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Episode 101:

“Navigating Disagreements with Editors”

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.

All right. My goal is to avoid jinxing our show Sportsy. Kick right into it. You are, you <laugh> you're listening to, don't write that book. My name is Mike Michalowicz. I am in virtual studio with AJ Harper. She's at her fabled lake house. Oh. I'm getting an echo on us, so I'm gonna see if I can fix that real quick. But nonetheless, welcome to our show. Thanks for joining us, AJ. What I admire is that you hoof it old school to your lake house every time. I, I thought you were flying out there, but you drive out every time.

AJ Harper: Well, sometimes I fly. Okay. But we've got a dog.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. So you have to, I mean, you don't have to, did you hear about this new airline that it's called like Fido Air or something? It's... Oh. It's specifically for people traveling with their pooches.

AJ Harper: Oh.

Mike Michalowicz: And I've also

AJ Harper: It doesn't sound that, say Fido Air,

Mike Michalowicz: Something's that effect. I I also noticed that there was a time when people had quote service animals with them on airplanes constantly. This goes back maybe two years ago or three years ago. It was relentless and people were clearly abusing the system I admire about you that you drive out there. Because I, I, I don't know if I would, I was, remember speaking with a friend once saying, if you have a vacation home, if it's not within two hours, it is a commitment to go. <Laugh>

AJ Harper: My mine's like 19 hours.

Mike Michalowicz: I know. And so it's, it's an all in,

AJ Harper: It's worth it, man.

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Mike Michalowicz: Good, good.

AJ Harper: I've gotten to the point now too, where you know, I go see my mom a lot and I drive to see her. And now when I get on the ferry, it just feels like part of a commute.

Mike Michalowicz: <Laugh>. I love it.

AJ Harper: And before it used to feel like, oh, I'm on the ferry, I'm on vacation. And I used to actually have a deal with my wife because, you know, I was terrible. Just like you used to be on vacation, and I would always be sneaking off to do work <laugh>. It was bad. Worst, worst fight we ever got in was because of work on vacation on this ferry island. So we had a deal where I could work up until the ferry docked, which means I was often sitting on the ferry with a laptop for the 28-minute ferry rides. Like, I got 28 more minutes till I, till we get on the, on the island. Now, those days are so far in my rear view, I'm proud to say, because I don't work like that anymore. But it used to feel like this, you know, crossing this threshold, <laugh>. Now it's just like, eh, it's part of my commute.

Mike Michalowicz: <Laugh>, you said this up,

AJ Harper: Order pizza or something while I'm on there so I can pick it up when I get off.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, I love it. I love it. Finish working while on the ferry and have a treat waiting for both of you when you

AJ Harper: Well, No, I don't work on the ferry anymore. I don't work like I used to. You don't either.

Mike Michalowicz: No, I don't. I don't, I just returned from Long Beach Island.

AJ Harper: I'm not looking, I'm, I I'm not looking for every minute to of free time to work anymore.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. Yeah. I just returned from

AJ Harper: But you just came

Mike Michalowicz: Back. Yeah, I, I took a two-week vacation. Total disconnect. I don't, I don't check anything. For the same reason is it's restorative. It's meant to be restorative. And my wife and I I wouldn't even say had disagreements. We, she's pointed out, she's like, you, you're never not working. This is back in the day. And I'm like, okay. Mm-Hmm. That's gotta stop. But it was interesting you said you had a disagreement with your wife, and I think that's a perfect setup for

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today's conversation. We're gonna talk about navigating disagreements with editors and, and I, I have millions of questions that immediately come to me, so I want to kick into it. But first I think we need to define what an editor is exactly what their relationship is to the author. C Can you give us some clarity around that?

AJ Harper: Well, it depends on who the editor is. But we're specifically, I'm talking about developmental editors here, where also they, they're doing developmental and substantive editing. So basically it's the big picture stuff. It's making sure that the book works and you could have multiple editors on a project. So it's not as simple as one. How do you define with one editor? So you could have an editor that helps you get your book ready to submit so that it can be accepted for publication. Then you have a different editor once your publisher takes you on, and your acquiring editor is usually the person who's doing that substantive and sometimes developmental work. And then sometimes there's another one. I've, I've had a number of students who have had mysteriously two or three high level editors before. They just, yeah, it's kinda kind of odd. Well,

Mike Michalowicz: What would, what would trigger that?

AJ Harper: Their own systems, you know, if they've got a process that works for them,

Mike Michalowicz: But is it more turnover related? It just sounds like once if I have a publishing. Okay.

AJ Harper: No, the person I'm thinking of, which I'm not gonna say her name because I don't want and cause any grief between her and her publisher, but it seemed to be part of their process of, you know, first we're gonna do this, we're gonna do three chapters with one editor, and then once we get into it, we'll do it with this other editor. Almost like they were checking for specific things and then they can move on to a new stage. So no, it wasn't about turnover. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz: That's so interesting. But that sounds like that's atypical.

AJ Harper: It is. That one, that one was a surprise to me. Definitely. In more than 20 years in publishing, I had never seen anything like that. So, but in, in essence, you, I'm, today we're talking about the editor who helps you make sure your book works. We're not talking about the copy editor or the proofreader.

Mike Michalowicz: Do you have some hard and fast rules for framing what the editor author relationship is?

AJ Harper: Well, their job is to help you realize the vision for your book. But what happens is a lot of people, authors, especially newbies, go in with this sort of well, first of all, they don't

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understand what's gonna happen and they feel lucky to have gotten the deal. So they sort of think of the editor as being like a boss, you know? Yeah, yeah. And it's true that the editor is gonna hold firm on certain things. But it's a myth in my experience about, well, I have known a few people who have had some tough editors who put their foot down and it ended the relationship. But that's maybe only two people over, you know, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of authors I worked with. So it's not typical that an editor is gonna say, you must do this, or else I. There are exceptions, of course, you don't need to write into us and tell us that. But for the most part, they're there to help you realize the vision for your book. But authors go in with this attitude of, I have to do what they say. Hmm.

Mike Michalowicz: And the editor, do they go through training for this? I, I, I don't, is there an editor's degree at, at a college? Like, how's that work?

AJ Harper: <Laugh>, most editors do not have a formal training like you would think. Right. Where there's a cl series of classes and, and and so forth. Most editors are kind of learning on the fly. Yeah. Especially freelance editors. And then there's a formal apprenticeship process at, you know, big Five. So, you know, we were, you know, how when when we were at, still at Penguin Random House. Yeah. And then Noah had, I can't remember her name. She was lovely.

Mike Michalowicz: Was it Lindsay?

AJ Harper: No, I can't. She was lovely though. And she did most of the work. Remember that?

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. Yeah, I totally remember that. Yeah.

AJ Harper: Yeah, yeah. And he was overseeing it. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. That's 'cause she he was training her up.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. And we worked with Kaushik prior to that, and he had some colleagues, but he seemed to do a lot of editorial work himself.

AJ Harper: Yeah. So he at the time, likely didn't have anybody who was training up.

Mike Michalowicz: I, I think he's an interesting story because he was a, an apprentice of some short sort before becoming an editor. I, I remember he worked with Adrian Zackheim, who was the publisher at Portfolio, the Imprint with Penguin, which I'm not sure if Adrian's still there, but then we had a different editor prior. I cannot remember the person's name.

AJ Harper: Mm-Hmm <affirmative>. It was a woman.

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Mike Michalowicz: A woman, yeah. Brooke, I can't remember. Maybe, but that's irrelevant. May, maybe. Then Adrian said, calls and says we're gonna assign you a new editor is Kaushik. And he's like, this guy's a rockstar,

AJ Harper: But Kaushik's the one that, that's the reason that you got the deal for Profit First.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. So the backstory, I don't know if we ever shared on the show, is Kaushik.

AJ Harper: Yeah. We, we've shared it a couple times about

Mike Michalowicz: The, the research with Penguin, with Pumpkin Plan.

AJ Harper: Yeah. How, how Kaushik, you know, discovered this self-published version of Profit First.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, oh, no, I, oh, it was a little different story that I wanna share. So Kaushik identified an interesting anomaly. He was doing, the data research identified that some authors at Penguin had growing back lists, meaning not more books, but the performance of a book year in year out was actually increasing over time. So we did Pumpkin Plan with them. That book when we went back to self-publishing with Profit First Surge during that time, pumpkin Plan was selling more and more and more copies. So they identified this, and then he found out that we have self-published a book, Profit First. And he called and said, listen you are an anomaly author and that your backlist is growing. I've, I've identified them. Would you be interested in, in publishing a new book with us? And then Profit First became the subject of interest. Yeah. Yeah. And he became the editor, which wasn't, his wasn't his starting point with us. He was this guy doing research, and then he was identified as a potential editor and became the editor and was good.

AJ Harper: I think though that was his aim, because I think he was trying to be an editor, you know, so typically whoever requires the book is the one that's gonna be the editor for the book, typically.

Mike Michalowicz: And do you see, is there, 'cause Kaushik was with us for a few books, but he moved on to, you know, perhaps greener pastures. Do, do you see this is a common trend that an editor has a typical lifespan at an organization?

AJ Harper: Yeah. It's very transient as you know, it's, yeah.

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Mike Michalowicz: So an author, are you putting yourself at risk if, if you're not betting on the publisher as much as the editor, that editor may leave in midst of you writing your book. And is that common?

AJ Harper: Sometimes I don't think it's, it's not necessarily common. It's, that was a publisher doesn't wanna mess with you like that. That would be a rare situation that did happen to us. We had one editor that came in at the very end of a process, but they're not likely to switch editors in the middle of the substantive edits, which is the first round. Unless something, unless something's really not working, you know, or unless something happens with that person, you, of course, you can't stop a life event if, but it's not likely that they're gonna wanna swap out, swap out when that person is helping you actually realize your vision for it. Hmm. So the high-level editing is what we're talking about here. This is a person who's helping you shape it. This is a person who's making, helping you make huge decisions. This is not, you know, dotting i's and crossing t's.

Mike Michalowicz: Are they trained for to, or I'm sure they are, but do they have specific responsibilities that they're trained on or they're looking for when they go through the process?

AJ Harper: Yeah. Absolutely. So here's, here's the thing. It's, it's not that editors aren't qualified for the job, it's just that, you know, they don't know your reader as well as you do. Yeah. So the, the reason that I say to all my students, any author I work with, the editors not your boss. It's just to get a reframe. You know, I don't want you to go into it saying, okay, now I have to do everything. They say, you should absolutely listen to all their advice. You should absolutely consider it. But ultimately, they don't know your reader as well as you do. They know how to make your book better according to the standards. Right. So they're gonna be focused on continuity flow, the through line simplification. Anything they can do to reduce repetitiveness, redundancy, anything they can do to make, streamline everything readability. So in that respect, they do actually think about the reader, of course, but they don't know the reader the way you know the reader.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: So therefore, they don't always understand why you might be choosing to repeat something or why you might need something somewhere. And they're following instead, this protocol that they've been trained to do, either as a freelancer kind of on winging it, right? Or in this apprenticeship model. Now, some of them do get certifications. There are not very many certifications that are related to developmental editing, which is what this would be. And then there are people who get degrees. There aren't that many degrees available that are specific to this, but you, you're more likely to have people who have an MFA, you know, coming, coming into, or an even an MA some sort of master's. If it's not an MFA. What,

Mike Michalowicz: What does MFA stand for?

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AJ Harper: Masters of Fine Arts.

Mike Michalowicz: Fine Arts. Okay.

AJ Harper: So if they're coming in with that background, that education, it's not really preparing them for on the job, getting a book ready to market. But, so they have to learn in an apprenticeship model, freelancers, which is how I came up. We're winging it, man. You know, I don't, the first time I edited a book was the first time I edited a book. Yeah. I didn't have anybody to tell me anything. I mean, the whole reason I developed the system I have for a prescriptive nonfiction is because I had to figure out how to do it <laugh>. Right. Because I didn't know any better. And I thought, all right, how am I gonna make sure this works? All right, let me figure it out. And because I am who I am and I'm always worried about things not working, I created a system and checklist for myself that, as it turns out, is super useful. But I developed it because there was nobody to tell me, is this book going to actually deliver change? So when we're talking about prescriptive nonfiction, which is what we talk about mostly on this show, you know, that's what I, where I think editors tend to fall short, is they don't really understand that change piece. Hmm. And they can't because they're not trained to do it, number one. And they don't know your reader the way you do.

Mike Michalowicz: Just a little aside, so in college, I had a, a buddy who he labeled people as MFAs. That's why it threw me off a little bit. That meant there were massive f-ing... You can finish off the sentence. And he goes, that person's an MFA. Do editors, I mean, they're human too. So do they get stuck in the, well, this is how I do it for everybody else, because every author is unique. I have my style. Another author has their style. We have editors across the board through all, every editor we worked with even most recently working with page two saying, oh, you know, you're repeating the same phrase over and over. This isn't necessary. There's certain things we do and the editor says, but it's, it's not done this way. Does. Is that common? How do you navigate it?

AJ Harper: Yeah. It's very common. And, and again, I really wanna encourage everyone to at least listen to their editor, give a consideration. We tend to have a knee jerk reaction to editor's comments. And it's not always, you know, reasonable <laugh>. Yeah. So, you know, read it, think about it before you discount it. But ultimately all you have to do is explain. You know, a good editor will listen to you and say, this is my reader, this is why I'm choosing to do this. And, and then usually let it go. I will say, I get <laugh>. I just got a text. I'm not gonna say who it's from, but it happened last week. It's someone you know, and I'll tell you offline. Okay. Saying that I had spoiled them and that I needed to get my editor certification up and running right now, <laugh>, because their editor had really didn't get it. And then, you know, one of the things I, we talked about on this show, and I do this with all your books, and I teach people how to write a conclusion that I call called greatness. And this baffles, most editors when they see it, like, why do you need this <laugh>? Right. And they tried to get this person to cut it said, I want why? The reasoning was it's just motivational

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Mike Michalowicz: <laugh>. That's great. I think I know who you're talking about. That is actually great. And,

AJ Harper: And he, and he, I said, well, tell me you saved it. And he said, I saved it. Of course, 100%. And so he didn't, it's not like the editor was gonna put his foot down and say, you can't have that. No. The author's like, no, I'm keeping it. Thank you. And I guess the author said to him, if you were motivated by it, then it's working <laugh>.

Mike Michalowicz: No, that's a funny, that's a funny little purple nurple response. <Laugh>. But I think the, in defense of the editor and in defense of the author, everyone's trying to elevate the book. Yeah. It's just different perceptions. Right. So is it, does that mean it's it's professional compromise? It's appreciation for the editor's comment is to see looking through a different looking glass kind of vantage point. Yeah.

AJ Harper: But yes. But here's the thing. You, you have to remember, they are focused on making the book better, but they're not focused on making sure that it works.

Mike Michalowicz: Dig deeper into that. 'cause This sounds profound.

AJ Harper: They are concerned with the flow and readability and all of those things are very important and we have to listen to them. Yeah. But they aren't thinking about the reader journey in the same way of delivering transformation. That's how we know a prescriptive nonfiction book. It doesn't work if it doesn't deliver the promise transformation. And the editors are not thinking about it. They're not trained to think about it.

Mike Michalowicz: Is it fair to say that the editor is focused on the, the flow of the writing and the author is more focused on the journey of the reader?

AJ Harper: I, yes. Well, I, the editors, to their credit, of course, they are thinking about the journey of the reader in terms of, you know, when they, when they're trying to simplify things and provide more clarity, that is for the reader. Yeah. You know? Yeah. Publishers care about the reader. They're just, when this, this genre delivering change is very specific and editors are not trained to think about is the transformation, has that been delivered? They're trained to think about, is this a good book? Is this, is this book solid? Is this clear? Is it, is it, does it have a strong through line? They have their own checklist, but it's not rooted in reader transformation.

Mike Michalowicz: So there's, there was an email I got from our editor for the Money Habit. That's, it's a line about Krista, and Krista shared with me when I was interviewing her. She, she really injured herself playing softball and the story is about the financial consequences afterwards. But after we go through the whole story Krista said, I got that girl out. So my, my wife was playing catcher and tag this girl out. And, and bust up her leg severely. And there's

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consequences even today as an adult for what injuries she went through and the care she wasn't able to get. And my wife said out loud, hashtag worth it. And the editor said, it's such a,

AJ Harper: It's so Jersey.

Mike Michalowicz: It's so Jersey, and Yeah. A lifetime of injury for getting one person out in a game. <Laugh> in little league, nonetheless. And the editor said that's not necessary. Right. And they're right. It's not necessary. And it is absolutely necessary.

AJ Harper: Right? Yeah. So there's the necessary in terms of what the, what the editor thinks. And then there's what you understand about not just the transformation, but in that case, that's voice. That's voice. That's, that's you know, technically it's, it's Kris's voice, but it's in alignment with yours. So

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: You, you would say something like that. Like that's, that's,

Mike Michalowicz: That's a, yeah, right. It was a total alignment. But it was an interesting dialogue. So it, and it does happen at that level where, where the editor is looking at just, I don't know if they were looking to make the book, the book tighter, I guess is what it is. And does it help, instead of saying STET as the response, meaning keep it, is it better to respond with, here's the reasoning why I want to keep it so that the editor knows as they go through further iterations. 'cause You're, you're building a relationship with this editor during this process.

AJ Harper: Well, you are. I mean, you're, you're really just have two passes. So

Mike Michalowicz: <Laugh> Yeah, that's true. It's a very quick relationship.

AJ Harper: It's not a, it's a pretty quick relationship. You know, one of the things I loved about working with Kauskik on several books of yours is that he knew us so well. So it, we just didn't have a lot of those issues. Although we did have some, you know, the one I talk about all the time is he insisted that we have a different open for clockwork than the one that we have to the point where at the 11th hour, I finally convinced him to let us do the Jersey Shore story as the open

Mike Michalowicz: That was 11th hour book. Yeah. What was the open that he did want? Do you recall? I don't,

AJ Harper: Yeah, what he wanted was the scenario. It actually, it's, it's lower, it's later in the chapter now, but the relatable scenario of coming into the office and the demands of the day.

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Right. So he wanted, and I, I get why he wanted to try it. The book wasn't 11th hour, but that was an 11th hour change because I had been fighting for it for a while. Yeah. And then I finally got, I finally, from reader feedback was able to prove to him this, actually, we've gotta, please let me have it, please let me have this story. Because everybody loves it as their favorite. We gotta open with it. And the thing is, if we, if, if I had said, Mike, I want you to put your foot down with Kasik, and I really want that. He, we probably would've, wouldn't have had to go through that. But I just was trying to be a good team player. And I think that's an a, a lesson here is if you feel really, I should have put said, we need to put our foot down about this earlier, so that we didn't have the 11th hour change.

Mike Michalowicz: So when I was at Long Beach Island this past couple weeks, my friend Greg Elk Turd, who we feature in many of our books.

AJ Harper: Oh, does he, does he know how you rag on him in this next

Mike Michalowicz: One? Yeah. He totally knows. He loves it. Now he, he fuels on it because people reach out to him with some regularity saying, oh, you're elk turd, <laugh>. So, and, and he's one of my closest friends. He, he came down to visit me at Long Beach Island with his wife Kelly. And we went, Greg and I went for a walk on the beach, and wouldn't you know it, there was a dude in the beach who had beach umbrellas, but laying on their side to make this block both shade and wind. Right. He was sitting in his, his beach chair with a large, like sombrero size hat to cast shadow over his face, but also over his laptop and balanced on a knee. He's clicking away and Greg's like, oh, he, he doesn't, he hasn't read clockwork yet.

AJ Harper: Right.

Mike Michalowicz: What was interesting is that, I don't know when Greg read the book, but it goes back years that that image is so memorable of we leave work to go on vacation, where we're gonna just work with an ocean in the background almost as white noise. So those stories, it was so important to have that story 'cause it's so memorable. So sticky.

AJ Harper: Yeah. And the, and it was the right decision in the end. And I think I should have fought harder, you know what I mean? Yeah. Earlier. And I was just trying to, trying to give, trying to do what he wanted, be a team player. So it's, it's good to trust your instinct on that. The thing is that editors can get stuck on what they've always done. Yeah. Right?

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah.

AJ Harper: This is what I know works for this or this or that. And then that's actually not helping you as an author. 'cause Sometimes their advice is counterproductive. And it doesn't mean that they're a bad editor, but you have to remember, they're going based on, you know, just

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the books that they've already done and their own their own checklist. They're not thinking about your checklist.

Mike Michalowicz: So, so what's the best thing we can do as an author? Is there preparatory work? Is there stuff that's atypical that doesn't get done out of rote? Because that's how the editorial thing works. That would actually give us an advantage for building a strong author editor relationship.

AJ Harper: Well, number one is to give them a lot of clarity about who your reader is and explain to them what your intention is, and to be clear with them about voice and just have a conversation about it. If you can't, sometimes you can't have a conversation. Some publishing companies don't allow that kind of interaction. So I would just write a little letter, you know, that you include with the manuscript submission. This is not when you get the deal. This is when you start the editorial relationship. So I, I would just, when you're submitting your manuscript for substantive edits, just say, this is my reader. This is their psychographics. This is what's going on with them. This is my voice, this is my intention. And then that gives them a little bit of a better foundation. And then I guess I would say when you are disagreeing with them and you've really considered their advice, and now you say, well, actually I wanna do it this other way, just explain to them why that is. But if it's a small thing, like hashtag worth it, I don't think you really have to explain that. But if it's something bigger, you, you do have to explain it. Like you wanna different opening story for the book. That's pretty big.

Mike Michalowicz: Do you do this? Like, is it a phone call? Are editors untouchable? And is... you gotta communicate in an email?

AJ Harper: I just have to ask you, you know, first of all, find out what is that process gonna be? Ask your publisher, because as we've established earlier in this episode, sometimes it's a surprise. You wanna really understand what is this process gonna be before you get into it? What kind of accessibility do I have? But you're not gonna get a lot of meetings, so you need to take that off the table. That's too time intensive. It's probably gonna be an email, but you can easily leave a comment in the document. And editors often are just communicating back and forth through comments with their authors.

Mike Michalowicz: When we did the money habit with page two, it was through the imprint we have with them, which is called simplified. Kendra Ward was our editor. And I thought what was unique was that Kendra hopped on the phone with us and we probably had 45 minute, an hour call you, myself, her. Ronnie may have been there too, who's le actually acting as the LE liaison and went through what the reader's about what they're expecting. Which is so uncommon. Like we, we never did any of that.

AJ Harper: No, no.

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Mike Michalowicz: With Penguin Random House. And still there was situations where there was edit editorial changes that were inconsistent with what would serve the reader, even though we had discussed that on the prior phone call. And, and I, I attribute that to that's human nature. Like, just because we've spoken it doesn't mean it's heard. But I'll tell you, it, it, it made the process a lot more fluid and it also opened the ability to have more difficult conversations, if you will, with her, because we had that prior conversation. That's what I thought.

AJ Harper: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, you just, every publisher is gonna handle it differently. I think Page Two handles it really, really well. I but you, I want, I wanna, I really wanna bring a point home here. Editors are doing the reason they have to focus so much on the through line continuity flow. Another way to think about it is sequencing readability, so much redundancy, repetitiveness, et cetera, making things simpler, simpler, simpler is because for the most part, authors are turning in manuscripts that are overwritten. And not sequenced properly and don't get to the point soon enough and aren't front loaded in all this.

Mike Michalowicz: Right.

AJ Harper: So they're used to having these same problems that it's, it makes sense why they're focused on this set of standards, because they usually get manuscripts that are overwritten and, and need to be shifted in terms of flow. And that's just the way it is. So it's, it's understandable why they do it. And it's hard for them to think about the reader in the way that you do. They can't, they don't, they aren't gonna have the knowledge.

Mike Michalowicz: Yeah. They don't have the knowledge. They don't know them. I want take a a little kind of right turn real quickly. You do retreats at your home or,

AJ Harper: Well, I have in my studio, yes. On my property. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: On your property is probably a better one on Madeleine Island. What do you do there when it comes to the editorial direction that you're giving to people, and then how do they find out more information?

AJ Harper: Thank you for that. It's becoming just such a, it's magic. We've done, we're about to do the fourth one and final one for this year, and then we have four scheduled for next year. Although we're only releasing the summer dates right now. By the time this airs, the summer dates will be open for people. Hmm. People come with, you know, a few chapters that I've read in advance, but the main point is that every day we're working on the thing that we're talking about today, which is does it work for the reader? Are we delivering the promise transformation? That is the sole focus, and it's through number of group exercises and then daily feedback privately from me that authors are able to really get at, is this actually working for my readers? Am I delivering on that? And yeah, we're thinking about sequencing and flow and, and repetitiveness, but honestly, mostly we're thinking about reader experience. And it's all the stuff,

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it's all the really thoughtful, deliberate work that often gets ignored when you're in a typical editor editing process.

Mike Michalowicz: Brian Harriet went through the experience on Madeline Island with you. Yeah, he is now part of Simplified. So he was originally with Page Two and he's been so impressive and the writing he's doing in his advocacy for Time Freedom that he's now with Simplified. So thanks for working with him. If, if Brian's listening in, dude, I am pumped that you're with Simplified, I cannot wait to work with you. Did, did you, when working with Brian or other folks talk about advanced reader feedback, I, I think is a really great strategy for, for a multitude of reasons.

AJ Harper: Oh, yeah, yeah. And then work, so did so much work with him on that. It's a huge part of the process. And if you do that in advance of sending your manuscript in for substantive edits, or if you do it at the same time, you send it in for substantive edits, then it gives you more of a conversation you can have with your editor to explain, this is what I'm hearing from readers so that I, they can see what's actually happening versus you just telling them.

Mike Michalowicz: And we, the advanced reader feedback, I think we have a full show dedicated to that, or at least a big segment of <crosstalk>. Yeah,

AJ Harper: We do. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz: But I do have a couple just quick questions around it. Just in regards to timing. Are you getting advanced reader feedback while substantive edits going on? Or do you do it at a different, like what's the timing so that you can get this information back also to the editor so that, well, so, so they're proactively editing.

AJ Harper: Okay. So let you mention Brian Harriet. So one of the things that he took this idea and ran with it of doing the book a book club and doing this advanced reader feedback pretty deep advanced reader feedback process well before he submitted the manuscript. So I think you can do this in layers, but if you wanna do that final round, either do it the month before you're gonna turn in for substantive edits, or we do it when we turn in, so that's fine, because you're only getting, you're only giving them about two weeks, two to three weeks to give you feedback anyway. And that's about the turnaround time for most editors. Sometimes it's longer. But then you have your feedback prepared for when the editor gives you feedback, or you can submit the advanced reader feedback to the editor when you submit the manuscript. But I don't know, I like to do multiple rounds of advanced reader feedback. So I hope that you're submitting a manuscript that's the best you can do. I, you know, don't leave a lot for the editor because then it makes, then it makes this transformational work really difficult. They're on a deadline, you know.

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Mike Michalowicz: But do you know, how do you know if you're leaving too much for the editor? Like, is there indicators if you,

AJ Harper: Yeah, you should do everything that you know to do.

Mike Michalowicz: Meaning when you submit to the editor, is it the best of the book that you can imagine at that point?

AJ Harper: Yes.

Mike Michalowicz: Okay.

AJ Harper: Yes. It's not, it should not ever be a first draft. It should be a draft that you've already completed a self-edit process and you've taken it as far as you can take it. You're actively trying to make the book better on your own before you turn it in. If you give the editor a hot mess or if you give them stuff and say, I know this could be better, you should never be saying that. You should never be saying, giving, giving them that list of comments of, well, I, I, I didn't have time to work on this or that, or whatever. That should never be the case.

Mike Michalowicz: What if you're in a deadlock and you see black, they see white is there a tiebreaker, is there some ruling that comes about who, who wins when there's a disagreement that can't be resolved?

AJ Harper: Depends on the contract, but I mean, it's, they should be, they should be deferring to you unless it's something that could potentially harm the sale, you know, the sales of the book or harm the publisher. So an example would be, did you, are you putting your foot down and you wanna include this super offensive content and they know that it's gonna be a problem, right? So they could get sued or it's gonna be a big scandal. They, they are not gonna approve that, you know? And rightly so. Rightly so. Obviously we have, you know, free will and a and the right to say what we wanna say in this country. But they don't have to deliver. They don't have to publish something that they know is gonna be harmful to them. In the end,

Mike Michalowicz: Today's a book Birthday. Scar Tissue by Melissa Alki released today, now, today is September 9th when we're recording this. So this will be out there. And it's about navigating grief. So proud of her. She worked with us. Ultimately what's become Simplified, even though this is not within the Simplified imprint but the reason I'm bringing her up is, first of all, she's amazing, and this book's amazing. She was originally with a publisher that did not work out. The editing was horrific. So disappointing. And have you experienced that with any of the authors you've worked with? I, I'll share how we navigated it, but do you have a way to navigate that?

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AJ Harper: Unfortunately all the time.

Mike Michalowicz: Oh, <Laugh>, I actually did not expect you saying that.

AJ Harper: Yeah. It, it's actually it's a, it's, it's stressful for me 'cause I'm sending authors out, you know, they get these deals and I'm sending them out and then they're frantically messaging me and saying, oh my gosh, what do I do? Because the editors are not respecting the reader journey at all. And I think we have a real problem. I think we need better training. That's why actually why I started editor certification, which actually does, is officially launching, this is September 9th that the announcement goes out this week. It's taken me years to develop it, but I think we really need it to, it's a specific editor certification for people who edit prescriptive nonfiction, because this is the missing link. This is the skill that we, that they don't have is how do you deliver change. How do you help an, how do you help the author deliver change?

AJ Harper: Not just write a good book, but how do you help them deliver change? Because what's happening to my authors is they know their readers so well. 'cause They've gone through my process. They understand every choice they've made. Most editors aren't used to that. They're used to an author who isn't quite sure why they made the choices they made, or an author who is following some sort of template or formula. And it's not actually specific to the reader. So they're not used to this deep knowledge, and then that causes friction and they want, they're kind of stuck in their old ways. And then the authors get frustrated because they want, they know what their reader needs, right? So yeah, that's why I decided to, to start it. But also now it's finally up and running. And I think that's actually gonna be a game changer to have editors who are certified in how do you deliver change so that they can add that to their skillset. It's not a replacement skillset, it's an additional skillset for this specific genre that I think is really needed.

Mike Michalowicz: What we did, specifically in Melissa's case, the editing, like I said, it was horrible. We responded and said this wasn't properly or effectively edited. They responded and said it was. So then we reached out to the publisher themselves, like, you know, the owner of the company effectively. And they said, this is, this is the work we'll do. So in the contract, what we were permitted to do is for them to give an accounting for the money they spent, the expenses they incurred for us to cover that and then break the contract. So we did and this included cover design, all editorial work, the bill and kudos for their integrity, but it was also shocking was \$1,100. So,

AJ Harper: So that, that's a, that's an unusual situation. I can tell just by what you said, that that person was outsourcing,

Mike Michalowicz: Outsourcing everything,

AJ Harper: But outsourcing in a specific way. So there's outs all publishers outsource all very rarely,

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Mike Michalowicz: Even Penguin Random House does

AJ Harper: For sure. Yeah. Copy editors are not on staff, most of them, for example. Yeah. to totally fine. That's not a bad thing. It's the quality of those, of the outsourcing. So Penguin has their people that they rely on that are quality. It's not like they're gonna go throw something up on Fiverr. You know, they have their pool of people that they, that they will go to because they know they've been vetted and they can trust them. But I can tell by what you just said that that's not the case with that publisher. That publisher's just sending out to whomever and they're just looking for the cheapest thing they can get. And there's no standard.

Mike Michalowicz: It was so, it was horrible. And I as embarrassed you know, working with Melissa that we brought this deal to her subsequently a day left Martin found inspired Girl books. The experience, experience has been extraordinary. So the, the book cover is extraordinary. The, the whole book was torn down to the studs. Melissa, the author was devastated initially saying, God, I just spent a year and a half of my life writing this book, and I got started over. And the answer was, yeah, yeah. Not because of her fault but what was so interesting is they dug deeper into the story. 'cause This is about grief of all forms. Melissa sadly lost her daughter Laden and talked about that story dug in deeper. And so at the end of the day, the journey actually was appropriate and necessary so Melissa could really get to the depth that she needed to. And the book came out to be superior. So it, it is a shout out to inspired girl books if you wanna talk about inspired girl books.com. And they also are helping, unlike some publishers a lot with the marketing. They got Melissa speaking engagements and some podcasts, and actually now potentially some TV appearances, which was cool. All just part of supporting her. Any final things on disagreements with an editor to-dos? Not to-dos?

AJ Harper: I think just come in with respect and respect in all ways. Respecting the reader and letting your editor know who that is. Respecting your editor by doing the very best you can by not handing them something that is a hot mess of a spider web for them to figure out for you. Right. Respect them and their time and res and then respect your own vision so that you don't lose sight of it.

Mike Michalowicz: And the starting point for everyone listening in, if you wanna find a specific starting point, is read Write a Must Read by AJ Harper. I'm telling you, your best book starts there.

AJ Harper: I interrupt. I need to interrupt you for just one quick second. Because I'm doing this editor certification. So if you're listening to this in 2026, by the summer of 2026, because the certification program will be complete by then on my website, you'll be able to go find a write and must read certified editor.

Mike Michalowicz: I love it. I love it.

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AJ Harper: And you'll be able to come to us for referrals. And I won't be doing, I, I, as a rule, do not take referral fees. So I'll be able to match people up and, and refer people to editors who have absolutely been trained in the methodology that I used for years do with your books, all my students, so that they can actually help you deliver change. So I'm so proud of that, that you'll be able to find a good editor once

Mike Michalowicz: This, it's, I hope it becomes industry standard. And it starts with the authors do authors have to require it and expect it. Join us next week we're gonna be talking about leveraging author partnerships, how you can work together to sell more books. I'll tell you something we're doing to simplify, that's really cool too. Also next week we're gonna reveal over AJ's left shoulder. So if you're looking at the screen, on the right side is a framed scoreboard handwritten by MOIs. And we're gonna reveal first of all how she dominated. Secondly, what the one thing that is being highlighted or pointed to in there is thank you for joining us. If you want more resources, go to dwtbpodcast.com. They're all free. They were all generated by aj. They're extraordinary in supporting you in your book journey. If you have episodes you want to hear, topics you want us to discuss you have questions that you want us to answer, you can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com.

Mike Michalowicz: Also, if you're interested in going to a retreat with AJ joining one of our workshops, you can go to ajharper.com or you can also email us and we'll put you in touch with her. And if you are in the entrepreneurial space and you're an extraordinary author already, or have an extraordinary concept that's gonna change the world and committed to it, maybe you wanna check out simplified. That's our imprint at page two. That's doing exactly that. You can email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com, the big grand finale. As always, don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can.