

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:00](#)):

Welcome back to the Don't Write That book podcast where you can learn how to write your bestseller and own your authorship. Follow along with us as we give you an insider's view of the book industry. Now, here are your hosts. Myself, **Mike Michalowicz** and **AJ Harper**.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([00:16](#)):

I wish we had, uh, some kind of spooky sound effects, because we're gonna talk about ghosts. Ooh! <laugh>. You know, I was just in New Orleans for a conference that I spoke at in our own internal conference. We took a ghost tour and, oh, I've got to show you this picture. So we go to these different buildings. I'll see if I can pull it up while I'm talking. And the host is just talking about all these different paranormal activities and goes, there's this one building, if you, you can look in through a window. There's a constant haunting. Every day there's a reported haunting. She goes, so take pictures, because someone will see a ghost. So this is the, can you see it? That's the room. Through a window. And I take a picture, I'm like, oh my God. I got a picture of the ghost. And then I sent that <laugh>. So it's a, it's a stick drawing.

**AJ Harper** ([01:02](#)):

A stick drawing, y'all.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:03](#)):

A stick. Yeah. So it was a picture of a door of this abandoned room that only has this one dining table in it. So I took a before picture, and then I take a pic, the same picture again, and I drew a stick figure in it, and I show it to this paranormal specialist. She starts laughing so hard. She's like, this is awesome. She's like, that's the most clear sighting ever. And she goes, no one's ever done that. And she's like, I've done hundreds of these tours. I'm like, no one's done the stick figure. Ghost joke. <laugh> No one.

**AJ Harper** ([01:29](#)):

You're unique.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:30](#)):

I'm unique. Welcome to, don't Write That book, our podcast, um, here with AJ Harper. Today we're gonna talk about ghost writers. First, I want to introduce my writing partner, AJ Harper. AJ I, I would say when we first met, it was under the guise of being a ghost writer.. I, I'd written a book and I read it through my own book. I'm like, I, I can't even read this. This is a problem. Let me find someone. It was a miracle find. I found you through Elance

**AJ Harper** ([01:55](#)):

E-Lance, right? El-formerly. It's now Upwork.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([01:57](#)):

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Yeah. I'll tell you what won me over, is that you were willing to meet with me face-to-face. You took the drive down to Bunton, New Jersey, and we met. You instantly started improving the book. You have this innate, extraordinary talent of seeing a sculpture within mud. Like, you invite me just to give you stuff. And you have this ability to scan through it. I, I don't know how, you read like every fifth word or something, and you pick out, oh, this is an element we need to expand on this. The rest of the stuff is garbage. <Laugh>

**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:32](#)):

But it's so powerful that you can sort through things so quickly like that. Thanks. Have you seen the new movie from Jerry Seinfeld called, uh, Unfrosted?

**AJ Harper** ([02:40](#)):

Oh, I'm waiting to see it. My wife and I wife shouldn't to, you know, we have, I'm not allowed to watch certain things unless we can be--

**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:46](#)):

Yeah, no, I get, I get it.

**AJ Harper** ([02:46](#)):

Yeah. That's the marriage agreement.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:49](#)):

<laugh>. I think it was excellent. You okay, cool. We, you see this dumpster scene with these kids, you're able to find the sweetness within this dumpster.

**AJ Harper** ([02:57](#)):

Okay. Now I'm even more excited to watch it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([02:59](#)):

I such, I loved it. It's a love hate. Some people are like, it's, it's too corny.

**AJ Harper** ([03:04](#)):

I want to introduce Mike Michalowicz. I say this a lot, but I, I am people since I retired from ghostwriting, I still write with Mike. Sure. It is not a traditional ghost writer relationship anymore. It did start out that way. But people still to this day, and it's been since 2016 or 17 that I've retired from ghostwriting, still try to get me to ghost, see what happened yesterday. In fact, very common and always want to know, well, what's so special about Mike? That, because I still write with you, and I just want to, as a way of introducing you, there's a lot of reasons. One of them is you really do hustle. And that's not a small thing. You know? (Thank you.) I need to work with an author who's going to actually sell it. <laugh> That's a factor. Because you and I have a, a financial partnership.

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**AJ Harper** ([03:55](#)):

But you evolved. You know? So it, yeah. We started out one way that's more of a traditional ghost relationship, but we are creative partners. It's the best thing you learned. You wanted to learn, you wanted to get better at writing. So even though we co-write now, you just keep getting better at it. And that's in, that's fun for me. You know, a traditional ghostwriting relationship isn't for me anymore. It's not something that I want to do, but that's not what we have. So, by way of introducing you as somebody who's always learning to get better at it,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([04:31](#)):

Thank you. That's very meaningful.

**AJ Harper** ([04:34](#)):

Because you could have kept just the same type of relationship. The whole, we could have kept that. I don't think I would've kept going because I like--

**Mike Michalowicz** ([04:42](#)):

I love our relationship.

**AJ Harper** ([04:43](#)):

The collaboration.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([04:44](#)):

I love our collaboration. I love that you call me out on my bs. I love that you challenge the quality of our books. I love what we've accomplished, and I think there's a big check coming this next quarter or next.

**AJ Harper** ([04:56](#)):

It's circle. It's personally gratifying. Like we were just saying. Do, do you remember? It was a couple months ago. It's unusual for us to not be in the thick of a book right now. It's summer. I summer. I'm supposed to be writing right now. I know one of our books. And it's just odd.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:11](#)):

I, I also feel odd, but I think the book...

**AJ Harper** ([05:13](#)):

I mean, we're starting today. Now. Today, but today, but normally, but at this point, it's--

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:17](#)):

We'd be in the thick of it.

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**AJ Harper** ([05:18](#)):

For sure.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:19](#)):

I think this book is gonna be extraordinary. I, it's been a weird kind of six month hiatus or whatever it's been.

**AJ Harper** ([05:24](#)):

For the first time in about 14 years. Ever. Well, except for the breakup time.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:28](#)):

Except for our breakup. And at times I feel like, what, what am I doing with myself? Like, this has been very cathartic. This time off I've been processing this new book concept. (Cool.) And we got something. We got something really...

**AJ Harper** ([05:41](#)):

We're gonna talk about ghosts.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:41](#)):

We got something big.

**AJ Harper** ([05:43](#)):

I can't believe we went to over 30 episodes before we decided to talk about ghost writing.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([05:49](#)):

Well, can you set the stage again for us? What is a ghost writer? What does it mean? Define it.

**AJ Harper** ([05:55](#)):

So the ghost writer will write the book for you. <laugh> Basic. Yeah. Yeah. They're the, they're gonna write the book now. You can also work with a ghost in to help write part of the book for you to take what you have and zshush it up, make it better. There's different levels, you know, some of that's more like, uh, book doctoring. Right. But ultimately, a ghost is a person who will write the book for you, and either they will get credit on the cover. So you see that a lot with celebrity books. You know, so-and-so with, sometimes they don't have credit on the cover, but it's acknowledged publicly. You, for example, acknowledge me publicly. But I would say most of my ghosts. And I never, that was your choice until you did that. I said literally nothing to anybody.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([06:46](#)):

Right.

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**AJ Harper** ([06:47](#)):

Then there are ghosts who no one knows. Sometimes not even the publisher. Very often, the publisher knows, sometimes they actually get you the ghost. Find the ghost for you. Agents help people find ghosts. So a ghost could be known or even not known at all by anybody, except the author, which has been the case for me most of the time.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([07:09](#)):

To me, authorship is different than writership. Authorship is a representative of a creator of an idea and a representative of it. And writership is the codification into a book. To me, it's kind of like a band. Like, I'd be surprised, I don't know of any author that's been able, I'm sure there has been, but being able to write a book, format, edit, the whole suite of things to get a book out there. I, I'm sure it's existed very successfully, but I think that's the exception. It, it really is a team. When we wrote *The Pumpkin Plan*, we were still under we Toilet Paper Entrepreneur as a ghost traditional. When it came to *Pumpkin Plan*, it was the first book deal. We were in this kind of hybrid state. Like, I'm like, we're kind of different, functioning differently, but I was still communicating exclusively with Penguin. And that became in, I'm like, this is so inefficient.

**AJ Harper** ([07:59](#)):

I know. I have a whole strategy for how I would respond to edits so that nobody knew I was the one responding to edits.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:05](#)):

I was honored and, and impressed that the, the degree of confidentiality you kept. At the same time, like, this is just like, this feels icky and inauthentic. So I called Penguin and said, yeah, I'm working with, uh, **AJ Harper**. She's been ghosting, and we're really partnering on this. Expecting them to say, oh, shame

**AJ Harper** ([08:24](#)):

<laugh>.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:24](#)):

And they're like, oh, it's awesome. We'd love to meet her. I'm like, what? It was like instant.

**AJ Harper** ([08:28](#)):

They're, they're really used to it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:30](#)):

So I'm like, this is AJ. And then they're like, oh, why don't you guys come in? So this was back in the day.

**AJ Harper** ([08:36](#)):

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That was back in the day.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([08:36](#)):

Yeah. You and I schlep into New York City. We're sitting with Carrie and Dave Molder and, you know, all the different team members that we worked with over time. And it became like, oh my God, this is the way to produce a book. I think the climatic moment was with Kashiuk, was that *Profit First*? I can't remember which book we were working on, but we're sitting in the conference room and we're whiteboarding and I'm sitting here like, holy crap. I, we got three extraordinary people working on this book together right now. We got someone who can write better than anyone on this planet, **AJ Harper**. We got Kashiuk, who conceptually was trying to understand what the consumer wants, and just forcing simplification, really forcing us to see ideas through. And me creating this idea of *Profit First*, but ready to promote the hell out of it. I'm like, my God, going about the solo is not the way to do it. So having--

**AJ Harper** ([09:27](#)):

Well, you can, though. I mean, I have, you know, I teach a class to help people do it solo. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:33](#)):

For me, going solo is not.

**AJ Harper** ([09:34](#)):

But for you. Yeah. It's not.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:36](#)):

So how do you find the right ghost writer?

**AJ Harper** ([09:42](#)):

It's hard.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([09:43](#)):

I have no idea how to go about it.

**AJ Harper** ([09:44](#)):

So again, not Elance, anymore?

**AJ Harper** ([09:46](#)):

No. There's Upwork though. You can, you can search for ghosts on Okay. You know, all the different sites like Upwork or Upwork. I'm not an advocate. I mean, I don't know even know what goes on over there. It's been a, it's been a really long time. I would say that it's good to get asked other people, you know. So back in the day, as we've been saying, people just have my phone number. I didn't even have a

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website. So it's, they would just give each other, do you know ghost? Yeah, I do. Here's her number. And really just like old school like that. And my phone would ring <laugh>, honestly,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([10:23](#)):

Out of the blue, and "Ring." I don't know. Interesting. Okay.

**AJ Harper** ([10:26](#)):

Or, you know, sometimes I would be in an event, sometimes authors would want me to come with to something. Yep. And then occasionally I did a few little speaking things. You know, you start to, so referrals, agents know ghosts for sure. Ghosts do have their own representation, by the way. So you can find them in, they're gonna be more expensive, of course, if they have their own agent representation. Publishers know ghosts. Editors know ghosts. There's, you can, there's different organizations that represent different ghost writers, different companies that have a whole roster of ghost writers. So, you know, they can be found. It's just you have to, finding one that's gonna be good for you is the challenge.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([11:13](#)):

Do you look for a rapport? Do you look at their history of writing? How do you determine?

**AJ Harper** ([11:18](#)):

So I personally feel that you need to find a ghost that has deep experience, not just in authorship, but in your genre. I think they really need to understand that genre. For example, you would never want me to ghost write historical text. You would never want me to ghost write... I don't even know. I maybe devotional or religious text. Right? I don't have a deep experience in that. I have deep experience in self-help, business, wellness, anything about any prescriptive nonfiction, can do. Can do that. Because you get, you get to understand the genre and what it needs. And if you're bouncing around a lot, it's, that's not exactly going to be helpful. So you want someone who has deep knowledge. You want somebody who is not just a writer, but has the ear to, to do the voice. So this is the problem. The problem is that you can be a great writer, but it doesn't mean you'll be a good ghost writer, because not everybody has an ear for it. So this has happened to me before it happened with you. When we reconciled and created our, our, went back to our creative partnership. You had a really good writer you had been working with in this.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([12:43](#)):

Becky Blanton.

**AJ Harper** ([12:43](#)):

Yeah. But she wasn't, couldn't do Mike. Right? Yeah. This happened to me multiple times. I've had, you know, I've had wasn't, I was able to deliver, you know, it was really, really hard for me to balance all of the ghostwriting contracts. And I wasn't very good at saying no. And all these different reasons why it was hard for me to always deliver on time. And I rarely did. And so I had another, at least two or three people who's like, okay, we amicably said, okay, I'm not gonna be able to finish this the way you want

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me to. They came back like, I can't find anybody who can do, be my voice. And that is a very specialized skill to be able to become that person's voice. And in fact, you're actually helping that person be more of themselves. So, a lot of ghosts. You can't just say, yeah, I'm willing to write this for you and not take credit. No. You have to be able to help that person organize their thoughts, codify their ideas, <laugh> their intellectual property, understand who their reader is, do all of that, and do it in their voice. And that's the last, that last piece is really so hard, really hard to find.

**Mike Michalowicz (13:56):**

It reminds me of actors. There's certain actors that get typecast because they can play one character so well, but they can't bridge. And there's a few actors that no matter what role they're in, I think of Tom Hanks, every role he plays is like, my God. He becomes that character. And I find that true with ghost writers. There's very few ghost writers that can, it's almost like they assimilate that person. So, you know, my tonality you know, the type of jokes I use. You also know how I'll, I'll embed a story to make a point. all those things? That ain't cheap.

**AJ Harper (14:30):**

No, it's not. And I, I do want to say that it baffled me when I first started ghost writing, why do people want to hire me? So I started out with dumb little books on Elance. Just about rando things. Yeah. You know, travel books to places I'd never been. Books on Google, AdWord and other type of stuff. Right. Whatever I wrote, whatever. I was just trying to make a living. But the first book that I got as a, the self-help book, she started all those referrals. And I was like, why, why are these people wanting, I mean, I'd only been at it about a year, and people were just lining up. And then I realized, oh, it's because I can switch my voice. Yeah. I, I just listen to them and I can get it after maybe, I don't know, four or five phone calls, couple chapters, and then I have them absolutely down.

**Mike Michalowicz (15:27):**

I, so I've got to learn this technique. Are you visualizing that you're that person? How do you do it?

**AJ Harper (15:32):**

No. So here's the thing. Is it, it's my playwriting. I really think it's this. I'd been a playwright for a really long time before I started ghost writing books. And, because I, I kept going, why is this happening? But the first gig I got, self-help, big self-help book. I got, they wanted a Sex in the City, Carrie Bradshaw Tone. Never saw the show. Yeah. But I just watched a couple episodes. Like, oh, okay. Blah, blah. Oh, I got it. Yeah. But that's because I had been writing characters for, you know, 15 years.

**Mike Michalowicz (16:06):**

That's interesting. So do you almost see the author that you're writing for if you're a ghost as a character?

**AJ Harper (16:12):**

I don't really visualize like that. It's honestly just a listening technique.



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**Mike Michalowicz** ([16:16](#)):

So what are some of the things you listen for? I want to, I want to get some practical stuff. Well,

**AJ Harper** ([16:20](#)):

My whole, I had, I developed a kind of system for trying to get at it. So keep in mind a lot of people don't know what their voice is. So that's also kind of, I mean, if it's a new author, if they're an established author, it's so much easier. I mean, I once had to ghost write a couple chapters for a person. I cannot, A very big deal person. Normally I would get to talk to them. Right. This person will not schedule a meeting with me. But I was still supposed to, they were too busy. And so, but I still had to write for them. Think about that. I'm on YouTube. Listen to, so that's what I did. I'm like, all right, fine. They're famous enough. I'm gonna go on YouTube.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:00](#)):

Watch every episode.

**AJ Harper** ([17:01](#)):

I watched a whole bunch of stuff and I was like, all right. I didn't even have a directive about what to write about. I just had a theme.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:11](#)):

My gosh.

**AJ Harper** ([17:12](#)):

Listen, I have written it, okay? I did that. So I'm on YouTube watching stuff, taking notes. That was before YouTube had transcription <laugh>. I'm like typing pause type, pause type. And I wrote it and it's published in the world. And I never spoke to that person.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:30](#)):

Oh my God. We, Andrea Conway from our office, and Kelsey Ayers and I, we drove up to Nyack. This is a few months ago to talk about voice. Yeah. We're singing that bakery slash deli. It was amazing.

**AJ Harper** ([17:42](#)):

Didia Dumas.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:43](#)):

Oh my God. That place was amazing.

**AJ Harper** ([17:44](#)):

It's a great.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:46](#)):

And you said something and I was like, oh my God, you have like an instruction set. You said Mike's voice, he always conjugates. Unless he's making an important point. <laugh>. And I'm like, she's right.

**AJ Harper** ([17:58](#)):

<laugh>

**Mike Michalowicz** ([17:59](#)):

Do, do you have a script? You're tracking? Do you have, like, how do you know these nuanced components? Because that, that's the voice.

**AJ Harper** ([18:06](#)):

Yeah. You have a lot of quirks. You have a lot of things that are you Yeah. And then you also have things, you know, we actually set out and developed. You know, let me... For you. So you wrote Toilet Paper Entrepreneur. And it's, I remember, I'm gonna be honest, I remember that assignment. And my wife would come up to my office and she'd be like, what are you doing? Because I'd be like, cursing. "What the hell?" <laugh> Who, who's talking about this bathroom? Here, Michael? Let this, let, let's kill this.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([18:38](#)):

Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([18:39](#)):

But you were positive <laugh>, so I know we didn't have, you didn't, you didn't have full trust me. Yet. Yet. And so you took, I always say you took about like 60 percent of what I said. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([18:49](#)):

It, it saved the book.

**AJ Harper** ([18:51](#)):

But you didn't take it all. No. So then when we sat down for Pumpkin Plan, 'cause you got the deal with Penguin, we had a frank conversation and I said, you want to do all these books? This isn't a whole, this isn't the Mike, I've come to know. It's part of you. But it's like almost like a caricature of you. Not the real you. And so we set those immutable laws and characteristics that we still follow that is more authentically you, you love a good bathroom joke, but you're also this other guy, this sort of gentleman and family guy and kind of a doofus. But a really good friend. And you know, the, we all that's in the book. So we sat down and it's authentic to you. It's not made up. It's not a cartoon. You have to do that. You have to know that.

**AJ Harper** ([19:38](#)):

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You have to have thought about that. If you want a good relationship with a ghost, because they, if you don't know you and how you want to come across, I, I mean, I just happen to have this gift for it. Not everyone is gonna have it, but you can make a ghost writer relationship better if you have that clarity yourself. And you can impart that. But how I do it is, it's not really scientific, but I came up with some methods. I would always ask people for a piece of writing that they loved, that they felt really proud of, that sounded like them, say, I don't care if it's a journal entry, an article, a letter you wrote. Just send it to me. Find me something that you feel this is me. Because I wanted to know what they thought. And then honestly, the whole rest of it was probably just phone calls.

**AJ Harper** ([20:33](#)):

Then I wouldn't get it right to begin with. So it's usually one or two chapters it would take me. And then seeing how they responded, uh, with notes. And then I, okay. I can, but I have to listen for a period of time and it's not that long. And then I can, I'm looking for phrases, the way you say things. Pacing, just some gen-general things. And that just comes from writing dialogue for 15 years. You know, the way you develop a character for a play is through the way they talk. So I had just a, I think it's just, I had a honed ear. That's, that's what I think.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([21:14](#)):

One thing I feel helped us refine our craft of working together was those articles for the Wall Street Journal. Because they were 800-word articles or thereabouts. We had this tight deadline. And so we're work, we, I think we produced 12 articles, roughly.

**AJ Harper** ([21:30](#)):

I don't remember now.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([21:31](#)):

Something like that. It was an intense short period. Is that a way, was that a technique that we kind of stumbled across? If someone listening in right now is looking for a ghost writer, do you start by working on some articles there?

**AJ Harper** ([21:41](#)):

Sure. You could start with some articles. Keep it simple. Certainly don't get locked into a contract where if it's not jiving, you can't get out.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([21:51](#)):

There's some dirtiness that goes in on, too. There's some people that have ghostwriters write on spec and basically steal the content you've had that happen to you. Don't, don't play dirty authors.

**AJ Harper** ([22:02](#)):

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Oh no. You have to pay for the No. What you want is at least a couple chapters. Pay for the chapters. Pay for the time. Um, I always structured my contracts so that the payments were made based on milestones that were reached. Yeah. And that we could get out early if we needed to get out early. I think, you know, if you don't, don't work with a ghost writer who's not willing to do that.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([22:25](#)):

Are there, uh, myths that, there are myths, but what are they, uh, that circulate around the ghost writing space? So

**AJ Harper** ([22:30](#)):

People think ghost writers write every single word. They don't have to our, you know, in our situation, again, I don't consider myself a ghost with you anymore, but sometimes, you know, people will read, would send me chunks. Right. Okay, well I I have this much, and so I would work with that and maybe edit it. But it's, you know, sometimes I did write every single word. But don't assume that that's always the case. Sometimes it is collaborative.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([22:54](#)):

I just want to give a quick story here. You you'll ask me to write something and I'll, I'll put a a thousand words just kind of rambling together. And then you'll take it and make it like 50 words that are beautiful <laugh>. There was one instance in our entire working experience where I gave you copy and you said, that's pretty much perfect. I was on a flight from New Jersey to California, it was copy for the back flap or something like that. And it was cumulatively like 80 words. I spent six hours writing that. <Laugh> And I'm like, I'm gonna nail this one six hours. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([23:26](#)):

Well that copy's hard back cover copy.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([23:29](#)):

No, but all copy's hard. My simple point is, a thousand words vomited to you and you come back and within 30 minutes we have something that's magical. So just want to point

**AJ Harper** ([23:38](#)):

That out. Well, and you can be more collaborative with it. You know, I mean, you and I will look at an outline and we give, divide up different tasks and yeah. So other myths. So other myths are ghosts don't always come up with all the content. You know, when I was a ghost, I was always, people always want to talk to me at parties when they found out what I did. Because it's fascinating to them. And they would assume that, you know, how can you live with that? How can you live with someone getting credit for your words? And I would say, well, I only write, I only ghost nonfiction and they're not my ideas and they're not my stories. I'm just know how to present them. I just know how to make it a book. I think I might've been upset. That's why I never did,. I never ghost fiction. Ghosted fiction. Which happens all the time, by the way. All the time. Especially in, um, series.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([24:27](#)):

How do you feel if someone reconciles that?

**AJ Harper** ([24:29](#)):

I don't know. People just want to work, man. Yeah. You know, <laugh>, I mean, I know some very famous authors that are acquaintances of mine or friends of mine who are famous now for their fiction, who once were ghost writers of fiction.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([24:42](#)):

Oh, interesting. So it's a way to cut your teeth, too.

**AJ Harper** ([24:45](#)):

Yeah. And then people know you in the industry, it's doors open. The gates aren't closed to you. So there's a lot of good reasons. I just personally was went against what it's like. I'm not gonna write a damn novel.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([24:56](#)):

They get zero credit for on outward.

**AJ Harper** ([24:58](#)):

And watch. It's gonna be some like, big thing. And then I'll write a novel and then nobody will know. I can't. I just, I can't,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([25:04](#)):

I can't. Yeah. I like that. You know, it does remind me though, of like Saturday Night Live, a lot of those comedians that present on stage first were writers in the back room. Yeah. Writing jokes for other folks. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([25:13](#)):

So another myth is that people who think the ghost has total control over the product and the ghost does not. I mean, you, you as the author have final say. So if a ghost is being kind of, you know, too forceful with you, that's not appropriate. They should be facilitating your vision. And then another one is you need to give them credit. You don't have to actually give them anything. Sometimes my name is in the acknowledgements, not as a ghost, but as something else. Sometimes. Not at all.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([25:43](#)):

How would they acknowledge you as something else?

**AJ Harper** ([25:45](#)):

# don't write *that* book!

Well, I don't want to say because,

**Mike Michalowicz (25:47):**

Because then it'll be a tip off.

**AJ Harper (25:48):**

Yes.

**Mike Michalowicz (25:49):**

<laugh>. Okay.

**AJ Harper (25:51):**

But, you know, I remember walking through the book expo floor back when we had Book Expo at the Javits and looking up, I was just walking around doing my, doing my job. And I looked up and there was an announcement about a book I wrote as Best Business Book of the Year.

**Mike Michalowicz (26:10):**

Oh my gosh.

**AJ Harper (26:11):**

And I didn't even know it was up for the award. And I was standing right there and I just kept walking.

**Mike Michalowicz (26:18):**

I mean, how does that feel?

**AJ Harper (26:21):**

I was very happy for the author <laugh>

**Mike Michalowicz (26:23):**

Are you also have this kind of internal confidence. Like, I made this happen. No one may ever know, but I'm the one who made this happen.

**AJ Harper (26:29):**

I'm just, you know, honestly, it's just who I am. Yeah. I'm just so proud of for the author. Yeah. But I don't feel emotionally attached. And you don't want, you need an an a ghost who does not have an ego about it. Yeah. I I legit do not, in fact, I don't even remember a lot of the books I wrote. That's not, that's not an exact, maybe that's not a, that's a big thing when I'm in menopause now where I probably can say that about a lot of things <laugh>. But I, I really, I move on to the next one. So I'm happy for the author, but I don't, you cannot work with a ghost who's super attached like that.

# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:00](#)):

Is there a way to identify that a ghost won't be attached?

**AJ Harper** ([27:05](#)):

I think it's just attitude. It's just attitude. And then referrals are really important. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:09](#)):

Look at their history. Yeah. Yeah. I may, I may have skipped over it, but I want to get to pricing or cost. Uh, I remember I was talking with David Molderer, he was a former editor at Penguin. He went on to become a ghost ghostwriter. He was charging six figures for his ghostwriting work. Yeah. Is that reasonable? What's the range?

**AJ Harper** ([27:25](#)):

Yeah, it's totally reasonable. Okay. If I were ghosting now, then you would, it's gotta be six figures. Be minimum.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:30](#)):

Because, you think about it, ghost can get one, maybe two books done a year.

**AJ Harper** ([27:33](#)):

Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:34](#)):

So if you're making 150,000 per book, it's a, it's a nice \$300,000 salary year. But it's, it's \$300,000. Right. A book that you publish that crushes it, that book that was up for the award, it may have generated over a lifetime, a million dollars. I don't know.

**AJ Harper** ([27:51](#)):

Yeah. Look, it's, you could get, I would be very nervous about a book paying less than 50.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([27:59](#)):

For to a ghost. Yeah. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([28:00](#)):

Because ghosts, their prices increase based on their experience. So look, I di I didn't start out with 50 and I was a good ghost. So maybe you're gonna find a needle in a haystack. Right. But you're, it's not that likely. We have to eat, you know? Yeah. We have families. So the, the biggest mistake I made as a ghost was I took on too many projects and I didn't know how to say no when authors changed the schedule. So I was always late, couldn't manage it. Yeah. Didn't have a, someone would be late and then

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I would still try and stay on everything. And it, I just was not old enough. I just didn't have enough maturity to say, okay, because you were late. Now this is getting pushed back. So everybody was always desperate too, because in publishing, there's all these hurry up and wait, and then all of a sudden it's like, go, go, go, go, go! So I just didn't have the personal fortitude to say no. So I backed myself into a literal never ending stream of being behind. And, you know, I, I had a couple people that, I had one person that I absolutely failed at delivering her book. And I still feel heartbroken over it. I learned, I learned how to be better and stronger and more forceful. Just know that if you have hiring a ghost and you're not paying that much, and they're, that means they're taking on a lot of projects.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([29:36](#)):

They have to, to be.

**AJ Harper** ([29:37](#)):

I had to take on a lot of projects when I was coming up. I was primary breadwinner. My wife's in social work. Yeah. Like, there's no money. <laugh> No. She does great work. I'm super proud of her. She's brilliant. She's saving the world. Nobody cares enough about that to pay those people with good wage. So I just worked my, and I worked constantly, and yet I was constantly behind. So I just tell you this because it's kind of the nature of it. So you need to be careful. If you're gonna hire somebody and they're super cheap, that's actually a red flag that not only do they not have enough experience, but they're probably taking on too many projects.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([30:12](#)):

Do you think, and I'm asking you to forecast here, but with ai, these, these large language models, I'm thinking of chat GPT. This released a new version yesterday. It's unbelievable. You can have a dialogue with it in real time, do you think it's gonna change ghost writing? And, and in what capacity will it?

**AJ Harper** ([30:31](#)):

Probably, I think for the people who don't really care and they just want to get the book done, they don't need to go. I mean, that stuff was always happening with article spinning and all sorts of stuff way before.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([30:43](#)):

What's Article spinning?

**AJ Harper** ([30:45](#)):

Um, you just sort of take, it's, it was a software program where you could take the same article and it would spin it. So Oh. It was slightly different words. And so you would release it. Yeah. Okay. So you get like a hundred articles on whatever.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([31:01](#)):



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So we have a new floor. It's the AI floor. I think ghost writers have to now take that floor and, and elevate it further.

**AJ Harper** ([31:09](#)):

But they're already doing it. Totally. If you want to have a book that is truly about what we come up with as humans. Yeah. You know, like with that, the, we people forget I'm anti-AI for writing. Okay. I'm, I I'm never gonna change my mind on this. I think you can use it for research as long as you check your sources. But even when people come up with lists of like, these are the topics you could write about. I'm like, blah, whatever. This is boring.

**AJ Harper** ([31:44](#)):

When we write, it's the act of writing and figuring this out. This is where the genius comes. Yeah. The revelation is the ideas that, oh my gosh, I'm gonna connect the dots like that. And AI can do some things, but it can't, it can't do that yet. Thank goodness. Right. And I don't think ghost writers have, who are working for people who want a truly remarkable book. I don't think they have anything to worry about. Yeah. I think ghost writers who write for people who are just doing factory books, just churn, churn, churn. Yes. They have something to worry about.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([32:19](#)):

Yeah. I, I think you're right too. I, I think connecting the dots in unexpected impactful ways is, uh, something AI won't be able to do for a while. So let's talk about your process. We actually hit on some of these elements already. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([32:31](#)):

We already talked about a bunch of it.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([32:32](#)):

Yeah. Is there anything left in your process that we didn't touch on?

**AJ Harper** ([32:36](#)):

Well, you know, I collect, I get that piece of writing, collect all the materials. We'd do a bunch of phone calls. I clarified their fundamentals. I came up with a system to figure this out. Because I didn't know what I was doing., that's the system I teach in *Write a Must-Read* and in my classes. So none of that's a big secret anymore. It was a series of questions. Once we had an outline, I would do those two chapters. If we felt like we could move forward, then it was back and forth on chapters. So with you, it would be turning in one or two chapters at a time. Revisions until it's Right. That's something that I had in my contract that I don't know any other ghosts that do that. But for me, it was important to instill trust because I would never tell anybody who I worked for. So, try and get a ghostwriting deal when you can't say anything about. So my way around it was, I said, I will write until we're up, until we're done. And then I also worked with the editor as well, if they needed it. So I would see the author through their revisions with their publisher.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([33:38](#)):

But

**AJ Harper** ([33:38](#)):

Not all ghosts will do that. Just for, you have to make sure.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([33:41](#)):

The outline, I think that's, you're breezing through this, but the outline is such an important element and it's, it's a living document. So where we were in that cabin on the lake and we had that wall. Was it, was that for *All In* with all the, the post notes on the, on the..? Yeah, that was *All In*, that was the first outline. But then as we're writing the book, it starts kind of morphing and playing around. Yeah. That I think a huge part. And is that typical that a ghost writer, an excellent ghost writer, will work with you in that capacity?

**AJ Harper** ([34:13](#)):

Yeah. It's just, you know, I think, I think not all ghosts are gonna stick around as long. It's a little bit more of a formula for how much time they're gonna spend with you. And, and understandably, like I said, I was constantly late and part of it was I gave every single ounce of anything I could to a book. And I think you might find stricter relationships.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([34:35](#)):

That, that was one thing. Another revelation, our relationship was perfectionism. Uh, when something's going behind, I'm like, what's going on? You're like, I, I'm not there yet. And you deliver it and it's perfect. I'm like, oh, we have to make some changes. And you've, I feel you've gotten to the point where I'm going to deliver it where it's good enough knowing that Mike's going to come back and say, well, here's some new ideas. There's--

**AJ Harper** ([34:54](#)):

Yeah. I couldn't do that with most people though, because people want it to be perfect when you deliver it. If you, you know?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:02](#)):

Yeah, I get it.

**AJ Harper** ([35:03](#)):

I get it. Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:04](#)):

But you were doing that for me and then we got, it's a little more malleable now.

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**AJ Harper** ([35:07](#)):

That's 'cause we're collaborating. Yeah. It's, we, we play out, we riff off each other. I need, I need everybody here to listen this. All the listeners, this collaboration, this co-writing relationship is once in a lifetime.

**AJ Harper** ([35:21](#)):

It's very rare that you will find this kind of collaboration if you do do what you can to hang onto it, but don't have an expectation because you're going to be disappointed. It's very rare. I've worked with hundreds of authors. I, I, when I retired, I called one author and said, I will keep working with you. Yeah. And that was Mike. Yeah. For a reason. I do want people to just, they have the expectation. So it's not, and I couldn't do it with another person either. I mean, I don't know how, how I would ever find that person.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([35:55](#)):

Yeah. I think it's, we have such complimentary different skills, you know, with a ghost, you're not looking for a clone of yourself. You're looking for, uh, uh, the jigsaw puzzle where you two match up. Red flags, you know, the biggest red flag. Hands down. And, and you pass the test. You know, this is, I asked you, who else have you written for? And you're like, can't tell you. I'm like, yeah, but seriously, I will not tell you. I interviewed other ghost writers and I, that that's the question I asked. Like, oh, how's this written for? And they'd say, oh, I wrote for so and so. I'm like, well...

**AJ Harper** ([36:24](#)):

They might've had permission.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([36:26](#)):

Yeah. Maybe off the list. They, because they didn't disclose that first. They didn't say, I can't tell you the ones that I don't have permission, but I do have permission for some. Sure. Yeah. They, they didn't give any qualifier. They said, oh, here's who I've written for. I'm like, off, off the rule number one, for me at least, was if you're a ghost writer, it's that confidentiality. That was what agreed to. So that I ran that simple test. Yeah. And I was surprised. I don't remember how many people I interviewed, say five 10. I spoke with how many have just revealed the, what they did. And I'm like, Hmm. Probably not fit for me. Uh, we went over some other red flags. We talked about being too cheap.

**AJ Harper** ([37:00](#)):

Too cheap, too fast.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:01](#)):

Too fast. Mm-Hmm.

**AJ Harper** ([37:02](#)):

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Why so fast?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:04](#)):

Yeah. How can you do it?

**AJ Harper** ([37:05](#)):

I mean, I don't know.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:06](#)):

Chat GPT does it for me.

**AJ Harper** ([37:07](#)):

Oh yeah. Yeah. Also, a person who goes off and writes for like a year, <laugh> then, then gets you the whole thing. You need regular check-ins. I had, I had a client once who came to me. He had waited about eight months for the ghost writer. Ghost writer wasn't late, but didn't check in the whole time. Delivered a manuscript that was absolutely unusable, oh, could not use a word. We had to start absolutely from scratch. Oh my gosh.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:33](#)):

And you're so far behind. The eight ball

**AJ Harper** ([37:34](#)):

Is dev. That's devastating. Yeah. I do also want to say that I've written stuff without that whole process. I shared. I've written stuff one time I wrote an entire book from a table of contents. I had no other input from them.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:48](#)):

Not even the voice.

**AJ Harper** ([37:49](#)):

Nothing.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:51](#)):

So did, did, were you able to?

**AJ Harper** ([37:52](#)):

A table, and I'm not talking a detailed table contents. I mean like, just the header.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([37:57](#)):

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Were you able to scrape information off the internet? Or is just, just create this?

**AJ Harper (38:00):**

I pulled it out of my brain.

**Mike Michalowicz (38:02):**

My god.

**AJ Harper (38:03):**

Yeah. I mean, some I've written, I've written from people who talked to me on the phone while they were standing in line at the airport. Wrote a story. From a 10 minute conversation, like I've written, I've written stuff them, some of the most famous self-help authors who made me edit with them at two o'clock in the morning. Like, I, there's every story you can think of of stuff. Shocking stuff. Shocking stuff.

**Mike Michalowicz (38:34):**

Let's flip the table real quick. What for a ghost writer represents an ideal author, how do they behave?

**AJ Harper (38:40):**

They pay the bill.

**Mike Michalowicz (38:41):**

<laugh>. Okay. They pay the bill.

**AJ Harper (38:42):**

They respect your expertise. And they, if they mess with the schedule, they then understand that they also don't get the schedule that they wanted. And I think, and have the, my, you know, my immutable laws when I was a ghost was, you had to have the goods. So, for example, don't tell me about this book, the idea you have that you have no experience with. It really bothered me. When people would come and say, well, I went to this class and now I want to write a book about it. <laugh> So you went and learned from someone else. Now you think you should write a book based on the class you took. <laugh>. Stuff like that, you know? Or I, here's a book of quotes of things I like to, from other people said, yeah. You know, or I, if they just didn't have deep experience in it, I didn't really want to work with them.

**Mike Michalowicz (39:32):**

How should the author come in best prepared to work with a ghost? What's the things they should do?

**AJ Harper (39:35):**

The very best thing you can do, and I've had students take my workshop who are working with ghosts. Okay? So they had clarity. Because where things go wrong with a ghost is when you don't know. So get

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your book fundamentals right. Get your ideal reader, core message, promise. That's *All In* my, that's the first four chapters in my book. Get that down. Understand your immutable laws and characteristics. The tone, what you stand for. Have some clarity about these basic things so that they're not imposing their will on you. Or just trying in good faith, but they get it wrong because they don't actually know because you don't know. You know? (Yeah.) So get, bring, bring as much clarity to the table as you can.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([40:23](#)):

Know the fundamentals. Listen to every episode of Don't write that book.

**AJ Harper** ([40:26](#)):

Read *Write a Must-Read*.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([40:27](#)):

Yeah. Definitely read *Write a Must-Read*. Anything else about Ghostwriting before we wrap up this episode?

**AJ Harper** ([40:32](#)):

No, just there's no shame in it. There's no shame in working with a ghost.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([40:35](#)):

I think there's pride in it.

**AJ Harper** ([40:36](#)):

There's no shame.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([40:37](#)):

Yeah. I think there's pride. I just want to remind people my perception of what an author is. An author is someone who creates an idea. At least this isn't the, the prescriptive Nonfiction is an author who creates an idea, is an advocate for the idea, and then codifies it in some capacity with a partner, uh, maybe on their own, but documents and codifies that idea. And I think there should be pride in having a writing partner or a ghost, because then you have the best, you bring the best people to the table. You've assembled the band, man.

**AJ Harper** ([41:04](#)):

Yeah.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:05](#)):

I want to share one final thing before we wrap up. This is a totally out of left field, not related to this topic at all. I just, we had our conference down in New Orleans. So we, I, I was down there speaking and we had our own conference. One of our members, his name is Bill Litster, is a musician. He plays guitar,

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he plays other instruments. And too, he's like, I want to perform. So we did 15 songs together at this bar setting with our members. And it was an open bar.

**AJ Harper** ([41:33](#)):

You played?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:34](#)):

<laugh>. Yeah.

**AJ Harper** ([41:34](#)):

What did you play?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:35](#)):

We played like cover songs. No, what?

**AJ Harper** ([41:37](#)):

You played your guitar.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:38](#)):

I played my guitar.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:39](#)):

Oh.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:39](#)):

So "Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks <laugh>. We did "Brown-Eyed Girl." "Wish You Were Here" by Pink Floyd.

**AJ Harper** ([41:47](#)):

Do you sing?

**Mike Michalowicz** ([41:48](#)):

I a little bit. Okay. A little bit. He's a singer. And we had Liz from our office here, who's an excellent singer by doing the guitar, the lead guitar stuff. I did solo for Patience. Yeah. Which was actually pretty good. (By Guns N Roses?) By Guns N Roses. Yeah. So we only had one rehearsal day. In person prior. And then we prepared right before we went on, one of our members walks down to the bar to get a beer. And the bartender goes, this band sucks <laugh>. Right. So, so Darren, Darren comes to me, this is a true story.

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**Mike Michalowicz** ([42:25](#)):

He, and he relates to the story. He goes, you know, the bartender said, this band sucks. And I pause. I'm like, we've got a band <laugh>. We've got a band. Like we've arrived. And I don't know why. Just <laugh>. I'm like,

**AJ Harper** ([42:42](#)):

That's so you.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([42:43](#)):

I think framing is so important. <laugh>.

**AJ Harper** ([42:45](#)):

That's so you.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([42:46](#)):

And that's the only thing I heard. That's the only thing I heard. I'm like, oh my god! Oh my God. There's a band like, oh my God, I'm an author! <laugh>. And I think if you go in with that framing, my God, how life can serve?

**AJ Harper** ([42:56](#)):

Oh, I love that. Yeah. That is the best story.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([42:59](#)):

So we performed "Wish You Were Here" again.

**AJ Harper** ([43:01](#)):

That's my favorite Pink Floyd song.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:03](#)):

Oh. If you're interested in seeing part of it,

**AJ Harper** ([43:05](#)):

You can send me the,

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:06](#)):

I'll send it to you. You can

**AJ Harper** ([43:07](#)):

Watch it some audio.



# don't write *that* book!

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:08](#)):

Yeah. You can see it. I think you'll say it's not bad in the is solo in the song. So check it out.

**AJ Harper** ([43:12](#)):

Can I just say one thing before we close? Yeah. I started a Substack.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:16](#)):

All right, tell me what that is. Tell me what it is.

**AJ Harper** ([43:18](#)):

All about. So Substack is a, a newsletter. And it's is fantastic platform. Substack great for anybody that's interested in writing, but all sorts of topics. It's called *Write a Must-Read*. So it's easy for you to remember. Super. Because it's the same title as my book. And, uh, if you go and subscribe to write, write a must read, you'll get tons of great content. I'm writing about how you stay in this writing game. But what I'm doing that's really cool is I'm taking popular big books and breaking down exactly why they work.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:53](#)):

Oh, I love that.

**AJ Harper** ([43:54](#)):

And how you can use those same techniques.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([43:57](#)):

Oh My God.

**AJ Harper** ([43:57](#)):

So if anybody wants to join my substack, Write a Must Read on Substack. Just Google it and you'll find it

**Mike Michalowicz** ([44:04](#)):

Amazing. Also, you know, people have asked, we love your show. Don't write that book and how can we support you? We don't have a Patreon or any of that stuff. What you can do is buy copies of *Write a Must-Read* right now. Get 10 copies. And here's why I'm asking this. When you get AJ's book on Barnes & Nobles or Amazon in particular, or any of these platforms, they are all using algorithms to maximize sales of the book. So when they see you buying it, it looks for other avatars just like you and encourages people to buy it. So I know, yeah. You already have a copy of *Write a Must-Read*, buy another copy right now. Gift it to somebody. And thank you. You're supporting AJ and me by spreading the word on that book through the algorithm. All right. We've got to get out of here, my friend.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([44:47](#)):

# don't write *that* book!

Right. We've got to go. We, we've got to go work on our new book. (We do.) That's what we're tweeting exactly. In half an hour. I got 15 minutes to, to head over there and do an interview and then we're going to meet you upstairs. We're rock and roll. Do you want me to get you something to eat or anything? You hungry?

**AJ Harper** ([44:59](#)):

I'm good.

**Mike Michalowicz** ([45:00](#)):

Okay. Hey, uh, guys, thanks for listening to this episode. We'd love for you to visit our website. It's [dwtb podcast.com](#). We have free materials there. You can join, join, uh, join our email list. Also, you can email myself and ask any questions, comments, your own stories, things you want to hear on our show at [hello@dwtbpodcast.com](mailto:hello@dwtbpodcast.com). Thanks for joining us today. We look forward to having you on our next episode, or at least having you listen in. And as always, don't forget this. Don't write that book. Write this one.