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Episode 73:

“Are You A Career Author?”

Mike Michalowicz: 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. We're having juicy episode after juicy episode.

Today we're gonna talk about, are you a career author? You're listening to don't write that. Book and I'm joined in studio with my cohost AJ Harper and my dear friend, you know, I like hmm that you love Prince. So freakin' much.

AJ Harper: So much.

Mike Michalowicz: Like, you would go to the mat.

AJ Harper: Yeah

Mike Michalowicz: With... for him.

AJ Harper: Yeah, and even when he's problematic and all that stuff. I just think he's a freaking genius

Mike Michalowicz: There was a song, my guitar? Is it my guitar gently weeps? I think so. That was remade by Superstars Tom Petty, so I was reading Tom Petty's book.

AJ Harper: Are you telling me this like I don't know?

Mike Michalowicz: Ha ha ha, I'm telling you, I'm telling our listeners who might not know.

AJ Harper: How many times have I seen that?

Mike Michalowicz: No, tell it.

AJ Harper: I want you to set it up because I'm going to say the thing I admire about you is I was thinking on the drive in, uh, And I was, I was actually thinking about all these things on the, the last episode I was thinking about the drive in your obsession with guitars is really cool. And I was thinking like, you get, you're really trying to get better at it, by the way, I've never heard, except for that one time we were in the retreat and you brought your guitar.

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Mike Michalowicz: Oh.

AJ Harper: And you, but you didn't play me a song, really?

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, I've gotten way better.

AJ Harper: I, I wanna hear, like, I wanna, are you, if you do a performance or a hair song, I really wanna hear it.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay.

AJ Harper: But I love that about you, that you're learning how to do that. And that you love it so much. And incidentally, you should go to Paisley Park so you can see the guitars.

Mike Michalowicz: I'm really interested now.

AJ Harper: Anyway, go ahead. I'm sorry. I totally interrupted you because I was offended that you would think I haven't watched the Well, you know what it is. It's the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, tribute to Jimmy Hendrix when he was inducted. Yes. Go ahead now.

Mike Michalowicz: And by the way, you can always interrupt me by talking about me. Like that's, that's always received well. Yeah, we can always take a little break to talk more about me.

AJ Harper: Okay. [laughs]

Mike Michalowicz: Um, Tom Petty. So I was reading Tom Petty's biography and they say he's overcome with this smile as he's singing as my guitar gently weeps, which is a Beatles song. Prince does the solo, the guitar solo in it. Uh, Prince, they, they, they have a rehearsal. He's like, I don't need to rehearse it. And I, dude, you're the lead guitarist. 'I don't need to.'

AJ Harper: He doesn't.

Mike Michalowicz: So, no rehearsal.

AJ Harper: Mm mm.

Mike Michalowicz: Best performance, best solo, arguably maybe of all time of all rock solos just wailing and Tom Petty is like just singing the backups with these other superstars.

I don't even George Harrison maybe was still there. I think there was some Beatles people. I don't know who was on stage and Tom Petty is looking at Prince and he just overcome with a

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smile, still singing at the very end. Prince does his last like lick or something and just takes the guitar and just throws up in the air and starts walking off stage.

AJ Harper: Uh huh.

Mike Michalowicz: And everyone looks at Prince and the guitar had just disappeared, like, like it didn't crash down. It was gone. It was like a magical moment. Well, what happens, it happens off camera. He throws up and there's a roadie ready to catch it. That's like his signature move. And the roadie catches it in the air and just turns.

So none of the performers or the audience really sees it. It's like a magical trick. And Prince just peacocks off that stage. He owned it.

AJ Harper: Yeah. If you watch the video, you don't even know he's there. For the whole –

Mike Michalowicz: He's kind of on the side hidden away.

AJ Harper: Yeah. He deliberately is. You don't know and it's... I will say it's kind of boring until he shows up and then you watch the— What you gotta do is watch Tom Petty's face and everybody else's face is like... Like they know that they just they're shaking their heads like I can't, don't even know how he did that. They're mystified.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Yeah. He's the greatest guitarist ever. I will go to the mat on that. Even though I know about Van Halen because my wife, Eddie Van Halen is, I understand.

Mike Michalowicz: In their genres.

AJ Harper: No, I'm going to, I'm going to fight you.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay.

AJ Harper: But it doesn't matter. Great guitarists.

Mike Michalowicz: I will tell you the greatest Eddie Van Halen solo is not a Van Halen song. It's Michael Jackson's beat it. Interesting. That's Eddie Van Halen.

AJ Harper: The only person I know who loves Eddie more than you is my wife.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, I believe it. Ask her what she thinks Eddie's best solo is without um, giving her any context.

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AJ Harper: Okay. So I won't say Mike wants to know?

Mike Michalowicz: Mike wants to know, but I, I'm telling you is Michael Jackson and what I think now this is my little theory 'cause there's only two examples when these. Uh, artists perform together where the way they are a little bit offset. They're both in the rock and space, but Michael Jackson's pop rock, he was hair rock. You get this magic. Um, Prince's music was pop rock and Petty was folk rock and you blend it and you get, you get something magical. Tell me if you're--

AJ Harper: I don't think he was, I don't think he's pop.

Mike Michalowicz: Prince? What would you define him as?

AJ Harper: You want to know what's something interesting? We're gonna go, we're a little, a little off track, but it's okay. I want to tell you. So first of all, there is a deep dive podcast put out by The Current, which is the greatest radio station in the entire freaking world, where they do deep dives into some of his albums. And they, and the, they talked to the revolution. They talked to the people who did the lighting. They talked, they talked to all these cool people you've never heard of before. And it's so fascinating if you want to learn how artists work. You mentioned the guitar thing.

When The Revolution broke up, there's, I remember, listening to this, Wendy and Lisa, who were in The Revolution, uh, said that they knew that it was over at this one concert when he actually did break the guitar.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh.

AJ Harper: When he actually did break it. And they were like, okay.

Mike Michalowicz: Done.

AJ Harper: We're done. It had been brewing, but that's, they, they knew, they talked about that trick where he tosses it and someone catches it.

Like, this time, broke that freaking guitar. Yeah, and they knew it was over.

Mike Michalowicz: Huh! Oh, that's interesting.

AJ Harper: Yeah. Well, all right. So we're, this is not at all, um, the topic of the day.

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Mike Michalowicz: But do speak to it cause it's a career. We're gonna talk about being a career author and these are career artists and authorship is artistry. So there's the link. Um, so let's, let's get into it.

When, what would you define as a career author? What does that mean to you? Do you have a definition for it?

AJ Harper: Yeah, it's an identity.

Mike Michalowicz: That's exactly what I was going to say.

AJ Harper: Yeah, it's not, it's shifting from I'm writing a book to I am an author, but not just for this transaction. It's not a transaction. It's not checking something off. It's not I did that. It's this is who I am.

Mike Michalowicz: Is there a quantity of time you've got to be working a certain number of hours a week on it to be?

AJ Harper: No, I think it's an, I've decided this is my identity because you had a critical moment where you decided to be, that you were a career author.

I, since a child, have decided, I wouldn't have used the term career author as a child, but I knew: This is who I am. So you and I have a different way of arriving there, but I wasn't writing novels when I was eight years old, but I knew I was an author.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. There was a moment for me. There's two moments. One was with you at the cookie factory. Um, so if people are not familiar with that story yet, I was able to get free office space at a cookie factory because the owner, uh, was a dear friend and he said, you can have this office. Your own office with no window above the ovens. It was 95 degrees in there.

And, um, I had with AJ written The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur, but The Toilet Paper Entrepreneur I had written myself. And then AJ did your best to...

AJ Harper: Book doctor.

Mike Michalowicz: To book doctorate. It's gotten so six figures of copies, like hundreds of 100, 000 plus, I got to look what the number is. Um, but out of pure hustle. But at the time I was like, Oh, I'm an entrepreneur who's written a book.

And then The Pumpkin Plan came about and there was some time during that book writing process where I said, I am not a entrepreneur who's written a book. I am now an author. And it, it, superseded everything else. That was that fundamental shift I had internally. This is now

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who I am. And I think that's the situation or the first time that happened to me the second time.

It's years later. It was just an affirmation of my new identity in an uber and that the uber drivers, you know, he goes, so what do you do? Oh my God, I'm an author. And he goes, pulls over. He turns around. It's like you're You're an author. He's like, I've never had an author in my car before. I'm like, Oh my God, this is an identity.

I bet you there's been people in that car that have written books and they may even said, yeah, yeah, I do this and I've written a book, but there's something powerful when, when you say something about yourself with such an emphatic emotion that it's, it's a definition of who you are. And it, it, it transferred to that guy.

It was just a really interesting moment. He's like, Oh my God, this is an author.

AJ Harper: But do you, do you remember why you and I had that talk in the house? I wonder, I don't know if you remember this the same way I do.

Mike Michalowicz: The Pumpkin Plan?

AJ Harper: We were in the cookie factory and you were frustrated. And you were, you were just feeling all these things. And I remember saying to you, you have to make that shift because you're Thinking of things, you have to stop that. Stop saying, 'I'm an entrepreneur and I write books.' Start saying, 'I'm an author.' You have to make that shift because it changes how you look at the whole thing.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, it really does.

AJ Harper: It changes how you come, your commitment, your strategy, your joy, because you have a more, you're thinking of it as an identity versus I need to hit this mark, and you hadn't yet made the shift. Also, I think at the time, was really trying to get— I'm trying to remember now I was really trying to get you to see that you deserve to say that because it was holding you back in some communications You know with editors and so forth Just there's a thing where we new authors show up to the publishing table, so to speak. Kind of like hat in hand, you know, like oh, I hope I get I get to stay, you know, and I don't know.

I just kind of wanted you to take hold. Like, this is me. This is not just something I do. This is who I am. Because I knew if you could make that critical shift, everything would change.

Mike Michalowicz: I do remember, I don't remember any of that. And I wonder if it's If it's a mental block, not a mental block.

AJ Harper: I can still see where we were sitting.

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Mike Michalowicz: In that conference room thing, right? I do remember that.

AJ Harper: It's that small, that small conference room.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. Which was only like 98 degrees, not 150. What I think it was, was acceptance. At a certain point. That's the primary emotion I remember is accepting I'm an author. And then there's this cascade of relief.

I don't know how to equate it. If to anything physically, it's like. Waking in the middle of the night when I have to go to the bathroom, like, I don't want to go. It's just so much more comfortable to say is sleeping and the discomfort only grows. And then there's this relief. It's like, okay, I went to the bathroom.

I can go back to sleep and you sleep more deeply than you ever have. Yeah. It's a horrible analogy, but that's what it felt like. It's just,

AJ Harper: It's horrible analogy.

Mike Michalowicz: But I was just trying to kind of hold on to everything. There's, there's this fear if, if I don't pursue entrepreneurship at a hundred percent, if I don't pursue writing books a hundred percent that I'm falling short, but it was just accepting authorship.

AJ Harper: I think I, I can, I can, I can tell you that I watched you change, uh, it was like, I couldn't believe it. I knew it would happen.

Mike Michalowicz: It did feel like in that day, in that second.

AJ Harper: You, your commitment level. Was you were trading the book. I know you cared so much about entrepreneurs. All that was totally legit. You know, you really wanted to get that out there, but it just still felt like this is one piece of my entrepreneurial puzzle. And once you made that shift, I don't know, it's like cranked it. You just, all of a sudden you were going for it.

Mike Michalowicz: Now in your story, did you always want to be an author?

AJ Harper: Mm hmm. But I mean, I wouldn't have said author, I would have said a writer.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay. Yeah. How would you have distinguished it back then? Why was one different than the other?

AJ Harper: I don't think I knew I was a child.

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Mike Michalowicz: Oh, how far back does it go to your first?

AJ Harper: I read *Little Women* and the character in *Little Women*, Jo March, writes a book. I can still see what I pictured in my mind when she's carrying the manuscript in her arms. I wanted that so badly. Yeah, I remember thinking, Oh, you can do that. I'm gonna do that. So, yeah, but I very quickly shifted to when I was 11, I realized that you could write plays and might have even been earlier because I shared this on a podcast with Jenny Nash on the #I'm Writing Podcast. She asked me this question and I watched, um, HBO. We had remember back in the day there was HBO, MTV, and I think maybe CNN and we had like three It was a big deal to have HBO.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: It came with an apartment that my mom and I rented. It's the only reason we could have it, because we couldn't have afforded it otherwise. And, um, they had a recording of the revival of Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park* on Broadway.

So it was a video of a Broadway show, and she let me watch it, which maybe wasn't appropriate for my age. But whatever, 80s, that's how it all was. So, I watched it, and I remember, that's when I knew, I was so caught up in the words, and I thought, I didn't even understand most of it because it's about newlyweds and all sorts of innuendos that went completely over my head. But I remember thinking, do you get to write that?

Mike Michalowicz: Mm.

AJ Harper: You know, I just thought that is magic.

Mike Michalowicz: Hmm. What's the difference? And while you answer this, I gotta pop that back on. What's the difference between writing plays versus writing books?

AJ Harper: What's, it was like 15 podcast episodes to talk about that.

Mike Michalowicz: But how you said, how you said you wanted to be a writer.

And then writing plays with something different. I, I just don't...

AJ Harper: Why you mean, why did I want that over writing a book?

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, exactly.

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AJ Harper: Oh my gosh. Just theater just because there's this Um, it's right there. It's right there. It's right there in front of you. It's happening right in front of you. And then there's an audience and they're taking it all in and you don't have to imagine it.

It's right there.

Mike Michalowicz: That's cool.

AJ Harper: And I just, I don't know. I fell madly in love. I mean, madly, madly in love.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. You see the consumer. Reacting to every line every moment.

AJ Harper: Yeah, I just I don't know. I just fell madly in love So I didn't you know because I didn't start writing books until I moved to New York and I had to figure out... Because I made it come I made a commitment to myself After years of being a playwright and having a regular job to support myself because being a playwright doesn't, you know, whatever.

Maybe you can afford a cup of coffee. Um, I decided when my son was, um, a few weeks old, I said, I will never have another straight job again. And I'm going to earn a living from writing no matter what. I didn't choose to be a ghost. I mean, I just, I was like, Oh, ghostwriting is a thing. And I did that. That was my commitment to say, I'm not doing this anymore.

I'm only going to be a writer, but I didn't care if it was someone else's name on it. And I didn't care if it was... the stuff I have written would shock you.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Yeah. My only rule was it cannot endanger humans, like I'm not gonna do bomb instructions. I'm not gonna do somebody's you know, like Nazi Manifesto, like I'm not writing that stuff.

Mike Michalowicz: what's the zaniest thing you've ever written?.

AJ Harper: You were... Oh, God. This is a kid's show

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, well you make it PG or make it G.

AJ Harper: I can't talk about that. But really I've really not um I don't even want to say certain words.

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Mike Michalowicz: I love the hand signals. There's circles, there's lines, there's fingers pointing.

AJ Harper: No, there isn't at all. That is not happening at all. Listeners, that is false.

Mike Michalowicz: I did start the filming, so.

AJ Harper: You can confirm. But there's zany things. I did something, I did a series of articles for gentlemen who were less than happy with their God-given size.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay.

AJ Harper: And I am married to a woman. Had to write and I'm not joking I had to write I think 25 of them a day.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh my gosh.

AJ Harper: And upload them

Mike Michalowicz: That's a brilliant I guess I

AJ Harper: Wanna know even more ridiculous. ?

Mike Michalowicz: You can do more ridiculous, but

AJ Harper: No, I totally can. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: What's that? I got so bogged down with work because I did actually get to a point where I was in the top 10% of writers on Elance, which is, was a huge deal.

AJ Harper: I could not keep up with the work , I just, yeah. Guess who I got to help me write those articles.

Mike Michalowicz: [whispers] Who?

AJ Harper: My mom.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh no. Oh no.

AJ Harper: No, I'm not joking.

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Mike Michalowicz: Oh, this is brilliant.

AJ Harper: I'm gonna cry. I'm actually, I have tears in my eyes laughing, so I'm actually going to go see her tomorrow.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, no. So you and your mom are writing about The male sex organ.

AJ Harper: Listen to me. My mom is Catholic and the biggest prude. I've never heard her use, use certain, some words ever, ever. Never curses. I know nothing about her past. She will not say a word to me. I did not get a talk. I did not like, we are talking level 10 prude. Formal, like, lady, okay? I had to call her up and say, because she had been helping me with some projects, I said, you gotta take this off my hands.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: I can't, I can't write 25 of these a day, and write books, and I also, I'm not the best person for this. because I don't have a lot of experience with this.

Mike Michalowicz: I can, I can, in my mind, in my mind, I can, I can see your mom leaving a voicemail saying, darling, why does this gentleman want a seven inch beef tart?

AJ Harper: Stop it. I was appropriate on this freaking podcast. Don't. You're going to get, we're going to have so much mail. I did actually, my mom and I completed that work together. Boy, when we were done with that project.

Mike Michalowicz: Are you closer now, the two of you?

AJ Harper: We did not discuss, my mother would just say, um, Annie, I am really pleased that this project is complete.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay, okay.

AJ Harper: And I do not advise that we take another one.

Mike Michalowicz: Huh uh.

AJ Harper: But yeah, she took over for me.

Mike Michalowicz: That is brilliant. What, okay, you are not an author in that space, but you wrote volume.

AJ Harper: I was a writer.

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Mike Michalowicz: So, what distinguishes the quantity, the volume of writing. Someone could have many books and not be an author. Is that true?

And could someone be an author?

AJ Harper: No, I think you're an author, but it's a mindset. You just decide. You just decide. Are these books a transaction? Are they something you're just putting out into the world? I hear that all the time. Makes me sad. Well, I just gotta get this out. Or I hear people say, well, yeah, just let me I'm gonna get this I'm doing this like third book and when I'm done with that then I'm really gonna get into this thing I want to do.

I don't know.

Mike Michalowicz: Have you ever had people come to your retreat? And by the way, I want to put this in right now. People got to go to ajharper.com.

AJ Harper: Thank you for always plugging that. I can't think of anything I'm more excited to do this year than moving my retreats up to the island.

Mike Michalowicz: I cannot wait to go myself.

AJ Harper: I know you're going to be so cold, but it's going to be good.

Mike Michalowicz: I cannot wait. Have you had people enter your program who clearly are not? Career authors. In the mindset of career authorship.

AJ Harper: Yeah. All the time. One of them is your, one of your Simplified authors.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay. Oh, right. Wow. So they're not in that mindset.

AJ Harper: No. I'm just gonna do this one book.

Mike Michalowicz: And—

AJ Harper: Another one is one of your Pen With Purpose authors.

Mike Michalowicz: Jesus, all my people!

AJ Harper: Well, no, I'm proud, like, I sent them to you. Yeah. Like, in terms of, like, doing those things. Like, in terms of, like, saying you should do those things. Mm hmm. Um, but I think that I always, I'm, that's what I'm proud of, when people come into any of my things,

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retreat or my workshop and I, and then they're like, I'm just doing this one book and then they come back to me and say, here's, here's another book I'm doing.

That to me is a great day. That is a great day.

Mike Michalowicz: That's the moment, yeah..

AJ Harper: Not everybody's like that.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: But there's a decision that we make. Am I doing this book, or am I an author? And it shifts the way you think about your craft, the way you market, Um, goal setting, long term planning. It's a complete identity shift.

Mike Michalowicz: When, what do you think triggers that shift, uh, for the majority of people? Is it, I don't know.

AJ Harper: I think most people are waiting for permission, which they shouldn't do. I think people...

Mike Michalowicz: Is it a fear of income loss? This is not a real Job?

AJ Harper: It doesn't mean it's the only thing you're doing.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay,

AJ Harper: You know career authorship part of being an author today means you're doing other stuff. Maybe you're teaching. Maybe you're speaking. Maybe you have Products related to the book. It's just that's the world we live in now. So it doesn't mean that you know, there are authors That's all they do, that would be, that's the dream, man, you know, that you can just live off royalties. It's not realistic for most authors, but that doesn't mean you're not.

There's no point when, Oh, now I'm an author because now I don't have to do anything else. That's that's bogus.

Mike Michalowicz: I had a call with, uh, our mutual acquaintance, a friend of mine, uh, is John Jantz, acquaintance of yours, uh, last week. He's called up, he's like, hey, I just want a bull****. So we were talking and stuff.

I said, what are you up to? He's like, I'm writing a new book. I'm like, that's awesome. What are you writing? He goes, fiction. I go,

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AJ Harper: Oh, really?

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, I said you're writing a fiction book.

AJ Harper: Wait, I think you did tell me that.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, maybe I did. Did I share it on air?

AJ Harper: You might have. You might have.

Mike Michalowicz: Well, then the short synopsis, I said, how's that? He goes, it is so hard.

AJ Harper: Yeah, it's a completely different landscape.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh my gosh.

AJ Harper: Yeah. You think you would want to try it?

Mike Michalowicz: I think so.

AJ Harper: Really? I think you'd be good at it actually.

Mike Michalowicz: I can go into storytelling very easily.

AJ Harper: I think the challenge for you is that you are used to these sections and you have to carry, if you're writing a novel, that's a whole other thing.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: It's not like here's this, you know, thousand-word story.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. And I think the genre too, I like, I like consuming sci fi, but I don't want to talk about that. History. I don't know. I don't know. But I think one day it, it may happen. My wife is actively, my wife loves writing, but she doesn't, hasn't put much effort into it recently. She downloaded or purchased a program, do it yourself program, and Every morning part of the script is you have to write. So when she wakes up 6 6 30 in the

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morning I'm she stays in bed and we have a bet you can slide open the curtains and kind of looks into the yard and I'm not, I'm not allowed in the room anymore So I get kicked out.

I'm allowed to bring her coffee.

AJ Harper: Well, you have that ritual. You do your writing.

Mike Michalowicz: I do my writing, but now she's doing her writing.

AJ Harper: That's great.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. Um, and I hope, I hope the bug catches her, because she writes really well.

AJ Harper: What do you think she would write? Memoir?

Mike Michalowicz: Uh, no, I think fiction.

AJ Harper: Fiction?

Mike Michalowicz: I think fiction. Yeah, not a memoir. No, I don't think she's interested in that. No, fiction.

AJ Harper: I love that.

Mike Michalowicz: She loves consuming fiction. Loves it.

AJ Harper: She likes her upmarket fiction. Mm hmm.

Mike Michalowicz: Mm hmm Um, if you commit to being a career author, what kind of landscape are we looking at? This isn't a one-day commitment.

AJ Harper: No, it's a total shift. Now, this isn't about the book you have coming out that you want to try and get a deal, and you want to make sure it's great, and you want to make sure it sells well. It's about, this is my life. What am I going to build my body of work?

Mike Michalowicz: Do you, when you're a career author, do you plan out your weeks? Has it become also a job responsibility?

AJ Harper: I mean, that's one of the benefits I think of shifting to this identity is I hear people, this is a daily refrain. I do not have time to think about my marketing. I do not have

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time. How do I fit it in? How do I fit it? How do I fit it in? As a career author, it's part. It's just part and parcel. You can't just squeeze it in. It's, it's just a requirement of the job. So, you know, you can slowly get into that process. You don't have to go all in where you aren't doing other work, but you do need to take it seriously. And I think that identity shift helps you to see, you know what, this is just not another task. It's just what I think a lot of, a lot of authors are saying, oh man, I have to do the book marketing.

But if you thought I'm a career author, this is part of it. You know, this is the next part of what I'm doing and it's a constant thing. You would do more, I think, if you could make that shift.

Mike Michalowicz: Do you consume more? Do you read more once you become a career author? I

AJ Harper: mean, it's up to you. I mean, there are people who read a bunch of stuff all the time. I mean, listen, if you're an author, you need to read, period. But then you might have periods where you don't read certain things because you're not, you're trying not to muddy the waters or, you know, I read. Specific types of things during specific times on purpose, you know.

Mike Michalowicz: Do you surround yourself with other career authors?

AJ Harper: You should. Now you're part of a community. That's another benefit. I'm an author, so let me know other authors. I can't tell you how many authors I know who aren't talking to each other. I don't understand this.

Mike Michalowicz: What do you think their logic?

AJ Harper: I just think people are thinking about my book and not thinking about who I am in my community. I have, you know, as you know, I teach Top Three Book Workshop once a year and this year it starts in mid-August, August 18th. It starts ,and the alums of that workshop. Now we're up to, I think, 178 people and that's a lot considering. I only take a few people a year and I can see a real difference in the people who are very engaged with each other show up for each other.

I have a live edit I do every Thursday you can anyone can come and when people show up even if they're not up for it, even if it's not their chapter, I'm reviewing. I know they're committed to learning. Improving their craft because they're paying attention to that but also to show up for each other. And then when people are just kind of around, you know, or only come when it's there, the focus is on them, they don't get the same kind of support when it's Launch day. They don't have the same kind of relationships.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

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AJ Harper: I mean, we don't we don't need to do it for purely business reasons. We should be doing it because it's who we are, but I think this transactional approach to authorship is really impedes progress and makes it really hard for you to actually get the goal, reach the goals you want with your book

Mike Michalowicz: So last week I flew down to Dorie Clark's apartment— Or condominium is the right word. It's beautiful, in Miami overlooks the water and 10 authors were there. And we're talking about the future of authorship. I'm curious what your gauge is on this. So I led the conversation and I said, We in history there was another defining moment where artistry changed forever. It was in 1816. 1816 was the invention of the camera the public use of the camera, the photograph. Prior to that an artist a painting artist Was compensated upon their accuracy of drawing a portrait. The more accurate I can make someone or depict someone The higher I was regarded, until 1816.

Then the camera supplanted the portrait artist, but a whole new artist came about. It was the abstract artist, you know, the Da Vinci's of the world. So my question to you is, is there a change afoot for career authors and how we need to see ourselves in the advent of AI and what's going down on that front?

AJ Harper: I mean, you and I are diff really different on AI, I'm, I don't use it, so that's my personal choice as an author.

Mike Michalowicz: Are you rejecting the camera, I'm saying?

AJ Harper: No, no, I'm, what I'm trying to do is continue to be able to hone my craft because one of the things that I do is, um, I know how to connect dots and I don't want a machine doing it for me because I need to keep that muscle working really well.

So I'm not, I don't, that doesn't, they have other reasons why I'm anti AI. But I think what will happen is more people wanting authentic reading experiences because I think AI is going to is already just polluting with a bunch of dreck.

Mike Michalowicz: I totally think it is. So look at the camera. As the camera proliferated, there was now thousands of portraits of one family. Remember, you just keep on clicking the camera. I see the exact same parallel happening in books. There's gonna be thousands of clicks, camera pictures.

You shared something a few episodes back here where you said, but the soulfulness, you know, and I'm like, that's the abstract. That's what authors need to do is to find the story that no one else that no one else has found yet because AI then can't assimilate it. To, to write it and make these connections that are obscure or remote or not common is going to bring a soulfulness to the book that AI can't or maybe never will, I don't know. I think I think there's a massive explosion in authors who up level the craft because the basics are done now

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AJ Harper: Yeah, and I yeah What at least with um Well, actually I think any writing, the author is bringing their own perspective. That's always the case. And all AI can do is think, assume what the perspective is.

Mm hmm, and The human brain is magnificent. Mm hmm combined with our experience the way we see the world. There's only one person that can write that and that's you. You can write your stuff. I can write my stuff for me. And that's the best part so I don't I understand the point of AI. I understand how it's helpful and useful. For me, it's not. For me, it's boring.

Mike Michalowicz: There was an anecdote about a professor who has rocks, sand, pebbles, you've heard this right?

AJ Harper: A million times. Yeah. Let's stop using it.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay.

AJ Harper: No, no. I mean, you can tell now, but I mean, let's not do it in books anymore.

Mike Michalowicz: Let's not do books. But basically he says, you know, if you put in all the small things first, all the sand, it fills up.

So you put the rocks in first. When you commit to being a career author, what are the rocks that are the things you really need to address first? The big things.

AJ Harper: Oh, that's a good question. Craft is number one. Craft craft craft craft continue to get better.

Mike Michalowicz: What about craft?

AJ Harper: Get better at it, and then I would say build readership. You know, I want to say book marketing, but that's not really it.

It's more about building Readership people that follow you from book to book Be active about that and then build author community

Mike Michalowicz: That's the big one. Those are the,

AJ Harper: I would say those are the three big rocks.

Mike Michalowicz: Because?

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AJ Harper: Because book marketing can be whatever you want it to be. There's people who are successful and they barely do a dang thing on social media, for example. Um, there are ways to go about it. But I think author community, um, craft and building readership.

Mike Michalowicz: Do you routinize those things? I mean, do you schedule that?

AJ Harper: You should.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: I was, uh, at an event with, with Dorie Clark, and Michael Bungay Stanier is there and he is writing a book on change management. So it's a business book on implementing change. And so the question is, after I, you know, yell out, "Boring."

AJ Harper: Nice to insult him.

Mike Michalowicz: I then said, or someone said, um, why—

AJ Harper: Isn't this the same guy you said you wanted to be BFFs with?

Mike Michalowicz: I know. Well, that's how I beat BFFs. That's how you do it. I gotta show a picture.

AJ Harper: Old school, old school 80s style.

Mike Michalowicz: I did the old Groucho Marx move on him too. I'm like, Michael, it's a pleasure to see you. I put my hand out to shake his hand as he did. No, no, I lifted my right leg so he was holding my leg. Wasn't that Groucho Marx who did that?

AJ Harper: I don't know.

Mike Michalowicz: So I Groucho Marxed him. I love him. I love him. He's just the greatest person. So I, I throw, I shower hate on the people I love.

And after I yell out boring, I go, or someone said, why are you writing in this genre? He goes, it's so, I can't really remember the term to use, but just sporadic. There's, there's no defining books. And then he said, and he used your words. He goes, I someone needs to write one of the top threes in this category.

AJ Harper: Mm-hmm.

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Mike Michalowicz: I'm like, well, you should go to AJ's course. Is there Michael?

AJ Harper: He's got it. He doesn't need me.

Mike Michalowicz: No, he's got it.

AJ Harper: He doesn't need me.

Mike Michalowicz: And he goes, they're missing profound simplicity. He's hitting on all these, he sees it. He sees it.

AJ Harper: Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: And he, and then he, he looks around the room, he's like, he goes, I, I gotta do this. And if, if. If not me, then who?

AJ Harper: That's how I feel about the new book I'm getting ready to write

Mike Michalowicz: you. Yeah, career author. You still won't tell us what it's about. You're not yet. Good.

AJ Harper: I'm not trying to be secretive. I just trying to hold on to the creative juice because I, I haven't had... The delay starting the development of it because, um, some health issues that my wife had. But so I just, I just want to. Being there by myself in my little creative cave before I say too much.

Mike Michalowicz: I think that's great.

AJ Harper: Yeah. I did tell my publisher who's also not your publisher

Mike Michalowicz: and they're pumped.

AJ Harper: Not only did they say that that yeah They were like, okay, we need the full. I think I said this on the podcast. We need the full 18 months

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, you did say that

AJ Harper: Which kind of blew my mind. So, made me feel good

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, for 18 months so that they can build a marketing momentum all that stuff

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AJ Harper: from the time. The manuscript is done.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah

AJ Harper: That's, that means I have a 2027 title.

Mike Michalowicz: Wow. When are you submitting your manuscript?

AJ Harper: I haven't started even developing it.

Mike Michalowicz: What was our deadline though?

AJ Harper: No, no, but I'm setting one for myself.

Mike Michalowicz: I see. Are you, so you're not in contract yet.

AJ Harper: I mean, I, they'll give me one if I want to have one right now.

Mike Michalowicz: Yes. You're, you're, you have a verbal agreement, but there's no contractual.

AJ Harper: Yeah. I just, I can't get on the schedule yet. Cause I don't know.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Because I have to see what's there.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. Is that part of being a career author too, is just allowing things to happen sometimes going off schedule?

AJ Harper: Yes. Yes, please. I was just, um, I will, I can't say who I was talking to a, um, Publisher,

Mike Michalowicz: Mm hmm.

AJ Harper: I said, what is your turnaround time with a complete, complete manuscript? Four weeks to four months.

Mike Michalowicz: Wait, you turn in a manuscript and they say you'll get back in four weeks or up to four months?

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AJ Harper: To publish.

Mike Michalowicz: To publish?

AJ Harper: I know. See incredulous. And then the other, but then there was this other process of developing and all of that. And I just didn't see a lot of room for figuring stuff out. I mean, I just, can we, can we please see what's there? Can we please allow time to see what we really think about things? I'm so tired of produce, produce, produce.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Because there's no magic in that.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: And I just think part of the problem is this transactional thinking. I just need to get my book done.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah,

AJ Harper: Who wants to read a book written by someone who just wanted to get their book down and turn it out. I just I've mystified me Why do you do this? Like look what you just said about Michael Bungay Stanier. He sees an opportunity. He's psyched to work on it He's gonna do it's that's the process as a career offer.

The process is part of it. It's not something to get through Yeah, it's not something to make more efficient so we can get there faster. It is part of it. It is part of the joy. And think about some of the stuff. For instance, you texted me the other day a major thing that we have to change the freaking manuscript.

I'm still like, I want, I don't fully see it. I don't fully agree, but you know, I made a choice in that moment. I was like, you know what? I think I sent back

Mike Michalowicz: You did.

AJ Harper: I sent back, I said, okay, I think was what I wrote to you. If I ever say that, that's me going, I released myself from, yeah, because I know when I'm just going to wait until it's back and then I'll be able to see it.

But imagine if people don't allow themselves that time to come to some sort of awakening like that, then the book's out. I just, I don't know, man. I, I'm so, I'm so serious about it

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because it changes what's you know, changes what people actually experience when they read a book and why are we doing this?

Mike Michalowicz: This is deep stuff. Imagine what's going on in my head right now, but I'm visualizing is whatever your book title is. You have the book cover on there, but you make one, you have one share on there you're required to make on the book cover that says, I had to get this book done, or I just had to do it, or this is my life's work.

You choose which one it is, like whatever the emotional state is you're in when writing this book. If you put that on the cover, that is what you're doing. That's what the book is. And could you imagine a reader seeing that saying, I, you know, I just needed to race through this book. I have met the deadline exclamation mark.

AJ Harper: I have a student, Francesca, and she's been, I think she was in, probably started in my class.

Mike Michalowicz: Do I know her? That name sounds familiar.

AJ Harper: Yeah, I think you do.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay. She has a really unique story with a twin.

AJ Harper: Yeah, she's a conjoined twin.

Mike Michalowicz: Yes. Okay.

AJ Harper: Brilliant storyteller. She's been trying to find what is the book. She wrote most of it. Um, and the other day she, she hadn't been around, because you know I have this membership, um, Top 3 Authors Membership, uh, community, and she hadn't been around for a few months, and then she came back, and I was all, I'm always so thrilled when people are, come back, and I said, and she told me she finally figured out what the core message is, and this is probably maybe... Probably like eight seven core messages in, what's wrong.

That's there's nothing wrong with that when she shared it with me I was like, oh my gosh. Yes, and she had so much confidence and she felt so strong about it. And it's just gonna be a change with what she's already done, but not it's just like she does not tear down. It's been several years and she has a job. She has a business. She has work that she is passionate about it's not her only thing, but I would call her a career author, even though she's not technically published yet, and she has other things going on because of her commitment to get this right,

Mike Michalowicz: Mm.

AJ Harper: Her commitment to get this right.

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Mike Michalowicz: You know what triggered the change that we need to make for the book?

So I'm teaching people about this system. Sam Horton was a great example, uh, and Sam was going through financial needs differently than some readers and to address Sam's need and the other readers, I found, Oh, you need specificity around your current pain. That, and the second thing was we're working on the subtitle.

So I ran a test, I used the PICKFU utility. And what happens in PICKFU is they, the people that respond will also give an explanation of why they chose a certain thing. We were doing subtitle testing. The winning subtitle, I'm not going to share the full subtitle, but it was the words "worry free" were included in that. That's, and people would say, that's what I want. I want to be worry free.

So I looked through. What we had done with test users or are people deploying it that gave them worry free. And I'm like, Oh my gosh, I can see it so clearly now. That's what we need, that people are not first looking to achieve a dream, like an aspiration or first looking to alleviate the pain. So get rid of my pain and then help me achieve my aspiration.

AJ Harper: So just imagine now if you hadn't, um, realized that

Mike Michalowicz: I said, well, so the moral of the story is I sat in that for six to seven hours reading, reading, considering, like I devoted a day to that one shift.

AJ Harper: Yeah. Just that one shift.

Mike Michalowicz: And I sent it to you maybe, too, too curtly or succinctly. I mean, I just, I don't,

AJ Harper: I don't, I don't mind that.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. I didn't give the context, but I'm like, Oh my God.

AJ Harper: Yeah. I mean, yeah. My immediate response was like, Oh my God.

Mike Michalowicz: Thanks Mike.

AJ Harper: Yeah. Because I was like, Oh, that is. Huge change. I think I know now though. I've, I've, you know, it's been percolating in my, but that's the thing. We're, this is what we're talking about. This is an ongoing commitment to the reader, to craft, to getting better at this, to showing up, to making a difference, to making sure that the book lands. That's what we do as career authors.

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Mike Michalowicz: Is there a, uh, point in your career, AJ, where, maybe there's multiple, where you're like, in reflection, that epitomized you being a career author? Maybe it was public recognition, maybe it was in a quiet moment at home writing.

AJ Harper: No, because I always felt like I was.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah, you were from day one.

AJ Harper: I think there's a difference, though. The pinnacle for me was when I was, um, I was pregnant with our son and I was working a full-time job and then some at a nonprofit and I remember saying to my wife, this has to be the last straight job. I just can't.

Mike Michalowicz: Mmm.

AJ Harper: Just can't. So it's more like Total all in on only making a living from writing and I made that I had no idea how I would do it. I had no experience except playwriting. And so when I went on to Elance, so then we moved to Brooklyn I was like and it was tempting. I remember looking at the help wanted because I could have gotten in, you know, some sort of Executive Assistant position based on my previous experience. Going to the city, be gone 10 hours a day.

I Just don't want to be away from my baby That was the real reason. And I also was kind of tired of just like, Ugh, I don't want to always be doing this at night, and on weekends, and trying to shove this all in. And I, but it was tempting. Like, oh, that would be nice, because we were broke. You know? I just thought, I'll just go get that job that pays, you know, \$90,000 a year, and this was 20 years ago.

And then I was just like, You can't do it. You can't do it. You have to stick to your commitment.

Mike Michalowicz: Mm hmm.

AJ Harper: And that's the thing about me, is it takes me a long time to say, I'm never doing this again, but when I say it, I will not waiver. And I'd have not since that day. So I think for me, it was more like, uh, I just, I'm going all in on this for me, but not necessarily for books.

The books thing happened because I wrote a, I wrote one. It was one of the jobs and that person. happened to be super connected in the thought leadership space and just started passing my name around.

Mike Michalowicz: Mm.

AJ Harper: So it happened really fast.

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Mike Michalowicz: Mm.

AJ Harper: But, um, you couldn't have told me back then that this is what I'd be doing now, sitting here talking to you and talking about like, what the heck?

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: Prescriptive nonfiction and being, I really feel like that's my, uh, I, my expertise is solid in that department, but I do wanna write other stuff. You know, I wanna write a novel, I wanna write other things. I think I just assumed that I will. Because I'm an author, right? So I'm not thinking about, I'm not thinking about it as there's any end.

There's no end.

Mike Michalowicz: Wow. A couple underlines for me. I went all in on this for me. There is no end. I'm an author. Those are the three underlines. What a great episode.

AJ Harper: I have to tell you that, um, right when you just told me to ask Polly, What is Eddie Van Halen's greatest guitar solo? I did actually text her.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, if she messes this one up, I'm going to throttle her through the Internet waves. Does she listen to the show ever?

AJ Harper: I don't know.

Mike Michalowicz: Probably not.

AJ Harper: She used to when she, uh, she just changed jobs. So she doesn't have a, uh, she just changed. She's going back to school, which I'm really proud of her. She's going to be 52.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, yeah. What's she going back for?

AJ Harper: She wants to get her degree in, um, I think it's, I don't know what it's officially going to be called. Social work, maybe, but, uh, no, wait. She wants to work with people who have, um, substance abuse. So she wants to work with that population. But listen, here's her response.

Mike Michalowicz: Before you say it, just make sure Polly listens to this, this section right now because I'm going to respond live if she's right or wrong. She'll get a buzz if she's wrong.

AJ Harper: Okay. She doesn't listen anymore because she doesn't drive to work anymore is what I'm getting at.

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Mike Michalowicz: No, I'm just saying you're going to have to play it for her when you're at home.

AJ Harper: Fine, get some

Mike Michalowicz: get some nice Charcuterie board out and then I'm either gonna buzzer or cha ching.

AJ Harper: Okay, so I said what is Eddie Van Halen's greatest guitar solo could be any song? I made that distinction. Not just the Van Halen song. She says Eruption hands down Then I said Then I said, Mike says Beat It. And she says, hell no.

Mike Michalowicz: All right. We're going to go fisticuffs.

AJ Harper: And then she actually totally called you out. Do you want to know what she said?

Mike Michalowicz: What'd she say?

AJ Harper: I wrote LOL when she said, hell no. And then she said, that's what any. Quote, she put the quotes quote unquote fan on the outside would say.

Mike Michalowicz: She's awesome.

AJ Harper: A true follower would say Eruption.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay. Okay. Now I would say a true fan would say Spanish Fly. Take that Polly.

AJ Harper: Okay. I'll tell her. You guys can just have this discussion when you come see us. You can get, you guys can have it all out at event Helen fast.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. So Polly, if you're listening in Spanish Fly, cause that's on an acoustic guitar and there is no margin for error. Eruption was on an electric guitar. He was doing that in rehearsal as warmups and then they captured on tape. It is a one take.

So that's Eruption. Spanish Fly was. Crafted and it's therefore superior, but Beat It, he actually wrote the guitar backing. So there, take that,

AJ Harper: You know what? I'm just going to let you two have it out in person and I'll just go do something else with my time.

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Mike Michalowicz: I'm so angry. Polly. Now it's like, uh, you're a career author. We're career guitar fans and we'll be sure for half a day.

AJ Harper: Yes. And you have the same kind of similar taste in music.

Mike Michalowicz: I know she's awesome.

AJ Harper: She is.

Mike Michalowicz: All right. Next week, we're gonna talk about the power of purpose and how you're going to get there, how we got there, how you got there, how I got there, and why it's the most motivating and powerful force, I think, on this planet. Um, AJ, you have a course, um, the top three workshop, top

AJ Harper: Top three book workshop

Mike Michalowicz: That is available currently.

AJ Harper: Yeah, I do have some slots left. We start August 18th We're always we always fill because I only take 15 students

Mike Michalowicz: And this is the craft of writing a book that is a category defining book.

AJ Harper: Let me put it to you this way. There's two ways that you can get me to work on your book with you and for me to be your editor and hold your hand and talk to you almost every day about it. One is top three book workshop, which I do once a year. And the other is editing retreat. And those are the only two ways because I don't take private clients.

Mike Michalowicz: Unless option three, 10 million dollars?

AJ Harper: I mean, I would guess you had 10 mil. I would totally do it.

Mike Michalowicz: We could have a conversation. Yeah. Or 10 mil. Um, go to dwtbpodcast.com to join our email list. You can stay on top of all the current episodes we have. I think we should start doing some shorts. We talked about that separately, AJ, and we just haven't done it yet. But, uh,

AJ Harper: we need to brainstorm some ideas. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: And maybe we can make them downloadable only on the website.

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Ooh, that would be juicy. Also, if you've any questions, uh, any things you want us to answer, any correction corners, do we make some mistakes here? You want us to clear up emails at hello. At DWTB podcast. com. Also, I am looking for authors. We have an imprint called Simplified. It's only for entrepreneurs. Do you have a profound entrepreneurial idea that you're going to be a career author around?

Maybe we could partner together at Simplified. Thanks for joining us today. We hope to see you next week as we talk about the power of purpose. And as always the grand reminder, do not write that book, write the greatest book you can.