

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 15: Neil Strauss

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Tim Ferriss: Hello, Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the *The Tim Ferriss Show*. And, holy guacamole, do I have a treat for you. I had so much fun with this interview. The guest is none other than Neil Strauss, a close friend of mine, seven-time, I think, *New York Times* Best Selling Author. He has written many books, including *The Game*, for which he's best-known, perhaps. *Emergency*, for which I was a proofreader – and, there's a hilarious story behind that that we get into. And, many, many others.

He has written what many consider 'The Definitive Rock Memoir' – or 'Biography' – which was *The Dirt* about Motley Crew. He has written with people, including Marilyn Manson, Jenna Jameson – on, and on, and on – *Rules of The Game*. The guy is prolific. He is also – and has been – Contributing Editor at *Rolling Stone*, Staff Writer for *The New York Times*.

Why am I listing off all of these credentials? Because the conversation that I have with Neil is about the creative process. How do you become a creative powerhouse? What are the methods that he uses? What are the tricks that he has up his sleeves when times get tough; when he's on deadline; when he wants to create the next best-selling book; when he wants to write a book that can become a movie; when he wants to create a business – and he's built some very, very profitable businesses – which is something not many people know.

So, this entire conversation, I hope you enjoy. If you want a Part Two; if you'd like to hear a Part Two – please let Neil and I know on *Twitter*. And, two other things: No.1 This episode is brought to you by you guys. I'm not going to browbeat you with advertisers. I want to avoid that. But, this thing has to be self-sustaining. The podcast takes time, and does take money to put together. So, please visit the *Tim Ferriss Book Club*. Go to fourhourworkweek.com/books. I'll give you a second to write that down.

This is a book club kind of like Oprah's book club. Every month or two I promote a book that has changed my life – that really

never made it into the limelight – a book that never got the attention it deserved. And, this ranges from books on investing, to learning, to travel, to philosophy. They're super fun, so check them out: fourhourworkweek.com/books. Please take a look. That would help the show.

Last, for show notes, all of the links, urls, book recommendations, and so on – all you have to do is go to fourhourworkweek.com – all spelled out, no numbers – fourhourworkweek.com/podcast for all of the goodies.

And, without further ado, I'd like to introduce you to Neil. I hope you enjoy the show. And, thank you for listening.

Tim Ferriss: Neil, my good man. Welcome to *The Tim Ferriss Show*. Thanks for making the time.

Neil Strauss: Cool. Thanks for having me. And, congrats on the podcast, by the way.

Tim Ferriss: Thanks. I am selfishly bringing you into the fold, in part because I want to pick your brain on creative process and interviewing – but we'll get to that. For people who may not be familiar with your work, how many New York Times Best Sellers do you have now? Six, seven, 12, 20?

Neil Strauss: Yes. Seven.

Tim Ferriss: That's incredible. I'd like a number seven. Three of them just about killed me. I'm not sure I have more books in me. But, you didn't start off writing books, as I understand it.

Neil Strauss: Right.

Tim Ferriss: What was the path that you took to get to writing your first book?

Neil Strauss: You know, what's funny is I recently had my family send everything I'd ever written – all of my old grade school stuff. I thought I had written my first book later in life than I actually did. It turned out when I was in second grade I wrote a book, and I tried to get it – maybe it might have been a little later. Maybe, fourth grade – however old you are when you're 11. – But, I actually wrote a book and tried to get it published. I sent it out to publishers and agents with a note saying, “Hey, I wrote a book...”

Not only did it get rejected, but I never got a single response back from a single agent or publisher. So, it really veneered me to rejection. Which is cruel. Who would not send a letter back to some poor kid?

Tim Ferriss: It makes me have even less sympathy for the traditional publishing world than I already do, perhaps. But, you really cut your teeth as a journalist at *The New York Times*, and other places?

Neil Strauss: Yeah, I worked for *The New York Times* for about ten years, and *Rolling Stone* forever.

Tim Ferriss: Speaking of rejection, you have a letter from Phil Collins framed on your wall.

Neil Strauss: Yeah. I had reviewed a Phil Collins concert, and it wasn't that good. I was really trying to be gentle in the review, but I guess he got upset. I got this two-page handwritten screed in the mail, and the last words are: "Well, Neal, fuck you. – Phil Collins."

Tim Ferriss: Wasn't it on hotel stationary?

Neil Strauss: Yeah. It's on 'The Peninsula Hotel'. So, I called his publicist just to make sure it wasn't a fake, and that he was staying there at the Peninsula Hotel. And, I think, later on TV in some interview he said that he regretted writing this letter. It's funny because I did a book about interviews called, *Everyone Loves You When You're Dead* – and, it just really goes to show you that everybody out there who's succeeding on a high level in this culture has this persecution thing going on.

No one I've interviewed doesn't feel – if you really get down to it – feel like they're not respected by their peers; they're not respected by the press; nobody understands them; no one understands what they're doing. And, we're talking even beyond Phil Collins level. We're talking Chuck Berry level – who invented Rock and Roll. It seem that as long as you're living – depending on what you pay attention to – you will always be criticized for doing great things. And, the greater they get, the greater the criticism becomes.

Tim Ferriss: How is your approach? I'd love to dig into the nuts and bolts of how you approach the creative process. How has your writing changed, if at all, from when you were on deadline, writing pieces for *The New York Times* – writing pieces on the shorter side – and book writing? One thing that's always struck me – and, it's given me a lot of insecurity – is that I do feel like I get writer's block. It

can last for extended periods of time. But, when I talk to my friends who are trained journalists, they've just seemingly eradicated the concept of writer's block from their mind: "I don't have a choice. I have to have this in by 5:00 p.m. I don't have the luxury of thinking about writer's block."

How has your process changed, and what are your recommendations to people who are trying to really write something substantive for the first time.

Neil Strauss: I will say something which is: "Writer's block does not actually exist." I'll tell you how I know. I was speaking to a group, and I thought, "I'm going to have them do an exercise." And, I had them write something really challenging. The first sentence I had them write 'the most interesting first sentence you can possibly write'. Something interesting has to be the second sentence. I took them through five sentences. "This one, I want you to write something that makes somebody feel something emotionally. Now I want you to tie this in."

I made it really challenging. I gave them just a few minutes for each sentence. Everybody completed the exercise – everybody in the room – People who are not writers; people who are professional writers; people who are screenwriters; people who think that they're not writers. And, it proved to me that there's no such thing as writer's block. Writer's block is almost like the equivalent of impotence. It's performance pressure you put on yourself that keeps you from doing something you naturally should be able to do.

Tim Ferriss: Interesting. Okay.

Neil Strauss: So, writer's block: The reason you don't get writer's block as a writer is because you have a deadline; it has to be in; you have no choice. But, if you sit there, and you think, "This piece has to be the ultimate article; the ultimate book ever written; my entire selfish being is wrapped up in this; and, this is me." – The more, and the bigger of a story you make up about what you are doing, the bigger the block will get. Because, it has nothing to do with the talent of writing or the skill of writing. It's all completely performance anxiety.

Tim Ferriss: I read a quote recently, which I thought was very applicable to me, because I have a tendency to put the weight of the world on my shoulders when I'm trying to write things, which doesn't help –

Neil Strauss: Right.

Tim Ferriss: – And, the quote was: “The essence of creativity is fucking around.” I think there's some truth to that. But, when you're writing – to avoid some of that pressure – I know we've talked about this before, but for people who haven't heard this because it was a long time ago – you do a number of different drafts, or revisions. And, they're for different people. Could you just expand on that?

Neil Strauss: Yeah. I would say that if I can give one tip to anyone that will help get their things done it's: When you start writing, write to the end. Just write to the end. When I start writing something, I try to get a nice couple of first pages or first paragraphs – because it's a nice little balance, or a nice sort of weight to drop the rest of my book or project on. So, you can spend some time on that, but when you're done, just write to the end. Just get it all done. Get the story out there. Because the truth is that it's not really until you get to the end of what you're writing that you really even know what it is sometimes; or where it's going; or what it's going to become.

So, you just write to get to the end. And, your first draft is only for you. No one is ever going to see it, so you don't have to worry about it. You're not going to turn it in. You're not going to show it to friends to evaluate – because it's only for you. And, the fun part about that first draft is when you're done, somewhere in that mess of words – you just wrote the entire book. The entire book is in there. And, you don't have to deal with anything else. You're done with your notes because you put them all in there. All of your thoughts are in there. Somewhere in that mess is your book. Now you just have to carve it and shape it into the actual book.

So, my first draft is always for me. That's the easy part, by the way. The easy part is the first draft. The tough part is the second draft because the second draft is for the reader.

...Is this what you wanted me to talk about?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. This is exactly what I wanted you to mention.

Neil Strauss: Yeah. So, the second draft is for the reader. So, here's the thing: Your life may be really fascinating to you, but most of it is really boring to somebody else. Your ideas may be really fascinating to you, and maybe you've worked really hard to get to those ideas, or you've suffered, and agonized, and this thing is going to change everything. But, some of it is just boring to other people. It's

interesting to you, but it's boring to other people. You have to have a filter on that says: “This is what's interesting. This is what's boring. This is what's repetitive. This is what's new.”

So, the second draft is where the real pain comes in. Literally, in the book I'm writing, I just cut out a 125 page chunk that took me months of research, and months of writing. It had to go, and it's a better book for it.

Tim Ferriss: Now – the 125 that you cut – what is the total page count now?

Neil Strauss: The total page count right now is 675 pages.

Tim Ferriss: Holy shit. Okay.

Neil Strauss: That's less than a book, but that's how much it is on a computer screen.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. All right, so you cut out a good, say, fourth or third of the book at this point – which was my experience with *The Four Hour Chef*. I mean, I cut 250 pages from *The Four Hour Chef*, and it was still a monster.

Neil Strauss: And, that was just a discrete chunk. There were other parts I cut too. So, I probably cut out 500 or 600 pages in this case. It's usually not that brutal. And, I had it right there. Here's the crazy thing – and just tell me if I'm getting too esoteric because I love talking about the creative process in writing – but, this is the crazy thing, okay? And, I hope that I can say this in a way that people will understand, and will change what they're doing: “The book is smarter than you.”

In other words, I'll sit down to write a book with the intention to write a book about a certain topic. I'll sit down, and I'll start writing it, and then I'll read it. And you know what? When I write the truth down on paper, and I look at that, I get a clean perspective. So, I'll sit down with the intention to write that book, but I have to let that book become something else sometimes. And, that's the right book.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. I've been looking at screenwriting a lot recently, and I heard a quote – which is not always true, of course. But I found it very insightful as sort of a fortune cookie concept, which was: “You don't know the first sentence of your book until you've written the last sentence.”

Neil Strauss: So true.

Tim Ferriss: Let me drill into one of the things you said which is: “The second draft is for your reader.” Are you actually taking the first draft and allowing other people to read it, or are you putting on your 'hat' of the reader, and pretending to be the reader, with their eyes, as you read what you've done?

Neil Strauss: Yeah. No one will ever see the first draft, and I hope if someone saw it – I think it would be unpublishable, and embarrassing, and I would never... The first draft – nobody sees.

Tim Ferriss: Okay.

Neil Strauss: And, the second draft is – I mean, here's the other thing: I think the art of succeeding in anything in life is the art of empathy. And, this is your empathizing with whatever your general idea of the reader is. My reader is never somebody who is a writer/reader. My reader is me, as a reader, probably. I can be reading a book and thinking, “Oh, my god, will this guy just get on with it?” If you're reading a book and thinking, “You know what? This guy is not even living up to what he's writing and saying that he's doing. He's a total hypocrite.” – Whatever I'm thinking when I'm reading. So, my reader is just me the way I would read a book critically.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And, what's the next revision?

Neil Strauss: So, yeah. That's a tough draft. That's when all those phrases like 'kill your babies' and 'let go of these.' That's the art of writing. Everything is in the revisions, for me.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Neil Strauss: Then I'm done. I have a book, and I feel like it's a great story. The third draft is for the haters. The idea with the third draft is: Okay. I've written a story. The story is really interesting, but there are going to be people who have an opposite viewpoint. There are going to be critics and press reading it. I'm never going to cater to them. I'm not going to change my point of view. I'm not going to change my ideas. I'm not going to change what I stand for. I'm not going to censor myself, ever.

But, what I will do is do my best to make it immune to criticism in the sense of: I'm going to make sure that my facts are iron-tight. I'll always hire one, or two, or three fact checkers because if somebody can just find one weakness, you know – that's it. They

can dump the baby with the bathwater: “He was wrong about that. He knows nothing.”

But, the second, more important thing is – and, I always use Eminem as an example. You can't really criticize Eminem because he's already – in his songs – he already, sort of, impersonates the critics, and then answers them. So, there's nothing that many people have said about him that aren't really already answered in a book, or accomplished in some self-aware way. So, I really want to answer the critics; their questions; their critiques – in a way that is still fun and entertaining. So, that's sort of the idea of hater-proofing it. You always get haters, but you want your haters to be wrong.

Tim Ferriss: Right. You have to have a fortified defense against criticism warranted and unwarranted, right? Reasonable and unreasonable criticism. Can you give an example from one of your books? I know how fucking secretive you are, so you're probably not going to dig into the details of the new book, but maybe an historical example.

Neil Strauss: Yeah. I'll give you a simple example. When writing *The Game* – which is the book of where I spent two years in this secret sub-culture of pickup artists – and, obviously, I'm writing the book for the book that I would have needed in college and high school, and the book that maybe would have made me feel a little less lonely growing up. And, I'm also trying to make it fun and entertaining, and mythological, and all of that kind of stuff – mythological in a sense that in all of my books I try to have an underpinning that's a great story arc.

Then I read it. I want to read it from the point of view of somebody who's not my own, in a sense – of a woman who's found something in her husband's drawer; or her boyfriend's closet; or maybe writing for *Jezebel*, or one of those blogs – and to think, “Okay. If they actually read the book, can I write it in such a way that they really don't find fault with the book itself?” They can find fault with the characters, but not the book itself.

So, I went through, and anytime a woman was referred to in a way that I thought was objectifying, you know, we just made sure that there was nothing that felt, you know – the woman was not rated by fate of numbers; or every time you describe them you're not describing a certain body part. It's actually just smart. Because nobody wants to read that.

Tim Ferriss: Right. Definitely.

Neil Strauss: So, that was one way of going through, and just saying, “Let me read this so...” So, the first book, you write from your perspective, but the second you write from your perspective as a reader – even more so than your ideal reader, I think. Because if it's you – it's just going to be interesting to nobody. You put on different hats. What's a feminist reading when reading *The Game*? Another example is I wished there was a female character in this book, but it's based on my life, and I wasn't really in that community. There wasn't really a strong female character I had a relationship with, outside of the woman I ended up dating in the end.

So, I could see that it needs a female point of view, but before each section I put a culture point quote from a feminist thinker, just to say, “Hey, there's another point of view, and this is what it is.” So, in that last draft, you're putting on your different hats of people who are not your audience, and how are they going to read the book.

Tim Ferriss: That makes perfect sense. I take a similar approach. I often try to address as many of these points as possible in my introductions or prefaces.

Neil Strauss: Right.

Tim Ferriss: For instances, in *The Four Hour Chef* I'll say: “Many of my conclusions are based on the following assumptions, and the following process.” And then, at least for that type of book, to say: “It's very likely – almost certain – that not everything in this book is 100 percent accurate.” So, this will evolve as the book evolves, and reaches more people, again, to deflect the criticism that it hasn't been 100 percent verified. Because, in some cases, there are theories or speculation. But, addressing that early because realistically, if people start reading the book, where are they going to start? Typically, in the beginning, right?

Neil Strauss: And, just to clarify something – which is when Tim is doing this, or I am doing this – what you're doing is: A book is like a little world. It's like a software program. You're debugging it. It's not like we're saying, “Oh, no. We don't want to get criticism.” We get a lot of it. Some is deserved; some is not deserved. But, what we're trying to do is create a program that doesn't have bugs in it. Because, at least in the old book model, you didn't get to do a Version 2. Now you can do that with Kindle and stuff. But, we're trying to create a completely self-contained world that has no bugs.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. Just like software – if you want everyone to be your fan, no one's going to be your fan.

Neil Strauss: So true.

Tim Ferriss: Because, you'll have to dilute it to the point that if no one is going to have a negative response to your book, it's very unlikely that anyone will have a strong positive response. You have to defend against that, and make sure you're focusing on how many people 'get it' – and not how many people don't get it.

But, to that point: How do you currently incorporate feedback from other readers, say – writers and people who are proofreading? The reason I ask – and people might find this amusing – is I remember proofreading parts of *Emergency*, and the length that you went to with me. Now, granted, we've known each other for a long time now, and I just remember going to this hotel. I don't know why you were working out of a hotel. We can talk about that. And, the only reason that you gave me parts of the book was because you wouldn't tell me what the book was about.

But I threw out a Hail-Mary and said, “What's the book about? Something related to Five Flags?” And, that freaked you out. You were like, “Wait, wait. Did somebody tell you?” Then you would give me something like 40 to 50 printed pages at a time, in a FedEx folder. And, I would have to bring those back before I could have the second set of 50 pages. So, how are you currently doing that? And, by the way, I agree – and, maybe you can expand on this – that memes get release accidentally, and you have to be very careful about that. Because books take so goddamn long to make, right?

Neil Strauss: Exactly.

Tim Ferriss: You don't want to prematurely release this idea virus so that you can't harness it later. But, how do you have other people proofread your stuff and provide feedback?

Neil Strauss: It's a funny thing because I'm doing it right now. They come over to the house, and they read as much as they can tolerate. And, then they come over the house another day. And, the second reason for that is the books haven't had the legal read yet. So, a lot of them are true life stories. And, when I'm writing from life, I really use the real names when I am writing a first draft – and the real

identifying details and characteristics – before the lawyers get their hands on it.

So, I don't want it to float around because – I'm doing a big thing right now, so hopefully no one who's in my book listens to this – So, my great cop-out is when I'm writing about somebody, I usually say, “Oh, don't worry. You were comped as a character. I used pieces of you, and pieces of someone else.” So, when they read it they can say, “Those good parts must be me, and the bad parts are obviously the other person.”

But, I write it all down with real peoples' names, and identifying details. I don't want that to get out because I'm either respecting their privacy, or I don't want them to sue me.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. The people who come over and read as much as they can tolerate – I remember doing something very similar for one of your books. It might have been your last book.

Neil Strauss: Right.

Tim Ferriss: How are you choosing the people you have proofread your stuff? You don't have to use names, but what types of people do you ask to read your stuff? What's your process?

Neil Strauss: So, the truth is that it doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be someone like yourself who's an accomplished author, and who's been on the Best Seller List. I'm just trying to get as many different people to read it as possible, who are willing to read it. So, a lot of people think, you know, I've never hired – I think the hardest thing to find, other than a good writer, is to find a good editor.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Neil Strauss: So, I really just have as many people read it as possible. I have a process, and I'll share this with you because I think it's good not just for writing, but for getting any kind of feedback and criticism in life; not just about a project you're doing, but about yourself. This is just the best metaphor for it. I'm trying to remember who told it to me. I think it was a guy named Brent. He had this basic concept which is: “It's a catcher's mitt.” So, when someone gives you feedback, you catch it in your catcher's mitt, and you look at it.

One of three things are possible. If it's true, then I put it in my head. The secret to life is not to take it personally. Criticism is criticism on your technique – not on you. People personalize stuff.

You catch it, and before you take it in, you look at it. If it's true, you insert it. If it's not true, you throw it away.

And, if it's a 'maybe', and you're not sure, you just show it to a couple other people: “Hey, Tim. What do you think of this?” Then you reevaluate and decide yes or no. But, here's the best stuff: You get a piece of feedback. You read the book. You tell me something, and I don't think that's true. Then my wife reads it: “You know, I think she's wrong.” Then I get it from one or two other people. Then, instead of throwing it away, I look at it again.

And, that's when you get the real truth. So, the more people you can have give you feedback, and if there's a piece of feedback you reject that keeps coming back to you, it's time to reevaluate that. Then you can get a real epiphany that changes you. That's where growth is.

Tim Ferriss: How many people do you typically have proofread a given chapter in a book before you get to the book being locked and done as a manuscript?

Neil Strauss: It's so fun. People think, “I've written a book to the end. It's done.” You're really only about a quarter done at that point. But, it feels good. You can have a small celebration. And, by the way, when you're done, don't take too much time off of it. You have to get right back to it, right away, because otherwise you're going to forget. Doing a book, or a screenplay, or a big project – it's a lot of information to hold in your head.

[Crosstalk]

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. It's a lot of connective tissue that you forget, that isn't in the book, but you need as glue to kind of hold it all in your head.

Neil Strauss: Exactly. And, if you go away for three weeks, it will take you a week or two to get those connections going again. Let's talk about time management later, because every time you're interrupted when you're doing something creative, it takes you 20 minutes to get back to the state before that phone rang, or that person asked you that question.

So, back to the [inaudible]. So, there are two stages. One is the early stage when I'm still in the second variation – the reader variation – I have a couple of people just read it through, so I can see if it's engaging, and not boring. Or, maybe there's a part I'm not sure about, or it feels too long. So, I have two or three people

come in to read it. But, then when I feel like I'm all done, and it's being edited at – Harper Collins, in my case – and, it's being edited, then I'll print it out fully, and have some people read it from front to back. And, really as many people as will tolerate, to get as many comments, and as much feedback and criticism as I can.

There are a few people, like yourself, and a couple of other people who I will always give it to as people whose opinions I take a lot more seriously than my cable repairman. If he'll read it, I'll give it to him. And, you know, if it works for him, it's maybe more important than if it works for you or another author.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely, because it's tough for a lot of authors to take off their editor/book-writing hat. They go into the weeds right from the outset, as opposed to just reading the book as a reader – if that make sense. One approach that I took with the last two books, that seemed to work pretty well – I do think *The Four Hour Chef* tried to do too much. I think it could have been four or five books, very easily, and it would have made the positioning of each of them a lot easier.

Neil Strauss: Right. That's my thing. I'm still upset that you didn't take my feedback on it. It was too hard. You were too invested in it. You were too far along in it. But, I always think, “I really feel...”

Tim Ferriss: It should have been multiple books. Who knows? Maybe they'll get split up at some point in the future – because they could be. But, where I was going to go is: I typically give proofreaders three to five chapters. My chapters tend to be pretty short, and they're modular, so that will usually suffice. And, then I'll always ask, “What was your favorite chapter? If you had to pick just one to stay in the book, which one would it be and why? If you had to get rid of one, which would it be, and why?” What I found really helpful is that if anyone loves a chapter – it stays in. End of story. If someone dislikes a chapter, I then need a consensus to justify taking it out, unless I feel the same way. Does that make sense?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. I always do that, too. It's so good because you're looking for criticism. I also say, “Mark what really moved you, or you thought was funny.” You want it underlined. And then, I'll be careful about throwing that out. That's a great point. It's true also with *Everyone Loves You When You're Dead* – which was an anthology of all of my favorite moments from my favorite interviews. And, with that, I probably had about 1,000 interviews that I had to cut down. I'd have people come over, and have them do a rating system. I'd have a whole pile, and I'd see what rated the highest.

And, here's the thing that people often don't get – and, tell me if this is true for you, as well. You often talk about testing a title on Facebook or Google Ad-Words back when that made more sense. Tell me if I'm wrong here, but this is how I do it, which is that's just one variable. It doesn't mean, “Oh, this tested the best. I'm going to do this.” It's one input; there was testing. – There is your own intuition. There is what other experts think. There's what friends think. You put that all into the mix, versus saying, “This just tested well – this one only. But, it must be right, so I'm sticking with that no matter what.”

Tim Ferriss: Definitely. And, I think because the testing was unique at the time – that started spreading around as a story about The Four Hour Work Week – I think that people missed the context, which is: I only tested titles that I could live with from the outset. So, you shouldn't test like a cyborg, and end up with a title that you hate, and then use that, because that will ultimately affect the success of the book, and secondly, most books fail. You could do everything right, and the book could fail. Can you live with a title you hate even if the book might fail? And, the answer is: You shouldn't have to.

So, you need to first pick sort of a subset before you test – of titles, or content, or chapters that you can live with – and then you do the testing.

On the time management – like you said – it's not a question of: Do you have the time to do something like run to FedEx, and mail something off? The question is: Can you afford the interruption? There's a great article by Paul Graham. I think it's *The Maker's Versus the Manager's Schedule*. For a Maker – whether it's a programmer, or a writer, or musician – if you're in the flow and you get interrupted, it might take you 20 to 60 to 90 minutes just to get back to the place where everything that's spread out around you makes sense again. There's a huge cost interruption. You go, pretty much, completely off the grid.

Neil Strauss: Right.

Tim Ferriss: You have some retreat spots. I remember when you were working on your last book, and I was working on *The Four Hour Chef*, we had some retreats which were really helpful.

On the interview stuff – because I'm trying to get better at interviewing –

Neil Strauss: Can I mention a couple of things for time management, because there are a couple of things that are so good?

Tim Ferriss: Yes. Yeah.

Neil Strauss: And, I have no vested interest in this, but there is this one computer program that's probably saved my life. It's been the best investment I've ever made at \$10.00, or whatever it costs. I don't know if you have it. Do you have *Freedom* on your computer?

Tim Ferriss: *Freedom*. I use something called Rescue Time, and few others, but *Freedom* is a fantastic app, absolutely.

Neil Strauss: It's so simple. It's my favorite program in the world. The great thing is it says: "How many minutes of freedom do you want?" You put in whatever it is – "120 minutes of freedom." And then, you are completely locked off your internet no matter what, for that amount of time. So, as soon as I sit down to write, the first thing I do is I put on Freedom because if you're writing or you want to research something, you research something, and then you get stuck in the click beats – you know – rapid rabbit hole. And, what you can do is save all of the things you want to research, and just research them when that time expires, and you'll find it so much more efficient.

And, now I go a little more hardcore – because I'm under a real deadline – which is *Intego Family Protector*. They're those children monitoring things. My wife put in the password, and I can only get on line from 5:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. every day and from 11:00 p.m. to midnight. That's the only time I can get on line, period. It is great. You'll never answer emails faster and more efficiently, and productively when you know you only have an hour to do it.

Tim Ferriss: That's amazing. What is it? *Intego Family Protector*.

Neil Strauss: Yes. *Intego Family Protector*. And again, I don't know the password, so if there was an emergency that comes up – like if we were doing this on Skype – I would have to have her go type in the password. I don't know it.

Tim Ferriss: I was wondering why you didn't want to do this on Skype. That's hilarious. That makes a lot more sense.

Neil Strauss: So, the bigger problem is not other people interrupting you; it's you. You are the enemy you're fighting. As soon as something

gets challenging, the first thing we want to do is go do something else. And, if you stay there, you can work through it, but as soon as something gets tough, the first thing we do is find something else that's not as big, or not as important because we just don't want to – we're trying to conserve our energy. That's the way we are.

Tim Ferriss: I was looking at a book on non-fiction writing by Ayn Rand. I think one of the chapters was called *The White Tennis Shoes*. Basically the point was writers will do anything to avoid writing. She said if there are white tennis shoes within your visual field that have one blemish on them, you will find a way to rationalize cleaning those white tennis shoes, instead of doing the writing you're supposed to write.

Neil Strauss: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: So, you have to build systems to protect against your lesser self.

Neil Strauss: Right. You have to find where your weaknesses are. So, whatever your white tennis shoes are – you have to make sure they're nowhere in your eyesight, in that space in which you write. You have to have the sacred space; that cave you go to. This is your sacred space. At some points, and when I can afford it, I don't even let anyone in that room. I don't want anyone's energy in that room. No one's even allowed in there. Whatever it may be, you have to create your sacred space. There are no clocks in your sacred space, because there is no time in your sacred space. No one is allowed in there. If there is something really important, they can slip a note, and you can answer it when you want.

Tim Ferriss: So, on the subject of productivity –

Neil Strauss: – No one's going to want to write when we're done.

Tim Ferriss: I get contacted by a lot of would-be writers who are actually good writers in shorter form, often times. And, this is where I know things are headed for problems. They'll ask me about all of the marketing stuff first, and then they'll tell me that they're going to write a book part-time in three to four months. I try to discourage everyone from doing a book unless they can allocate at least a year to it, assuming full-time, Monday to Friday. I'd be curious to hear your thoughts because I think a mediocre book is more of a liability than no book at all.

Neil Strauss:

I agree 100 percent. I think that the greatest distraction people have – and, I'm glad you keyed into that – is when you start talking about the marketing while you're still writing. I never think about the marketing, or promotion, or any of that stuff until the book is actually created. That's just a distraction for creativity, and it will hurt your creativity because that's when you start getting writer's block, because you're thinking too much about the audience; the reception; and, is it going to succeed.

I was always inspired when I was working with Judith Reagan at Harper Collins. There's a writer she had that did a book about some famous court case about ten years ago. I don't remember what the court case is, but I'm sure 1,000 listeners know what it is. Anyway, it was a horrible court case where somebody was famous for five minutes, and she had to get the book out. I think of the model. So, the writer wrote it in a week. This challenged me. He just typed it out as she was talking. Then he edited it. He got it on *The New York Times* Best Seller List. So, it inspired me to think, “How fast can I write a memoir?”

So, Joel Stein from *Time Magazine* was writing that Sarah Palin book. He called me up, and said, “I want you to write my memoir in the quickest amount of time possible.” I said, “Awesome. We're going to do this in half a day. Come over for a couple of hours. I'll write as you talk. I'm going to send it to my editors. We'll have the cover, the book, and the design of the book by the end of the day.”

So, I'll give you link, but we put this in Time, and they put the link on there. It's a short, 25 page book. But, it's actually pretty funny, and not bad. So, the answer is: It's focus time. You can still write something great, but you have to sit down, really focus, and really want to write something great, versus saying, “I just want a book to help my brand,” – or whatever.

Tim Ferriss:

There are so many bad reasons for writing a book. But, on the subject of writing, with most of your books, and certainly all of my books, the books start with personal experience, and a lot of interviews or interacting with experts of various types. What have you learned as any interviewer? Obviously, you did it for *The Rolling Stone*. First of all, you should mention some of the people you've interviewed – some of the better-known folks, because the list is super long. And, what have you learned about interviewing that I might be able to use on this podcast, or other people might be able to use for their various projects?

Neil Strauss: Sure. I love interviewing. I've basically done any kind of *Rolling Stone* cover story. I've basically covered any musician, and most actors – I've probably interviewed them at some point. So, it's interesting: A *Rolling Stone*, or an article, or a book interview is different because you have time to play with. So, that's the waiting game, and I can talk about the details of that. And, you can choose what you want to talk about. But then, I got a show a Sirius Radio, and I just did the show as an experiment or challenge to think, "Can I get what I get with someone in a *Rolling Stone* interview in just a one hour amount of time that that interview takes?"

So, I created a bunch of techniques for the live interview that helped me get to that core really quickly. Do you want to talk about live interview?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. Let's talk about the live interview because I think it will translate. I think the principles are probably quite flexible. So, why don't you talk about the live interview and some of the techniques that you developed, and are using.

Neil Strauss: Well, let's start with preparation – and, this is for any interview. It's tough to do a really, really great interview. You and I have an awesome rapport, and we can talk about this, and talk about anything. But, when I'm preparing for an interview with somebody, I will go research everything they've ever done. I'll try to read any books on them. If they're musicians, I'll listen to everything they've ever done. I'll try to watch every interview because I just want to make myself an expert in them. Then I'll write down as many questions as I can think of.

Maybe I'll write hundreds of questions, literally. Then, I'll study them like I'm studying for an exam. I'll mark the ones I really want to make sure I ask. Then, I get to meet them. I'll take those questions. I'll fold them up, and put them in my back pocket, and I'll never have to look at them again. And, then I'll let it flow, but I'll know where I need to go. Here's what they've said. What have they never said? What about them is a side of them that's never been seen by anybody else? The conversation will never hit a dead point. It will feel completely natural to them, but I'll know where I'm shaping and structuring it.

So, every now and then I have a tough one. I had to interview Taylor Lautner for *Rolling Stone* – who was like the werewolf kid in *Twilight*. And, I actually thought it was an assignment for someone else. I didn't realize who it was until afterward when I got it. So, my goal as a writer is just to be interesting. If you bore

someone, you've committed the cardinal sin of writing. So, I would walk him into a place where I knew I had a series of five or ten questions that would lead him somewhere fun, or funny, or entertaining, or interesting. So, the little segments are almost like if you're a lawyer, and walking someone down a chain that's going to end up with a unique revelation.

Tim Ferriss: Give me an example, or examples of some of these questions. So, you can answer this a couple of different ways. Give me that, or just questions that are not person-specific, like, that tell us about this incident; that are good can-openers for getting people to tell you something interesting.

Neil Strauss: It's funny. Everyone thought of making a list like that. Someone wrote: "Right or wrong, no one wants to interview Bob Dylan." And, he once asked Bob Dylan, "Who tells you when you're wrong?" Bob Dylan got upset and left the interview. I think that's a good question. I use that question a lot. But, if I was going to try to do those canned questions like those cards you get in a game that are fun. They're always good questions – but, what I always think about is not what I want to know, or what the audience wants to know – it's the art of empathy. I want to think about, "How is life lived from their perspective?" "How can I get inside of them?" "What are the things that they wrestle with, or struggle with?"

Like the conversation we're having as writers is because you can empathize. It's useful for me to talk about it. You're hitting a nerve with me because these are the things I talk about. If you wanted to talk to me about, "Is *The Game* good or bad?" – it would be a horrible interview because maybe I'm interpreting that as judgment, and it's just sort of a stock answer, and I'm already on the defensive, so now it's going to be boring. But, the questions you're asking are the things that I wrestle with; the things I think about; the things I probably talked about today, and yesterday.

If I'm interviewing a celebrity, and there's a scandal, or you want to find out if they're dating somebody – I'm not going to say, "Are you dating that person?" I'm going to say, "What's it like for you when everyone is always trying to speculate about who you're dating, when you have your own private life that you want to keep?" So, I'm empathizing with how they see their reality, not how TMZ sees their reality.

Tim Ferriss: Right. At the same time you're softballing the topic in if they want to hit it. If they want to swing for it, they can go for it.

Neil Strauss: The real trick for celebrity interviewing types of things, is that the topic that you really want, but you know that they don't really want to share – you wait for them to bring it up. Once they've mentioned it, they've opened the door to it if you want to get. It's like anything. It's like *The Game*. It's like getting funding. It's like dating. If there's something you want from someone, they're not going to want to give it to you. So, the idea is that you wait for them to bring up the elephant in the room.

Tim Ferriss: Are there any ways to leave the gingerbread trail to get them closer to it? Are there any particular examples that come to mind? I know one thing that a lot of journalists do, which sometimes drives me nuts, but I recognize why they do it – is they'll deliberately give false facts to try to get a correction. “So, the rumor is that you're dating Taylor Swift.” And, you hope that they'll come back and say, “Actually that's completely bullshit. I'm dating so-and-so.” Okay. Gotcha. Now we can go down that trail.

Neil Strauss: Right. But, that's weak because –

Tim Ferriss: – It is weak.

Neil Strauss: – because you've shown: A: It's too tricky; B: you've shown your ignorance about them; C: you're trying to catch them. So, you might get that one answer, but you'll have a shitty interview.

Tim Ferriss: Exactly. But, it is a common technique that journalists use, right?

Neil Strauss: Yeah.

Tim Ferriss: Very common. The other one that makes me kind of crazy – and I had to learn how to defend against it because it's so easy to be misquoted in print – “So, I guess what you're saying is...” – Fill in the blank. And, all of sudden you're quoted as saying this. You think, “Hey. Whatever. I guess it's pretty close.” Then, all of a sudden you're quoted.

Neil Strauss: And, that's kind of the equivalent of when you're sitting down to write a book, and not letting the book tell the story; it's you trying to force your story on the book. It's you trying to force your story on the subject. So, yeah, I'm sure that's a way to get but, it's a short-term gain for a long-term loss – which is untruthful journalism. And then, not having a good reputation because of it.

Tim Ferriss: In the case of Taylor, where you want it to be interesting, and have a series of questions that will lead somewhere interesting for the piece itself, how do you go about doing that?

Neil Strauss: There's a technique like creating a 'Yes Ladder'. It's kind of a persuasion technique, which is ask them something safe, and it's, "Yes." And, ask them something safer, and it's, "Yes." You know, as an example which is not far off is, "You seem like a healthy guy. You're not a smoker, right? No, you don't smoke?" "No, no. I don't smoke." "Then you obviously never smoked pot, right?" Then you start getting something interesting. Then we got down to traffic tickets. Then we had this fun game of me trying to find something he's done wrong, or illegal, like – he's never even double-parked, or whatever. So, you're walking them in a natural way that's fun for them, versus: "I want something from you. I'm going to try to get it." "I'm going to hold it, and keep it from you."

Another secret for interviews is the idea of fractionation, right? Fractionation and hypnosis is if you are hypnotizing someone and you bring them out of trance, and then you put them back in trance, they go in deeper the second time. So, whenever I'm interviewing somebody – especially for *Rolling Stone*, or anything – I always try to break it into a couple of little pieces. We do a little bit of interview. Then we go have lunch or dinner. And, that second interview is always better.

Tim Ferriss: That's interesting. That's very fascinating.

Neil Strauss: So, this is something for people with podcasts or radio shows – and, I don't know how relevant this is to everybody. I love this stuff. I love the art of trying to get someone to be themselves. I think that is really the goal. Because, people go into interview mode to try to show you how they want to be perceived, not who they are. So, with my radio show, we first prerecorded, and the first ten minutes were a complete throw-away. We do the first ten minutes, then go to a break. But, that's a throw-away. It allows them to get their promotional message out. They feel like they've said their message. Beyond their message is a person. I get rid of their message and get to the person.

Tim Ferriss: That's hilarious. Do they end up being able to plug the stuff that they wanted to plug by coming on the show?

Neil Strauss: Oh, yeah. I'll plug for you. I'll always tell somebody, and this is true: When you're going on, and you're trying to promote your business, or your brand, or your book, or movie – whatever you're

promoting – it goes back to that philosophy. Whenever you want somebody to do something, and the more desperate you are, the more they don't want to do it.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Neil Strauss: You're selling yourself. If they like you, they'll like what you have to offer. You're not selling your book. You're representing it by who you are.

Tim Ferriss: Absolutely.

Neil Strauss: So, my thought is it's your job, or the host's job to do the promotions for you. Your job is to be the most awesome version of you that you can be.

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. Definitely. Getting them to trust the messenger, not the message, first and foremost.

Neil Strauss: Right. If you're somewhere, and they keep mentioning, “We do some of those interviews.” And, they keep mentioning their website, and putting a 'www' in front of it, or whatever it is – you're just like, “I don't even want to go to your stupid website.” Right? If someone is interested in me, I don't even mention my book. I don't mention where they find them. I don't mention my website because my name is on the podcast, and there are search engines that will lead them there without me having to say it.

Tim Ferriss: Definitely.

Neil Strauss: And, that's for anybody. Don't go on to sell; go on to represent.

Tim Ferriss: That's excellent advice. I want to be cognizant of your time, obviously. I wanted to just ask a couple of questions. Obviously, we talk all the time, so we could just keep talking about this for hours. But, the first is: What books, if any, do you gift to other people the most? Besides your own books? Are there any books, resources – things that you give to people in the written format?

Neil Strauss: So, it's probably one you give away a lot, and you've given it away on your blog.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, it could be anything. *Seneca*?

Neil Strauss: Yes. I'm a shortness of life. I have a stack of those – that little Penguin edition, I think it is. So, I give that away a lot. There

were other ones I tend to buy a lot for people. I have a friend right now whom I'm encouraging to read fiction. He's a voracious non-fiction reader. And, I'm a big fan of reading fiction because – especially your audience, and to a degree my audience – a lot of people feel like we have to read self-help books because that's knowledge, and we don't want to waste any time, and we want to be efficient.

Tim Ferriss: Right.

Neil Strauss: People learn through metaphor. That's how the first stories were told. That's what the bible is. Metaphor and story-telling are how the brain actually learns information. If you just get it as data, that's good for computers. It's not good for human learning. So, I really encourage people to read great works of fiction and literature – A: Because it's art; and, B: because I've learned more about life from fiction. So, the book I told him to start with was – it's kind of a deeper one because he's an artist.

So, I thought that Gabriel Garcia Marquez *100 Years of Solitude* – I just think is a good book to appreciate. Literature is story-telling in a magic world that can be weaved through fiction. So, I give that away. There's a dark, dark book by Jerzy Kosinski called *The Painted Bird*. It's really dark, but it's 'un-put-down-able'. I tend to give that away a lot.

Tim Ferriss: *The Painted Bird*.

Neil Strauss: Yeah. By Jerzy Kosinski. It's disturbing though, so. Just know –

Tim Ferriss: It might be for a plane ride, and not before bed.

Neil Strauss: Yeah. But, it's about – you know what? I'm not going to –

Tim Ferriss: Yeah.

Neil Strauss: But, you learn about human nature through that book. For artists, there's a book by Milan Kundera that I give away a lot. It's called *Life is Elsewhere*. And, this is my interpretation of it, which is probably wrong. It's been a few years. But, there's someone who's born. And, he's born to be a great artist. He's going to become a great poet, but his mother issues, and sort of politics, and peer pressures of the time turn him into a total hack. And, I think it's an analogy for that choice we all have in life: Are you going to fulfill your potential? Or, are you just going to give into the peer pressure of the moment, and become nothing?

I was talking with this billionaire friend of mine, and I was saying, “I'd really like to write a book about the way your mind works.” And, he was saying that the difference between someone who is a billionaire and a billionaire – it's so stupid to even talk about this, but it's so – is that the people who really think big – he said, “The biggest mistake you can make is to accept the norms of your time.”

Tim Ferriss: I love it.

Neil Strauss: By not accepting norms is where you innovate, whether it's with technology, with books, with anything. So, not accepting the norm is the secret to really big success, and changing the world.

Tim Ferriss: That's a fantastic way to wrap-up this episode, I think. So, Neil, I'm going to ask. You don't have to say, because people can just use Google and other tools, but where can people learn more about your work; find more of your stuff? Where would you like people to find you?

Neil Strauss: After that big speech it would be completely hypocritical to say to say anything. They can find me in their various ways. On the blog on the fourhourworkweek.com.

Tim Ferriss: I appreciate you not throwing the 'www' in there. All right, man. Many conversations to be had. To be continued. Thanks for making the time, and I will hope to have some wine with you soon. Thank you, Sir.

Neil Strauss: Talk soon. Always enjoyable to talk to you.

Tim Ferriss: All right, buddy. Bye-bye.