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Episode 145:

“When Your Publisher Bullies You”

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.

Mike Michalowicz:

All right, AJ First time you were bullied. Like everyone can remember that. Oh. Or, or most memorable bullying moment.

AJ Harper:

I mean, I was teased a lot - Yeah. Because I was overweight. Yeah. Um, also I went to a private school and I, we didn't have any money, so I didn't always fit in, in that way. So it wasn't like, it was like taunts, but there was -

Mike Michalowicz:

Taunting, that's more of what it is.

AJ Harper:

Well, but I did experience bullying. There was one girl, I won't say her name. And, um, she was so mean that, and diabolical. Oh. And, um, actually, I told you on when we were recording a week and a half ago that I met up with my, um, childhood from 25 years ago or something. Stacy Sanders. But

Mike Michalowicz:

You hadn't seen her in 25 years or something extraordinary.

AJ Harper:

And we talked about this bully. Oh. She was way worse to Stacy where Stacy went to, went to Paris on a trip and then she convinced all of us that we shouldn't talk to her when she got back. It's one of my great shames that I participated in it, but it was kind of like everyone was like, you felt like, oh my God, you're gonna be in trouble with this person. And then, um, oh, it was so bad. Mm. And then I, I, I, so like she would orchestrate all these things and there was some stuff orchestrated against me too. And I just, um, like we were like elementary school. Like I wonder

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today if she's like running some sort of like criminal enterprise or something. I, I, it, it was, yeah, it was very bad. Like s - like where you feel scared to go to school.

AJ Harper:

And it's, and it's funny because my son just, uh, he's doing great by the way. And, um, he's been as an, he's an older now and we went out for, um, we're recording this in May. We went out for Mother's Day dinner and it started ha - we started to have these frank conversations that he wasn't having with me before, just about how - Oh, that's great. And, um, I didn't re - I knew he was bullied, but I didn't know how bad it was. And, um, he, you know, he said, "I, I'll never be bullied again." Like everything he's done - Yeah. With his physical stature and weightlifting and even like how he presents himself, um, is to basically like don't mess with me kind of situation. But I didn't know how impactful that was on him and, and I feel terrible. They didn't, you know, he didn't tell us.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Um, so, uh, but it's changed the way he moves through the world even now. Like, well, he will, he will not accept anyone c - saying anything. Yeah. Um, do you remember? Were you bullied?

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's interesting how his, how our bodies look. So for me, I was the skinniest kid probably in our class or one of them. And one particular taunting, I, I thought it was a perfect word. Taunting incident was Sarah McMickle

AJ Harper:

And - Oh, your name? Oh, you're putting the names out.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, because I don't, I don't think she had any ill intent. I, I don't think she's a bad per - I think she's an extraordinary human. I think we were s - in seventh grade.

AJ Harper:

I mean, there's that. Like some of it was, is -

Mike Michalowicz:

Like the, the brain isn't formed. And I, I just remember her specifically and she was one of the popular girls and the other girls were coming up. And they start like, "Oh, Mike, how often do

you, do you exercise? Or how often do you lift weight? Like you look like, you know, and just

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really picking on me. And I cried. You know, and you know, it, it was so embarrassing and so ashamed. The, one of the reasons I exercise like I do and, and work out so often is a manifestation of that moment. Like I'll, like, Jack, I'll never allow myself to be in that position again. Yeah. There's a, a book called Reset by Dan and Chip Heath and they write in the book or, I'm sorry, it's not by both of them, it's by one of them. And in the book, they say your business is perfectly designed to get the exact results it's getting.

Mike Michalowicz:

So whatever we're getting in, in our business is because our business is designed to support that. And we deny that. And I think who we are as humans today is a perfect result of the script that's come before it.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, I'm, I'm actually grateful now for that experience because of what it's empowered me. I forgive that circumstance because I don't, I think I know that's not a representation of who she is or was. Yeah. It just was that moment. And I'm ashamed that I've bullied people. I've done the same thing. I've taunted. I've done other things. I also think that people that go to the extreme, like that girl that orchestrate all that, I can't imagine what was going on in her life at home.

AJ Harper:

That's, that's what we both said. But I've also witnessed some really bullying that is just, there's no putting a positive spin on it. Like, you know, in high school, all my gay friends who were absolutely tormented. Yeah. Absolutely tormented. Is

Mike Michalowicz:

It fear? Um - I'm not saying that's a positive spin.

AJ Harper:

I don't, I don't know what, I don't know. I think it's, um, I think a lot of it is hate.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um - But, but, but isn't hate a manifestation of fear amongst - I don't know. I don't know. Yeah. I don't

AJ Harper:

Do it. Like, it's, like, it's, there's no positive spin on some of the stuff I saw. Yeah. Really bad.

Um, but, uh, the reason you asked because of our topic today.

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Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. And, and the, the sideline, the title line. The title that you select as person. Yeah. And you've, every title is, is a selection of yours for all our podcasts. It says when your publisher bullies you. Yeah. These are some slacious titles.

AJ Harper:

Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, what I admire about you is your inclusivity. 'Cause you include a diverse set of people, including myself. Like, I consider myself not someone... We would've grown up and hung out together. Never. We weren't in the same cliques. Oh my

AJ Harper:

God. Never. Never.

Mike Michalowicz:

Um, and yet you included me. And I think that's remarkable. Yeah. Well, I mean, yeah, no brainer. I think you have as, you have a right to exclude, but you, I've never seen you do that. No,

AJ Harper:

Thank you. But you don't either. I admire that about you as well. Thank you. Um, I think sometimes we de - we, we do exclude through by default. Yeah. Like, we don't always think of it. And I'm, you know, I've done that myself. Mm. And I think that's important to note is we say, "I'm not gonna exclude anybody," but we don't actively include any, those people. Yeah. So it's got, especially if you're a person who moves through the world with some sort of privilege, it's important to say, "Wait, who's not here? I'm looking around. Who's not here? Who's not at the table? Okay, let me go get them." And less about, "You can sit here." It's more like, "Would you please come sit with me?" Yeah. Is the way we need to do

Mike Michalowicz:

That. Yeah, I love that analogy. Yeah. Um, this episode's sponsored by Simplified, which is an imprint of page two. I'm working with page two.

AJ Harper:

A highly inclusive publisher that says, "Will you come sit with me? "

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Mike Michalowicz:

Oh. Perfectly said. Yep. And I, it gave me a little bit of chills when you shared a few episodes back that you're publishing with them again. What a loss would've been, I think, for the community not to have you publish through page two, because they will fight for you tooth and nail - Yes. To make that book. I don't know what the book's about. You're keeping it so buttoned down secret.m. I think it's extraordinary. But I do know you have the best ally to get that word out in the biggest way. I know they'll fight for you more than any other publisher in the world would.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. I agree.

Mike Michalowicz:

So what inspired, uh, today's episode about bullies?

AJ Harper:

<laugh> Okay. So I was, um, chatting in, on, I have a writing sprint community and we meet at nine and four Eastern every weekday. Now, I don't do Monday through Thursday, but I do Fridays. So, well,

Mike Michalowicz:

I - You, you personally, but your team manages seven days?

AJ Harper:

I, yes. Okay. I am personally on sprints at 9:00 AM and 4:00 PM pretty much every Friday unless I'm on vacation or speaking or some - or away, you know? People don't realize that they could just join the sprint community and come hang with me, um, on Fridays. Anyway. That's cool. So it was in the, on Fridays at 4: it gets a little, you know, it's like the end of the week work week kind of situation. So it gets a little cocktail hour-ish minus the cocktails. And, um, so I said, "Hey, anybody stick around? I've got to do six episodes of Don't Write That Book and I just wanna hear what's on your mind. Is there something that you wish we would talk about? " So I, they, a bunch of people hung around for about 15 minutes and one person is this alum of mine.

AJ Harper:

I'm actually not gonna... I love naming them. I love supporting them, but this is not gonna benefit her if I name her. She said, "How about, um, if you get bullied by your publisher?" And I was like, "Hmm." <laugh> And I knew some of what happened, but it turned out a lot of more had happened. And so I thought, yeah, we really need to have this conversation because sometimes

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it's, you know, I always say, "No, publisher's perfect. Work in partnership with them. Have open communication." You know, I'm always saying this stuff, but sometimes they're just a - holes.

Mike Michalowicz:

So we won't mention the publisher. Nope. We won't mention the author.

AJ Harper:

No, not their book. No. I

Mike Michalowicz:

Do have a little qualifier. Is it the publisher as a company that bullied this author or is it the editor who bullied?

AJ Harper:

I think it's at this point, pretty much everybody that she dealt with. So then we can say -

Mike Michalowicz:

So the entire representation, organization. So, so lay out the circumstances. Like how'd this play out?

AJ Harper:

So first of all, this person was very excited to get this deal. It's a traditional publisher. Okay. And perfect for this person. So they were very excited. Yeah. From the get there... So even though they wanted the title, from the get there was pushback about a lot of stuff. And I'm talking major things. Like it's normal to get pushback about title. Mm-hmm. You know that. We've been, we've been to that rodeo many times.

Mike Michalowicz:

Did I ever tell you a story about Will Wiser at Penguin when he pushed back on the Pumpkin Plan? Uh, we, Dave Moldauer was the agent at the time, uh, the agent, the editor of the time brought us in and we're gonna write the Pumpkin Plan. That was the working title. And the f

first sentence out of his mouth, I'm like, "Hey." He goes, "Hi, I'm Will Wiser." He goes, "I hope you're not addicted to that title." Yeah. And I'm like, "What?" Uh, it was just shocking. Um, and we actually ended up using that title and it was a powerful mnemonic. It's the second most successful book on volume of sales. So that's kinda normal, I think, to get pushback on titles.

AJ Harper:

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Yes. And, um, but this title, the phrase used in the title was really critical - Okay. For readers finding the book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, okay.

AJ Harper:

And it wasn't just the title. The phrases was used throughout the book. And it was a way, it was the way for the readers to find themselves.

Mike Michalowicz:

What does that mean, to find themselves?

AJ Harper:

Like, it's how they felt about themselves.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, I see. I see. So very powerful title.

AJ Harper:

And it was very powerful. And even if it wasn't the title, they wanted to not just change the title, but remove that phrase from the book because it was too quote unquote negative. Even though it's exactly how they identify themselves.

Mike Michalowicz:

This community that's gonna read it?

AJ Harper:

Yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

Is the publisher coming because they don't have perspective on this community? Like what do you think the reason was behind this?

AJ Harper:

Because I think sometimes publishers decide to have these rules and policies and they aren't really taking it on a case by case basis. Yeah. And they don't trust the author. So this happens a lot with my authors. So I teach my authors a very, um, specific way of writing prescriptive

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nonfiction, which is reader focused. And that's not just a nice thing to say. That requires an, a lot of careful consideration of the reader. So by the time that they've actually got a draft and they're actually going out and trying to get published, they know their reader so well. And every choice they've made in the book is on purpose. Mm-hmm. But publishers aren't used to that. They're used to authors who actually can't answer those questions. They're used to authors who don't know their readers that well or who skip through that as fast as they could.

AJ Harper:

They are not used to authors who have looked at every single page, every single section and thought, "Will this serve my reader?"

Mike Michalowicz:

And that's what you teach.

AJ Harper:

That is.

Mike Michalowicz:

By the way, go to ajharper.com right now. Sign up for those sprints, please. Um, one of the things that shocked Noah Schwartzberg, our last editor at Penguin, something that I think it was Kendra at, um, page two as the editor. I, don't quote me on that. And other editors was how polished these manuscripts are coming. They're like, "This is like a final book." Like that was the general response. Like this is it. You've arrived. Because you put reader first and you apply that methodology, not just to the overall book. It's sentence by sentence, word by word. Yeah. So it sounds like this, this is a student of yours. Yeah. They did the same thing. Mm-hmm. And - Yeah, sorry. And so, so the publisher just wasn't ready for a book to be that complete? And they come with their own rules and policies and say, "This is what it should be?"

AJ Harper:

" It's not that it was complete. I mean, I, I've always tell my students, "I'm trying to get you ready for the next editor. They're gonna have a lot of things to say and they'll probably be right about a lot of it. But I want them to go into it. I'm not saying it's not done, but I want them to go into it with confidence and say, this is why I made this choice." And then you can have that conversation. And I think a lot of editors aren't used to that. They're not used to authors who are that aware of why they made the choices they made. So I'm not saying that it's complete. It's ready for the next editor so that they can do what they do, but they weren't listening to her. They just weren't listening to her. They also weren't listening to her about, um, storytelling, repetition.

AJ Harper:

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Like, this is one thing that really bothers me about <laugh>. Yeah. Like, I, yes, editors are correct that we don't want redundancies. We don't want unintentional repetition. And get it out. Yank it. However, sometimes repetition is exactly there for a reason because the reader needs it again. Could

Mike Michalowicz:

You imagine if some editor cleaned up Martin Luther's I have a dream speech? You' said that you have a dream. You don't have to repeat that. <laugh>

AJ Harper:

Well, oh my gosh.

Mike Michalowicz:

But that, that is what happens.

AJ Harper:

Uh, it's just sort of like, this is, I'm, they're trained to do this and that. And this publisher was very regimented in their editorial approach. Like they, I won't even tell you what it was because it would, it was so odd to me that, so I'm supporting this author through the whole process. Like she was coming to me and saying, "Well, now they want this. " And I would say, "What?" 'Cause every time... And this is me. I've been in publishing over 20 years. Like I've never heard of such a thing. And you've worked

Mike Michalowicz:

With all the major publishers. You own a publishing house. Uh-huh. You work with the boutique shops. You self-publish. You know every single platform.

AJ Harper:

I do. And I was, "What on earth are they doing?" It was so bizarre. So I kept trying to help her navigate and have conversations with them. She had to fight for a lot. She had to fight for graphics. She had to fight for her core message. Which is what they, why they wanted the book, like - In the first place. Yeah. Um, she had to fight for storytelling. She had to fight for, um, the content she included that was, um, designed to keep them on the page, like encouraging, right? Yeah. Um,

Mike Michalowicz:

Just - When you're being bullied, how do you separate out the taunting versus the relevant... I'm s
- I suspect they have some - Well, so

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AJ Harper:

They weren't taunting her. They were just pushing her. Well, I

Mike Michalowicz:

Was trying to refer back to the conversation.

AJ Harper:

No, I know. I'm just saying.

Mike Michalowicz:

Okay, but th- there's some stuff that is just, that's their policy and are enforcing it and there's some stuff that's actually critical, valuable feedback. How do you bifurcate that out when it seems like everything is an assault on you?

AJ Harper:

You know, I didn't get the whole rest of her s- story. Here's what happened is I started to see less of her.

Mike Michalowicz:

In your group? Yeah.

AJ Harper:

Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

People that are struggling - They remove themselves. Yeah. It's funny with, uh, our membership

organization, Pro - First Professionals, the first indicator that a member is struggling in their business is they stop showing up. Isn't, it's, it's a weird human behavior. Yes. When we need help the most, we remove ourselves from getting help.

AJ Harper:

And I, I think she had, she did work with someone else on the, um, she worked with someone on, um, helping her with the launch and then that person I think was helping her navigate some of that. But apparently the bullying went, it turned into bullying bullying where it's like you need to do this or else kind of situation. What, what could be,

Mike Michalowicz:

Be an or else with a publisher? Could they pull back the contract for non-compliance?

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AJ Harper:

I don't have all the details, but you know, I think - I'm just wondering

Mike Michalowicz:

Hypothetically what they could do. Yeah,

AJ Harper:

They, they could, I guess. Um - They won't

Mike Michalowicz:

Renew with you. You won't get a new book deal. But here's,

AJ Harper:

Here's what I, here's what I see so often, and this is why, oh God, in my community, and it's not just my workshop people, I have a membership community as well. I am spending so much time just trying to help them navigate and advocate for themselves because I want them to go into these situations with eyes wide open. And I want them to be able to know what to say because so often they don't say anything. Mm. You know? Like they don't, they just wait for their editor to contact them. But meanwhile, they're missing stuff and they're not getting what they need. They're making assumptions about what their publisher is gonna do or not do for them. Um, and they just let stuff slide. I think because they're afraid that it took so much to get the deal. Yeah. I don't wanna lose the deal.

AJ Harper:

Yeah. Um, but publishers are, it's not in their interest to kill the deal. So I wish people would hear me say this. That's a good one. Uh, uh, as a publisher, I can tell you, I moved heaven and

earth to make sure books got to market. And that meant sometimes, I mean, okay, you need a few more months? Fine. You need a few more months. Okay, you need this. One time we even acquiesced on cover when we knew and that was, that was not the right choice, but we were actually being reverse bullied. Like we were actually having an author who was so adamant. But we, we went through ex - sometimes extreme things. One time I had an author who was so late with the manuscript and when they turned it in, it was like, oh my God. I, I couldn't... I had no idea what I was gonna do because it was in such bad shape.

AJ Harper:

Shambles. I pretty much just -

Mike Michalowicz:

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Burt it for them.

AJ Harper:

No, I, but I, I did doctor the heck out of it. Why? Because I had to give this book to market. So I hope authors are hearing that it is not in their best interest to kill the book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, they have a sunk cost. They have - They

AJ Harper:

Have a sunk cost, but it's also their front list. Yeah. They have been talking about like it's bad form - Yeah. To, to yank a book.

Mike Michalowicz:

Could an author get to a point where this publisher's not working out? It's a, can I transition mid agreement?

AJ Harper:

Yeah, I mean, that's a conversation for you and your agent or attorney or whoever. This, this person that I'm talking about didn't, was not agented. So that would be your first call when you feel like you're being bullied. But I, you know -

Mike Michalowicz:

We have a little boutique agency. Delo does that work. It's called Pen With Purpose. Uh, Melissa Dugalecki is one of our authors. And our first publisher we identified was a profit share deal.

Um, wasn't a bully. They were just not doing this work.

AJ Harper:

They were just, yes.

Mike Michalowicz:

They were, the editorial work was horrific.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, you've said that before.

Mike Michalowicz:

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So what we did, this is, we did is she contacted us, the agent. We called them and said, "You're not meaning's performance parameters." We wrote down all the elements. Yes. And in the contract, and you gotta make sure you have this, is there was an exit clause where we would remunerate the, uh, publisher for the hard costs they incurred that had to be documented. And it was absurd. Once we got the hard cost, it was \$1,000, not even, of editorial work, cover design, all this stuff was \$1,000. So kudos for them for being integral with that. But it also was representative of how much cost or effort they were putting into this. We found a new publisher who was Inspired Girl and it's been an amazing relationship. Scar tissue came out through them.

AJ Harper:

I think, um, you do need a representative, you know? Who would

Mike Michalowicz:

You get if you don't have an agent?

AJ Harper:

Your attorney. Yeah. Um, I think, um, I know this author of mine was working with someone to help with the marketing component. And so that person helped them document everything and advocate. But I will tell you, I did see not a ton, I didn't see a ton of promotion. And I feel like it's, um, related to having such a negative experience. It's not in publisher's best interest to treat people like this because what happens is it sours the whole experience. And so then they don't want, people don't wanna promote their books.

Mike Michalowicz:

There must have been someone somewhere at that publisher who was kinda leading this charge

in the bullying.

AJ Harper:

I mean, I think there's an attitude of, sometimes about authors, you know? Um, I've definitely worked with people who thought of authors as employees.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh,

AJ Harper:

Okay. And authors are not employees. Yeah. They're not. And, um, that relationship should never be adversarial. Yeah. It's in a publisher's best interest to make sure that that author wants to promote the heck out of that book. Loves that book. Cares about that book. And if you just keep

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chipping away at everything that matters to them. I mean, obviously publishers do know what they're doing, right?m. But there has to be a compromise. There has to be a communication about it, you know? Um, so some, this is, I don't wanna scare anybody off. This isn't not a normal situation. This is -

Mike Michalowicz:

One in how many? I don't e -

AJ Harper:

I don't even know. One in a million, one in a hundred? In 20 years in publishing, I've never heard about anything like this

Mike Michalowicz:

Before. Oh, so I'd say it's a one in a

AJ Harper:

Thousand then. At least. Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

When it does happen, um, is there ways you can or should make your arguments in response to their -

AJ Harper:

Yeah. So I think this is one of the reasons I'm always advocating for advanced reader, um, because so that you can say... And I, we do this as a matter of course and we've actually... We never were bullied by anybody at Penguin, but we definitely had disagreements about how to open a chapter or what. Totally. And so then my arsenal was, well, this is the, this is what readers think and believe. And a good editor is gonna look at responses from readers and take it for what it is and say, "Okay, I see what you're saying." Because they, they know if readers are res - they care about what readers are thinking versus say an overall, um, rote policy that's not maybe appropriate for you. So I think do advance reader feedback and try to get as many people as possible, document it. Um, surveys.

Mike Michalowicz:

Surveys are great.

AJ Harper:

Surveys are great.

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Mike Michalowicz:

We, um, had a situation with page two for one of the authors in the simplified platform where I was leading a proposal for a different design where it emphasizes the author name more. And they said, "We don't agree with you." And I said, "Hey, can we just put this on a survey system?" They said, "Yes." And they were right according to the survey. And that satiated my need. I think kind of these whimsical thoughts on either side are very dangerous, so back it with data.

AJ Harper:

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I always tell authors you think that you're, you want a certain cover and that publisher is saying something else. You should lean toward the publisher on cover. Yeah. They really do know what they're talking about when it comes to cover.

Mike Michalowicz:

You, that's general rule.

AJ Harper:

You think you want something because you have an idea about it, but you are not the expert. And so I think I, I always tell them, really listen. But sometimes they're wrong. I had one author who, um, <laugh> oh my God, I cannot say who it is. A big five publisher, very esteemed author, woman. Like I'm talking very esteemed. Not even gonna say what their job is because I don't wanna out this person. Message me like, "I don't know what to do. I just got the cover. First

comp on the cover. One comp, no other samples." Oh, that's - So red flag. Yeah. This is a big five. Okay? It's very peculiar. And you have something like 48 hours or 72 hours. What? Yeah. So they totally screwed up. Yeah. Like they forgot. Something didn't happen. Oh,

Mike Michalowicz:

That's probably what happened.

AJ Harper:

Okay, but listen. They made it pink.

Mike Michalowicz:

Oh, as a female author. Yes. Oh, that's the classic.

AJ Harper:

This is a person - Oh, sticking me in my eye. When I tell you how esteemed this person is. Yeah.

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AJ Harper:

And they did not write a book for women. And even if they did, it doesn't need to be pink, but it wasn't for women. This is a major leadership book. Pink. So- So then my, you know, here I am texting with my poor student. What do I say? What do I do? I was like, okay, this is exactly what you're gonna say. This is probably what's happening. Here's how you're gonna communicate with this person. This is what you need to do. And I just talked, talked them through it. But here's what happens. P - authors don't know this stuff. That's right. So, I mean, member, people who are in my membership community can come to me and say, "What do I do? " And I'll say. Um - You're

Mike Michalowicz:

Doing a lot of sound effects. Last episode you did. I did. Yeah, you did some.

AJ Harper:

I did? Yeah.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah, at the very end, it was

AJ Harper:

Pretty good. I have no recollection of this. It was

Mike Michalowicz:

Good. Um -

AJ Harper:

So what I'm saying is you can fall prey to that stuff. And sometimes it feels like bullying, but it's not actually. Yeah. Where if you could just say, "Let me explain this to you. Let me show you my surveys. Let me explain this whole thing." Then you're gonna get, "Okay, let's work together." Right?

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. I, I say knowledge is power. Data is decisive. And people listen to this episode or any episode can go to ajharper.com, join a community - Yeah. Where you can gain this knowledge. And don't diminish the value of just having a community that can give you expertise and knowledge. Because for many authors, this is their first go around. Yeah. And listen, we've done 10 titles now or whatever it is. Like, number six, seven, I'm still like, hmm, maybe they're making valid points and I'm coming back to you saying, "No, no, no, no. Change that. Do this. "

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So it, it, it's still fresh for a long time. You need a community. With covers, I wanna add a little yes and to you. They generally know what they're doing. My experience with the big five, generally they hire a first year, uh, marketing student to do it.

Mike Michalowicz:

So while, while it's kind of in the general thematic area, you have the need to modify it to be representative of your book, I would argue. Secondly, you have the right, if you wish, to hire an external cover designer at your cost. Yes. That's what I did on every s - every single one of my books, I used an external cover designer, including The Money Habit, um, to give additional points. And as a result, I would say every cover has improved. I get consistent feedback like you've remarkable good covers. Oh.

AJ Harper:

You know what? Let me just, you know what? I have to tell you, this is what, you know, this is me being a publisher that's giving me this bias. Yeah. But now I'm thinking about all my students who got covers. <laugh> Uh, in fact, I think I talked about it on this show, one very serious one where they got a cover that was, um, uh, actually problematic and racist. And, um, I helped, I helped that author now I'm again, I can't say these people's, I can't, I can't out any of these people, but helped them navigate how to have the conversation and the publisher was great about it and handled it. And, um, it was not intentionally so, but it's one of those situations of like ignorance. Yeah. And so once they understood, then they made corrections and now that person

loves their cover. Um, and I was able to help them navigate how to do that.

AJ Harper:

But, uh, and our, actually our whole community helped them navigate how to do it. We actually made it a learning moment. That's fantastic. And had them come into the writing sprint and - Yeah. Everybody... And then when they got the new cover, um, I almost never come Monday through Thursday, but I got this email from this author and they said, um, "Oh, I love my new cover. It, thank you for helping me navigate this. It's great. I'm gonna bring it to the 40PM sprint." And it's like, "Okay, I'm gonna come." So I came even when I don't normally Hit that one. Oh, that's cool. And then everybody was there and it was just like, yay, you know, a learning moment for everybody. But so I have to actually backtrack because the reason I feel this way that publishers know better about covers in general, with the exception of the, the pink one, the problematic one

Mike Michalowicz:

Is because - The pumpkin that became a monster.

AJ Harper:

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Okay, you know what? I have to backtrack myself. But this is my bias as a, when I was a publisher, that people wanted us to do on their covers. Yeah. Like unbelievable stuff. What are you talking about? Yeah. You know? So that I think gives me that bias. I think - Yes. Let them come up with it, with you tell them what you're interested, you know, what you're thinking. And then you push back about what's not working. But they do, a good publisher will at least have some idea of what's gonna make it look on trend and stand out.

Mike Michalowicz:

One final question for you before wrap up, because, uh, I just gotta notice the cleaning crews here. It'n get real loud, real quick. It's

AJ Harper:

Gonna

Mike Michalowicz:

Get loud. Yeah. Um, how do you prevent being bullied by a publisher or more likely an ill informed assertiveness from the publisher?

AJ Harper:

I mean, I think, um, the first thing is to make a list of your deal breakers. Re - you gotta give some thought. Yeah. So you're going into it, you just wanna get the deal. So you're, you're just like, you're not even maybe reading the whole contract. So what, what's gonna matter to you? You gotta really give it some thought and consideration to, okay, what, uh, what do I want? What do I need to have control over? And then you need to negotiate that in the contract. And if you aren't gonna be able to get it, you might need to move on to a different publisher. I think it's gotta be in the contract.

Mike Michalowicz:

I love that. Another tip you have in here is talk with other authors who've already published with you.

AJ Harper:

Oh, please. And this is the most important thing. Yeah. Publishers within the, uh, authors who published with that publisher within the last year.

Mike Michalowicz:

So - Yes, yes.

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AJ Harper:

Publishing is extremely transient. Oh my gosh, is it? It's <laugh> it's just like a revolving door. And so, uh, for example, if you were to go back to Penguin now, which you're not gonna do, it would feel very different.

Mike Michalowicz:

100%.

AJ Harper:

Yes. And we haven't been gone that long.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. It's only been a year and a half, two years.

AJ Harper:

Yes. So it can't be someone from five years ago. It's gotta be a recent author. Just message them on LinkedIn or wherever, just find them. Don't, don't even ask your publisher for the referral. Go

see who they published recently and go talk to them.

Mike Michalowicz:

Yeah. And you'll be surprised how many authors are willing to talk to you on - Privately. Privately. Yeah. I get call calls from people saying, "Hey, I'm considering XYZ publisher, including page two." I had a call yesterday at the airport from an author who's looking at page two. Mm-hmm. I said, "Let me share my experience." Uh, anything else you got on this subject before we wrap it up?

AJ Harper:

Don't let the publisher, if a publisher does bully you, don't lose sight of why you wrote the book in the first place. Exactly. You know? Just you got, you gotta get out there and get that book sold.

Mike Michalowicz:

And get AJ's help. Go to ajharper.com, please, please. And read write a must read. Did I get that in this yet, this episode? I don't know.

AJ Harper:

You just did. Okay.

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Mike Michalowicz:

<laugh> Hey, what you can do for us is, uh, email us at hello@dwtbpodcast.com. That's also our domain. We'd love to get your questions, your thoughts so we can do it on a future episode. Please rate, review the show. Um, please go to ajharper.com. Check out what she's got going on. There's all this cool stuff there. And as a reminder, don't write that book. Write the greatest book you can. I

