joking the whole interview, whereas I always thought it was funnier to have them joking a lot. So some of that is a reaction to that. It's lampooning the form, and *GQ* loves that. They love to sort of show the architecture of a profile or something, or show the architecture of a funny nonfiction piece, and make fun of it at the same time.

AC: Now you went to Duke. Did you always want to be in journalism and a writer/editor, or was it something that you kind of found yourself into?

SB: I did. I always wanted to do some form of this. At first I thought I might want to do it in a newspaper. I don't think there are any newspapers left. It's a very diminishing form, except of course for *The New York Times*. I got into magazines because of this exact thing that we're talking about. There's a real looseness to magazines that is not always the case at a wire service or something, and I like funny and lively things that also are very visual, and that's what so much of what we do is, that it has to have that visual mandate.

AC: Henry, can you tell us how you got into writing, and how you found yourself as a professional writer?

HA: Sure. Let's see. Studied film at NYU, worked in the film industry for like three and a half years as a casting person, and became kind of increasingly disenchanted with film production. It's just so grueling, and I don't like to wake up at five in the morning. *(laughter)* So I just started writing stuff on my own, and the first stuff I started doing was lists, similar to a Top Ten list on *Letterman*. And I started sending them to *Spy Magazine*, a satirical magazine that was around in the eighties. And I think they took three of those lists, maybe four of them, and then I did like a 250-word thing and mailed that in, and they took that. And then I thought, OK, they've taken five things, what I'm going to do now is I'm going to write the first paragraph of something, and then I'm going to say, "And here's what I would do for the rest of it." And that's how I got my first assignment, and I think I did two or three of those, and then I said to the woman who I was dealing with, "Are you ever looking for staff? I'm sort of burning out at my job. I don't like to wake up at five in the morning, and I could be an attractive bauble in your workplace." *(laughter)* And it took maybe half a year before something came up, but that's how it started.

AC: *Spy Magazine* was hugely influential for a lot of people. They were very funny, but also very, very serious. A lot of the big journalistic pieces were really acerbic, but they were also really well researched. Was that the aesthetic? Was that something everyone said, "This is what we're going to do, we're going to be really pointed and smart"?

HA: Yeah. And it had a very specific voice. It was a really weird fit for me, I will say, only because it was all of those things you just said, but it was also quite vicious, and it had this kind of gossipy edge to it. And some of that kind of scared me shitless, to tell you the truth. I remember, shortly after I got the job there, the real estate developer Harry Helmsley, husband of Leona Helmsley, was on trial, and *Spy* had heard that Harry Helmsley has a prosthetic dick. And so it was the plan that they were going to send a bunch of us editorial assistants down to the courthouse en masse with garage door openers and TV remotes and try to activate the dick.

(laughter) Which is really fun to recount fifteen years later. At the time, I remember thinking, "Wow, that's either going to be the worst day of my life or the best day of my life." *(laughter)* Probably the worst. So that kind of stuff was really nervous-making to me. They wanted you to uncover dishy, investigative stuff, and that made me really uncomfortable at first. And then gradually, I got used to it. But no, *Spy* was unusual in that, when most people hear "humor in magazines," they think of *The New Yorker* and "Shouts and Murmurs," which doesn't have any facts in it. But the whole thing of *Spy* was, this is a news magazine, but one that's very funny. And their aesthetic came from a bunch of different places, but the two guys who started the magazine both came out of Time Life, and one of things that people loved about the magazine in its infancy was that they did all of those "charticles," great illustrations or funny pie charts or diagrams. And I remember reading that they got the idea for that because when one of them was at *Time Magazine*, he loved how whenever there was a plane crash, they would diagram where everyone was sitting on the plane.

(laughter) So this was meant to be like the last gruesome airplane crash approach to humor.

AC: Great. Maybe we have a question? *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: I have a quick question that brings up all those visual things that are very current. You see that all over the internet, these graphics and stuff. I think it's interesting. If you have an idea, how do you pitch something like that, that you know has this graphic element. Do you say, "Well, you guys will come up with a funny pie chart for it"?

AC: I'm going to repeat the question just because we're podcasting, which is, if you're a writer with a funny idea that's visual, how do you pitch it, say, to a magazine when you're not the illustrator? Is that about right? Yeah.

SB: It depends on what it's going to be. If it's going to be a lead visual, and you have this really funny idea for how a big visual over some jokes could happen, you could just describe it in detail. In some ways, our art department, our photo department, this is one of the biggest challenges of editing humor at a magazine, is that you have to then sell them on the idea. And if it there's too much detail, they're like, "There's no room for me to be artistic in this!" Which is a real thing. And then you have to say, "It's not supposed to be beautiful, it's supposed to be funny," and it turns into a philosophical debate. At *Vanity Fair* I edited a lot of online, web-y humor, so much more topical. And we would do funny, weird, Photoshop-y treatments or charts, things like that, and it would become an e-mail conversation with a writer, just going back and forth, links, just really spitballing and getting kind of granular. But

yeah, it is quite difficult. And sometimes the visual, even if you describe it well, for some reason or another, it may not pertain to the funniness, it just won't land, maybe we're through our illustration budget for the year, maybe we can't have that kind of a thing on that page, it can be difficult. But description is your friend there.

HA: Yeah. Or why not even do a crappy version of it and attach it as a JPEG and say, "Here is my crappy version of this?"

SB: That does work.

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

Audience member: Just piggybacking on his question. When you say visual, do you mean specifically like graphs and charts and stuff, or do you also consider if the story lends itself to excellent photography? Like if I write first-person narrative humorous stories... Like I used to work with a kangaroo shooter in Australia, and I could see how to illustrate that with photography, although it might blow out your photography budget. So how would you consider that visually? Are you talking about charts and graphs, are you talking about photos...

SB: Both. I think your question was probably more about charts and graphs and things that are very bespoke and very intricate and hard to imagine, but any pitch, not just funny pitches, but in any pitches, an editor likes to hear that it has a strong visual element if it's going in the magazine. If you're pitching "Shouts"-type stuff, I almost think that could be more fun because you're freed from that constraint. You can really be conceptual and don't necessarily have to say, "I have a photographer

lined up, but we gotta get a visa.” But it does help to say that you have some insight on what the photos would look like, or that it would be great to photograph.

HA: I just did a thing for *Vanity Fair* where they wanted me to go through various kinds of greetings. Hugging, handshaking, kissing on one cheek, kissing on two cheeks, et cetera, and then come up with funny categories and stuff. And so when I pitched it at them, I did the first version of it. You don’t want to write the whole piece, but if you can show them, “Here’s sort of what the modules would be, and here’s an example of the first one, here’s what the handshake one would read like,” and then I gave them the four funny categories and the jokes, and sent that to them, so then they can look at that and say, “Oh, OK, so that’s what this piece would look like. It would be that, only then he would go through these other five things.” It’s like a sample version. I think that helps a lot.

SB: Yeah. That is a key to getting it. If you’re someone who we’ve never worked with before, that’s a key to be able to take it to a bunch of other people and say, “This is really funny. This is their work, this is what it would look like. Here’s how it flows, here’s how it’s gonna look.”

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

Audience member: You talked about being funny when nothing happens.

SB: *(laughs)* Be funny *right now!*

Audience member: I guess what I’d love is an example of how you went to something thinking a ton of things would happen...

HA: Oh, and nothing happens?

Audience member: And also, I wouldn't mind hearing an example of how one of your writers did that that you loved.

HA: Well, here's an easy cheat. Sarah and I worked on one together, where it turned out that the New York City Visitor and Conventions Bureau was using Waldo from *Where's Waldo?* as their mascot. He was all over their website. So *Vanity Fair* wanted me to run around New York dressed as Waldo and do sort of a parody version.

SB: I love that you call this "investigative." *(laughter)*

HA: *(laughs)* It's low-level investigative. It's super-rigorous! So in a situation like that, before I even bought that itchy, awful red-and-white-striped thing, I sat down for like an hour and thought of jokes. Like, "I'm gonna think of stuff to say to people." Because yes, you walk into a crowd, you're going to dress as Waldo, a million people are going to say stuff to you, but it ain't that funny.

SB: Didn't they all say, "I found you"? *(laughter)*

HA: "I found you!" And that's not great. So I thought of stuff, like I knew I was going to go to Washington Square Park, which has a very cool new fountain with this central *(makes whooshing noise)* thing like that. And I thought, "OK, I'm gonna go there, and I'm going to sort of hunker down, just lower myself down onto that jet of water like it's a bidet." *(laughter)* And then, when I walk out, whoever walks up to me, they're going to say something to me, I don't know what they're gonna say, but I'm gonna say to them, "Waldo likes to keep it clean. *Storybook* clean." *(laughter)* So

that was just something I could have in case a person who saw me in there had nothing interesting to say. So that's one way you can cheat. And then the other thing is, the funny stuff in a first-person piece that like, it's not necessarily what happens, or what people say to you, or what you say. A lot of times, it's just your impression that's funny. It's you likening that situation to some incongruous element that makes it funny. So that's just a question of bringing a notebook along and writing down, or as soon as you get home, writing down your impressions. I think those are the two things that have helped me.

SB: Yeah. I should clarify that; it's not that nothing happens. Obviously an event happens, you're in a place, there are things to look at and describe, there's material. I mean that if your subject doesn't go along with it, and magazines now are starting to do it, you sort of write that, and it tends to be funnier. This is not even really strictly a humor piece, but it is a non-fiction piece that I find very funny, and I go back to it all the time, weirdly. There's a piece that ran in *The Washington Post* by David Segal, who's now at the *Times*, is that his name? He's now the business writer for *The New York Times*, is that his name?

HA: I don't know.

SB: He does very serious work now, but he did very funny work for *The Washington Post* for maybe ten, fifteen years. And he wrote this piece when Martha Stewart was released from jail. He went on the scene, and he wrote this piece that started with a top about how people were throwing whisks in the air and wearing celebratory aprons and everybody was there, and it's this sort of wonderful, meandering top,

and then there's this record-scratch moment where he says, "Actually, literally nothing happened. Journalists were interviewing journalists, it's just a normal day here in the woods." And it's an extremely, extremely funny, wry, clever piece that ran in a very, at the time, maybe dustier environment, in the business section of *The Washington Post*. I love stuff like that, and *GQ* loves stuff like that.

HA: Yeah, and there's an old newspaper-writing adage: "If you have the story, tell the story. If you don't have the story, write the story." Meaning if you have a murder mystery, as a writer you don't need to embellish that very much. You pretty much just tell the facts and people are going to be riveted. Whereas if you went to a bar, you went to Comic Con, and nothing interesting happened, then that's an instance where you as a writer really gotta whip it out, because it's not in your notes. The story's not in your notes. The incidents are not going to excite the reader. So what seems like a failure should be a boon, right? In that instance, that's a really fun time for you as a writer to get super creative, and it's a really good test of your skills.

AC: How do you balance that need to be funny with the reality that if you're published in *The New York Times*, you're published in *GQ*, you're subject to the same laws of libel as everybody else? What do you do then? Because sometimes people don't like it when you're funny about them in a story, and they can get litigious.

SB: Well, obviously don't make up their quotes or make events up. Don't do anything like that. You record it. We have a fact-checking department. In fact, I've always wondered if, at *The New Yorker*, when you write "Shouts" and things, are they checked?

HA: They are checked. Yeah.

SB: Even if it's utterly of your own creation?

HA: Yeah, and when fact-checkers meet humorists, oh man. *(laughter)* Because you do have to sometimes say, "It's a joke, my friend. I don't literally mean that."

AC: So you're saying that when, in your last "Shouts and Murmurs," you wrote, "I'll never get used to the sight of someone vaping kale," they fact-check that?

SB: They're like, "Kale cannot be vaped!"

HA: That one they were pretty good about. There was an instance, oh man, I wish I could remember where they asked me... I can't remember. But anyway, the *Times* is a much tougher one because that's got to be one of the prudier publications ever. And I'm enough of a potty mouth that... There's one dude at the *Times* who's sort of the FCC of the paper, and...

AC: Are there words that are verboten? Can you say "bottom" versus "ass," for instance, in *The New York Times*? We're getting kind of detailed now.

HA: I think you can say "ass" as a body part, but not as a...

SB: As an expletive?

HA: As an expletive.

AC: OK.

HA: Here's a word you can't say in *The New York Times*: you can't say "kids." You have to say "children." Whenever you mention a person the second time, you have to use "Mr." or "Ms.", and famously someone wrote an article about Meat Loaf, and the second paragraph referred to "Mr. Loaf." *(laughter)*

SB: That's hilarious, actually.

HA: But I once wrote a very shticky thing... There was a time when I was doing this thing at the paper called "Ten Topics to Talk About This Weekend." So I would pick ten things from the news, and that would be a sentence, and then I'd just have a little joke afterwards. And there was a week where a twelve-year-old girl climbed Mount Everest, a fourteen-year-old boy sailed around the world, and an eight-year-old kid did something else exhausting. *(laughter)* So I just listed those things, and then I wrote, "Kids today. Who can figure 'em?" And it comes back from the editor: "Kids today. Who can figure them out?" *(laughter)* That's not so good.

AC: It's interesting you bring that up, because sometimes something will be funny, but not necessarily grammatically correct. And you can get in an argument with an editor who's like, "No." What's your yardstick?

SB: We have a copy department and fact checkers, and they're both raising these same kinds of things. I try to have as much patience as I can, but I'm on the side of the writer in this case. There are some idiomatic usages, and some liberties that you take where it's clearly facetious to anybody who's reading it except a copy editor. It's really hard. Those are the battles you have to fight. So if anything, if you're pitching a place that has a rigorous copy and fact-checking department, know that

some flexibility is going to be required of you when you get to that closing phase. I often would rather sort of rewrite a joke than try to ruin the flow like that. Just hearing that makes me cringe. It's the worst. It's the worst. What did you end up doing? Did you run it like that?

HA: I think I wrote back, "This is a joke." Or yeah, I think I pointed out to them, "Let's be colloquial here."

SB: That's good.

HA: Yeah.

AC: *(to audience)* Yes.

Audience member: Thank you for coming out on a Sunday morning. You're in fine form.

HA: Thank you.

SB: Thank you.

Audience member: Two questions: Can you help me understand, if you have an idea, and you want to pitch it to the website of the magazine, do you pitch it to the regular editor? Is there a web editor? Is it the web content editor? Is there a web producer? Who? And who do you like to read?

AC: So if you're pitching a magazine, like say *GQ*, and you want it online, who do you pitch, and then also who do you guys like reading?

SB: The web thing is harder. I think there is a bunch of different people, as you were speaking to, where it's not as easily decipherable on a hierarchy. On a magazine side, people have sections and pages and a sort of turf. On the web, that's not really the case. So you can kind of really pitch anybody, which I know isn't a great answer, but there are people who tend to focus more on... So if it's political humor, say, you'd want to pitch a news editor. If it's entertainment humor, a celebrity-type editor. But also, I think the more important thing is looking for sites that already run the kind of humor that you want to write, and that have shown openness to it. There are some websites that aren't as open to it as others. When I was at *Vanity Fair*, we were extremely open to that stuff. We read a lot of conceptual, absurdist, just really fun, I thought, humor pieces. Henry wrote a lot of stuff, we were open to that. So that's a place that runs a lot of humor, and would be a great place to amass humor clips, to go somewhere that maybe doesn't run as much, but you want to sell them on a specific point. So I would mostly look for different places that have shown an interest.

HA: And here's something, this has probably come up already during this weekend, but the biggest lesson I learned as a writer was not to cook up something good, you know, write something great and then go to the newsstand and then look at all the magazines and think, "Oh, OK, well I've written this funny thing that mentions rowboats. Here's a magazine called 'Rowboats'. Maybe I'll send it to them. Oh, here's 'Yachting Magazine.' They like boats. Oh, here's a magazine about oceans, I'm going to send it to them." I spent two years approaching it that way. In fact, you should do it the opposite way, which is to say that you should find a website or a part of a

magazine that you really love, and that is funny and that ideally is using a lot of different contributors, and just read it and read it and read it and read it until you sort of crack the code, and then write something very specifically for that page or that department. That will save you years of time. I think a lot of people start out, and they just write stuff, and then you think, “Well, would *McSweeney’s* take this,” or “Can I send it here?” That’s just a really hard, self-defeating way to work.

Audience member: Thank you.

AC: (to audience) Another question? Yep.

Audience member: Sarah, do you ever work with Wells Tower?

SB: I don’t work with him, but I know him. Wells Tower is a hugely successful magazine writer who has written a lot of funny essays, but also writes a lot of serious long-form journalism for *GQ* and other places.

HA: And a great fiction writer. *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*.

SB: Yeah. He’s a rock star.

Audience member: Yeah. He’s hands-down my favorite author. I was just wondering how a magazine would classify what it is that he does, because he’s writing first-person journalism that’s really funny...

SB: Right...

Audience member: He also does short stories that are hilarious, but not necessarily always journalism...

HA: You would like John Jeremiah Sullivan.

Audience member: Oh yeah, I'm aware.

HA: Yeah, I was gonna say, he's another person...

Audience member: How does a person come to you...Do you already have to be Wells Tower to do stuff like that for you guys?

SB: I would say you don't have to be Wells Tower, I think that's kind of a tall order for any person, but you have to have written some things. You have to be able to show that you've done something in this vein, or that you have a style, and he wrote for several places and has an established voice. That's maybe the hardest trick there is, to be Wells Tower. He's great, but I think the other thing is that he's very funny, like he did this piece not long ago for us about going big-game elephant hunting in Africa, and there is a funniness in it, but it certainly wasn't the intent of the piece, and he's a master of that. So yeah, I think it's putting yourself in those scenarios, and he's obviously political. His work on political campaigns, finding the absurdity, kind of like what you were talking about, those absurd quotes or moments, it's putting yourself almost more in a reportorial place, and then finding humor, is how I would classify the beginnings of his style. He's a rock star.

AC: (to audience) Question.

Audience member: Yeah, I have a question about digital versus pitching a book. The number one question I can't seem to crack is the lead time for either. Say if you were

to pitch something to a senior editor, would they possibly knock it over to the web if they thought it was right there, or do you treat them as separate entities?

AC: So what's the lead time for pitching digital versus print? I guess you could even talk about pitching in general if you want. We seem to be talking about pitching.

SB: The lead time depends on the magazine and how organized that magazine is, and how long their closes are. There are a lot of different factors that go into it. I would say it varies. But for most monthlies, right now *GQ* is nearly shipped with December, which means that things came in a while ago for December. So that's a good chunk, that's, what, three months or so? That means you're pitching three to four months out, in some ways. With the web, yes, it happens all the time that we say, "You know, this is actually more of a web-y idea," or "Shoot, we already have that note hit in this issue, but I know that that's a different perspective and it would be really funny online." In some ways, the print pitching thing is so difficult that as someone who loves the internet, and thinks this is the point of the internet, to make us laugh, I would think it would be more rewarding, if you're starting from scratch, to cultivate a relationship with a web editor and get a volume of stuff. And then you're easily put on a print list. I would say it happens more that way, specifically at *GQ*.

HA: And writing for the web is so much freer. You don't have the length issue that you do with a magazine. That's what's really hard about doing humor in magazines. You're sort of necessarily talking about stuff that's less than a thousand words, unless you're doing these "going on an African safari" big things. But you're

probably talking about stuff that's shorter than a page, which is pretty short.

Whereas if you have an idea that maybe could go 1200-1500 words, how great to be able to do it on the web instead.

AC: Do you have a breakdown for structure? Because you mentioned word count, and one of the things you have to do in print is you've got to set up whatever it is you're writing about. I once talked to an editor who was like, "Can we cut it down to 500," which you can for really short, short little lists, or very, very short things, but if you're doing a comedic essay, you do kind of need at least 700 words, 150-180 of that being setting up whatever you're going to riff on. Do you have any structures you like to go to for your stories, or is it just a straight, news magazine, set it up and spit it out for five paragraphs, that kind of thing?

HA: Let me think. I usually go freestyle for the first two paragraphs, and then I'm usually writing on a legal pad, then I start typing, and then I think of what the word length is. Then I make a list of either jokes that I know I want to be in there, or if there's reporting facts that I know I want to be in there, then I've got my first 200 words. Then I've got a list of five things, and I know, "OK, I've got 800 words to do these." And then, yeah, that really helps, so it's sort of a road map.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* One more? Up there? *(to panelists)* Are there sort of best practices—we're going to be about another five or ten minutes—if I'm pitching *GQ* something funny, here are five things I should never do, or things that people always do, just the nuts and bolts of it? Are there areas that have been pitched a million times?

HA: If it has clothing in it, is that a shoe-in? *(laughter)*

SB: *(laughs)* Henry talked earlier about the sample jokes, how it's gonna feel, how it's gonna land, and I think that's so important. If you don't have that, and you just have something like, "I want to write a funny essay about fashion," it's an impossible sell. The other thing is, *GQ* is a place that does care about having a published volume of work. If I want to use a new writer, at magazines there's one general at the top of every magazine, and he's the guy who's like, "Yes. Great. That's who we should use." So every editor who works at *GQ* needs to make a case for bringing in a new writer, and has to show what they've done, and why it works for us, and can they write with our voice, can they write in our house voice, or our style, or have our sense of humor. And so I would say you need to have some clips, or some body of work. Include samples of what the jokes are going to be like, and then be prepared. This is not quite pitching, but just in general about the process. It is a process, there's copy-editing, there's fact checking, there's tweaks we have to make for design. When you're looking at inches and inches and inches of overage, and you have to cut it all down, you're gonna have to start cutting jokes, and that's really the hardest part about writing for a magazine, is cutting it down, but making it still funny. And you have to be open to that process. And if you are, and you're able to work under those circumstances, they're much more likely to use you again and again because they know that you'll be OK with that kind of work environment.

AC: Are there topics or subjects that you're always looking for that don't get filled? I know certain areas in magazines tend to fill up pretty quickly, and then there's

always some section, for whatever reason, where they're like, "Aaah, we don't have anything for that." Is there something like that for you at *GQ*?

SB: I think there's a real hunger for these two-page, middle-of-the-book humor things. We always have a back page, and that's always there, and we always have humor injected into other parts of the magazine, and we have funny people writing for our Culture section and putting a funny spin on that. A little write-up about a movie that's coming up, something like that. We don't do enough of these things that are just two-page, middle-of-the-book humor essays or conceptual riffs. We've done some of them, though, and I would say go back and look at them and see what they're like. That's something I would say we're always looking for. Two pages is about a thousand words, but it's not much, and it tends to be a heavily conceit-y kind of thing.

AC: Henry, do you have any tips for pitching? We've talked a little bit about it, or things that you shouldn't do. You mentioned one like, "Don't write the story and then find the magazine, find the magazine and then write the story." Are there any more things along those lines that you would suggest for people?

HA: Ideas for pitching...Well, for me, the trick is always knowing, it's like giving them enough of a sense of the piece, but not writing the whole thing. Because then you're kind of shooting yourself in the foot. So it's sort of like how to be a good tease, I would say. Give them two or three good jokes, but not all of the jokes that might emerge from what you're pitching. But that's the point of view of someone who's trying to get an assignment. These guys presumably, what you guys are doing, is

you're going to be writing the whole piece and then sending it to a *McSweeney's* or *The New Yorker* or the back page of *The New York Times Magazine*, or wherever you find a place for print humor. In that case, no, obviously you're writing the whole piece, and you want to give it all.

AC: What's one of the funniest things you've had to cut out of the magazine?

SB: Oh my gosh. Wow. That's really hard. It's funny, too, because when you cut, you immediately have to make peace with it. It's almost like I can't think of it because...

AC: You've blocked those memories out?

SB: It was brutalizing, and then once you cut it, you're like, "I can't look back, I can't look back, I can't look back." (*laughter*) I hate that. I really do. Because as an editor, I think if you edit funny stuff, you can't be someone who's a frustrated wannabe funny writer. You really have to be innately an audience person, and I love to laugh, that's my favorite thing. So I can't dwell on it. I can't have any regrets. (*laughter*)

AC: OK. I feel bad. I feel like I've abused you here.

HA: When you write for magazines, you get very good at cutting lines. If you see a paragraph and then the last line is just three words of a sentence, you're trying to get rid of that, what's called a "widow." So you're looking in the rest of the paragraph for three words that you can take out so that those three words will go back up to the front.

SB: You'd be amazed at how much gets decided by stuff like that, by widows and all that. It's crazy.

HA: Or using a contraction, “you haven’t,” I can save one letter!

AC: It’s very satisfying when you do it, though. When you’ve saved the whole thing by combing through...

SB: It is! I do think that with an overly wordy joke, each magazine has its own thing, but sometimes when you achieve that golden thing of cutting out enough and making it flow better, it actually can be better, just like *(snaps fingers)* punch.

AC: All right. *(to audience)* Maybe time for one more question, and we’ll wrap it up? *(to panelists)* I think we covered a lot of ground here. Well, guys, thank you very much, this has been extremely funny.

HA: Thanks for having us!

SB: Thank you! *(applause)*