Steven Pressfield - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Matt: hello writers. Welcome to the London Writer Salon. We are Matt and Par. We're your hosts for today's interview. We're also the co-founders of the London Writer Salon. In our salon interviews are a chance for us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey and dig into the stories behind the stories. And so each week we invite to the salon, a writer that we admire to explore the craft of writing, the art of building a writing career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

Parul: And today, our guest is the one and only Stephen Presfield. Stephen wrote for 28 years before he found success. His book, the Legend of Bagga Advances, was made into a movie directed by Robert Redford. Today, he's the author of Gaza Fire, the Tides of War, and some incredible non-fiction books as well for writers, including the War of Art, turning Pro, and Do the Work and so many more.

His latest book is his memoir. Government cheese where he takes us back to the earlier days before he started writing and really telling us, showing us how he became the writer that he is today.

Matt: And so today we're going to be talking with Steven about the memoir. We'll also talk about what it means to have a creative calling, how we can stop SAB self-sabotaging ourselves to pursue that calling and realize our creative dreams.

We'll talk about Steven's experience writing across multiple genres, and of course we'll dig into the process and the stories inside government cheese. So we've prepared a bunch of questions for Steven, but about 60 minutes or so in, we will turn it over to you. So if you have a question at any point throughout this interview, please stick it in the chat and we will give you a chance to ask it at the end.

All right, let's dive in. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writer Line, Mr. Steven Presfield.

Steven: Thanks Matt and Peril. Thanks for having me. I'll give you Okay, thanks. Great to be here.

Matt: Steve, this is we were saying before we open this is one of the highlights of, our year just to, be here with you and, do this.

We've been long fans of your work and so many in the community, are too. So this is a special moment for all of us. We actually consider you one of our patron saints that you might not know, patron saints of something we do called Writer's Hour. It's a community silent writing sprint where we put our hearts, or sorry, put our butts where our hearts want to be work.

So first, thank you so much. That sounds great.

Steven: I like it.

Matt: So we like to start with your early writing life, and we're fortunate that you've put so much of this period into government cheese and into some of your other books. And in government Cheese you write that you lugged around your Smith Corona typewriter for seven years in your van before you even had an inkling to write, before you began to see an interest in writing.

Let alone a destiny. Why do you think you carried that damn thing around for so many

Steven: years? It's actually a little different than that matter. I actually had tried to write a book before that and for two years, supported by my wife and I. At the end of it, I had just blew the book up totally sabotaged myself and the marriage and everything.

And that sort of cast me out on the road living by myself in a Chevy van. And I kept the type, the typewriter with me. It's almost if it was a novel and you were writing about somebody trying to that was fighting his writing demons, you would give them a typewriter and have them throw it in the back under a pile of junk and never touch it.

And that was so I, as I was carrying this typewriter, I hated it. There were many times, as I say, in government cheese where I was ready to just throw it off the, a bridge or something like that. I never got it out, not even to write a letter, but it was always with me, like the dream that I had no courage to pursue.

And I suppose I thought one day I would take it out and I finally did. So yeah, that's why I lugged it around all that time.

Matt: Do you remember the first tug that might have been the seed of your calling as a writer? And was it those first couple years that you tried to write the book and then blew it up? Do you remember that first tug that you thought, actually,

Steven: this might be something? Yeah I got into the writing business for all the wrong reasons and in the dumbest possible way, I I was like a a junior copywriter at a big ad agency in New York.

And I had a boss named Ed Hannibal, and he wrote a novel and it became a hit, an overnight hit. It was called Chocolate Days Popsicle Weeks. And he quit the business. And so I'm 21 or 22 years old, and I thought why don't I do that too? How, hard could it possibly be? In other words, I didn't really feel any great tug or calling.

I was just an idiot. And I just thought how hard can it be? Let me give it a shot too.

Parul: And so was that first book that you then wrote after the one that you blew up, was that the, Fester

Steven: transfer? Yeah, that was the second one. The first one I actually finished. Yeah. Which was like about seven years later than that.

Parul: And it would be another 10 years before you actually got your first check from writing and another 10 years. Yeah. After your first novel, the Legend of

Steven: Bagga Van. Yeah, so I was like 52, I think when my first novel actually got published. And.

Parul: This feels like a bit of a big question, but what do you think kept you going throughout those decades?

I know you've written a whole memoir about it.

Steven: There were times during that period when I tried to go straight, tried to get a real job, or and, but every time I would do that, I would be so depressed at

the end of the day that I would have to just try to write something at night or whatever it was.

It was the only thing, the only activity that I had, and I'm sure a lot of the people who are listening to this will say the exact same thing. It's the only thing that kept me sane or gave me any kind of hope that I w you know, wasn't utterly wasting my life. So that, was part of it. Peril. But another part was before I was able to get a novel published, I had about a 10 year career as a screenwriter.

In Hollywood. And so not only did that kind of pay the bills for the first time in my life I actually was making a little money. But I was really learning the craft screenwriting, and I'm sure there are a bunch of screenwriters in the audience right now is it's, all about story.

William Goldman said, screen plays our structure so you, so I felt like through that time, even though I wasn't really living what I really, wanted to do, I was learning the craft. I was getting beaten up and, learning in the school of Hard knock. So that, was what kept me going.

But another thing Par was I just didn't have a plan B this was it. So that's what kept me going. There was no alternative.

Parul: Yeah that's, it's really interesting to hear you talk about it and going back to this Novel that you blew up along with your life, that this idea of self-sabotage comes in.

And I think it's something we can all relate to. I feel like many of us do that unwittingly. Do you have any sense on Yeah. Why, did you self-sabotage and why do we writers do that? Why do we do that in the creative field?

Steven: As if anybody that's read my book, the War of Art, knows that I'd given a name, at least in my own mind, to this force of self-sabotage, which I call resistance with a capital R.

And at the time when I blew up that book, I had no concept that such a thing existed at all. But now I've become like a total student of this demonic force. And one of it, it certainly strikes us as writers, I think, at very predictable points. One is just before we start, it'll stop us from even starting.

And there are a number of other places along the way, but at the very end, at the finish line is another place where resistance really will hit us self sabotage,

because we're at the point then of exposing our work to the world, right? Exposing it to judgment. And, that's a very scary thing, right?

What if it's terrible? What if people, nobody notices it? Or even worse, what if it succeeds? And then what do we do? So I think A lot of times we, writers are not aware of this internal force. We just suddenly find ourselves acting out people, you'll lose your manuscript, you'll delete the file.

Or there any other number of ways. Do you guys, you know who Seth Goden is, correct? Yeah. Huge fans. Yeah. Yes. Yeah. I love Seth. Now he has a term for this, he calls it shipping. And he, thinks of it in terms like if you were if we were inventing the iPhone, if we were Steve Jobs, you can noodle around with it.

But there comes a point when it's ready to ship and you gotta say, okay 20 million of these are going out to Apple stores. And that's a really scary moment. So th that was really I had no clue. I was just at the end of something and I just didn't have the guts. I choked.

It's like a football player fumbling on the one yard line.

Parul: Do you think sometimes resistance or the thought that we shouldn't finish could be that we are simply meant to pull away from the work? How do you discern when it's time to pull the pin and when it's time to actually keep going?

Steven: Could you say that again, Pearl.

I didn't

Parul: quite I'm, wondering there are times when we, choke because we are afraid of success. Perhaps it's too much, it's too overwhelming. But perhaps there are times when this project isn't for us. Ah, it isn't the right one for us. Okay. And maybe we should abandon it. Ah how, do you discern

Steven: the difference?

I, have a kind of it's like the question is, we hear in our heads the voice of self-doubt. Is this any good? Is this really what we're trying to do? Or is this really us or are we trying to fake it and pretend some, that kind of stuff. And that's the same voice that resistance speaks in.

And so what the question you're asking, I think is how do you know when it's resistance or when it's legitimate? And I have a rule of thumb, which I say is when in doubt it's resistance. Almost all the time that seductive voice is resistance, and for, at least for me, because I, my big demonn was not being able to finish something that was the real hurdle that I had to get over with.

Ever since then, I'm like crazed to finish everything. So for me, I. I won't abandon anything, even if it's really terrible or turns out to be terrible, I'm gonna finish it. And whether that's right or not, I don't know but it's I, just think it's always a good thing to finish, even if it doesn't work.

It

Matt: seems like a big part of being a writer is figuring out what works for you. Yes. And it sounds like it works for you, so you don't want to mess with the Yeah.

Steven: The, magic of it. But here's another thing that I've found I would say for me, at least two thirds of the way through any project, any book I'm racked with self-doubt.

I ne I, it's not until I've almost got a, real readable draft done that I start to say to myself maybe this might be okay. And I think that's a good thing. That to me is a sign it's, the voice of self-doubt is the voice of resistance. And the fact that resistance is trying to stop me from doing this tells me that I need to do it.

I, do think that's, a constant for me, self-doubt. Un until maybe two-thirds of the way through and I finally start to think, okay this, is pretty good. Let me just keep going.

Matt: And how did this show up for you in government cheese, if it did

Steven: in writing that book? Yeah. Ah that's a great question, Matt, cuz I was really racked with self-doubt for that one because the way the book, it's a memoir, right?

So it's, it actually came from my girlfriend Diana, who said she's heard all my stories. And she said you should put these down. These would be really helpful to people that are trying to write they can see all the stuff that you went through and, maybe it'll help them to realize on their journey I.

So I immediately thought, oh that's, a really dumb idea. Everybody's got a million stories. Who cares about anybody's stories? I don't care about anybody else's. Why is any anybody gonna care about mine? That, again, of course, that's the voice of resistance. That's, what it is, right? But I really bought into it cuz for a long time, and I had real self-doubt.

I thought, what am I doing writing a a memoir about so many of the, my failures and all this dumb sort of stuff that everybody else has gone through. But finally, like I say, maybe two-thirds of the way through, I started to think maybe this will help somebody maybe this is a good thing.

And at that point, the self-doubt went away. And I guess you had, and you had to go back to Seth Golden for a second. He has another thing aside from shipping that I imagine as like a business card. And on one side it says, this might work, and on the other side it says, this might not work.

And that's where we live as writers, as we're working on something is we have, we're too so close to any project we're working on, there's no way to tell. And even if it's great, if it's like a Van Gogh painting that he never sold one in his entire life, it, the times might be working against us and we say it might not work.

Anyway, I'm not sure why I said that, but that's it's a great thing. This might not.

Matt: Yeah. That it's such a powerful concept and I, actually think we say this to ourselves when we launched new projects here, or at least I say it in my own head from Seth goin, is this might not work, but here it is anyway.

It's, I think it's really empowering, so I'm so glad. Yeah, it really is.

Parul: I have a feeling that our first ever event, Steve, we had quotes from you and Seth Gordon at that event, that in-person event ah, I think we do have your voice

Matt: in our head

Steven: actually.

Matt: So we are gonna get more into government cheese in a bit, but there's some more things we do wanna talk about.

And in particular you started to, you described your life looking back as an odyssey. And this can really be a transformative concept to zoom out of our lives and to start to view it as if it's a great story unfolding. Seeing low points and obstacles as trials and tribulations. A hero is enduring instead of annoying things or problems, things that are important to our spiritual growth.

I've had moments where I've zoomed out and it's been really helpful, it's helped me make decisions. But I'm curious for you, when did you start, when were you able to start shifting and zooming out from. Being in the mess to looking at this as a story, a game, something

Steven: that's unfolding for me. Great question.

I can tell you this, I never was able to do that while I was in it. Yeah. It was only like years later thinking back on something. But I, do think it's, a guarantee. I would say that if we're pursuing any kind of creative calling, we are on a hero's journey. And it is, it does have meaning. I think in many ways the worst part of that, of the struggles of anybody and a creative calling is this feeling that it's meaningless, right?

That you are worthless, that you're just randomly bobbing from one wave top to another, but it's not true. Because if we hadn't received the call in the first place, think of the hero's journey, right? We wouldn't be trying to do it at all. And I'm, sure all of our listeners here are familiar with the Joseph Campbell's concept of the Hero's Journey.

And I wanna recommend a book, if you haven't read this book, it's, have you read, heard of a book called The Writer's Journey? Yeah. I, have it here. I'm blanking on the, guy who wrote it. But it's really a great one. But anyway, if we hadn't received the call, we wouldn't have moved from the ordinary world to the extraordinary world, and we wouldn't be in that, hero's journey of meeting allies and enemies and shape shifters and, eventually coming to confront the villain, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So maybe it does give meaning to that, to be in it. I'm actually doing a, a. A little video series on Instagram now. That I call a passage through the wilderness, which is really what government cheese is. That memoir is it's really about it. The book ends as with my first success.

So it's all about the years when there's no success. And I think those wilderness pastor, a lot of people, I'm sure they're listening now, are in the wilderness one way or another. And I can guarantee you there is meaning and you are on a

hero's journey, and it is a journey home. And it, and if you can just hang in there, you will get back to Ithaca, just like adieu did.

Parul: It is a journey home. I love that.

Matt: Yeah. I think a lot of people needed to hear that. Steve, thank you. So the concept of resistance with a capital R, we've touched on that. That's from the war of art. And you continue to talk about it in your other work. Is there anything that you think people get wrong about resistance or don't understand?

Maybe it just hasn't sunk in for them what it actually is, but is there anything you think people misunderstand about the resistance?

Steven: It, but Okay, I'll try that cuz I haven't really talked to people about it. But if there's anything I, would say that people underestimate the diabolical pill, nature of resistance that they think, oh, that's just a little bit of self-sabotage.

I'll just blow past it. And, but it's a constant. Extremely intelligent, always adaptive, witty, clever force that is relentless. And for me, like 50 years into my writing career, it's just as powerful today as it ever was for me. And even worse because it gets more nuanced in terms of seductive reasoning to throw me off the track.

So I, really say if you're in the creative arts or any kind of entrepreneurial venture, and you're not top of mind, aware of your own self-sabotage, so the to the point that you're absolutely, it's the first thing you think about in the morning in terms of combating it, slaying the dragon every morning.

You're in a vulnerable position. Cause this is an enemy that aims to kill and it has a lot of, it has left a lot of casualties by the side of the road who didn't take it seriously enough.

Parul: One thing that I love about the way you talk about resistance is how critics and criticisms are just an extension of resistance, and often they're echoing what's in our mind.

Yeah. So for me that was a very, that was a personal something that personally resonated with me. Cause I think many of us fear the outside critics, but the minute you frame it as resistance, it's just another dragon display.

Steven: It's true. The, danger, like Hemingway said, I know we all know these things.

He said if you believe the critics, when they tell you're good, then you have to believe 'em when they tell you're bad. So in other words, don't believe 'em at all. Don't read anything at all. But what's really harmful about. Negative feedback that you get from anybody is not, that feedback is right, cuz I think usually it isn't, most people who are criticizing things are criticizing out of envy or out of an in a, they don't know what they're talking about.

They're idiots, but what's the danger, as you just said, Paul, is that voice reinforces the voice we've already got in our head that says, you're a loser. You're no good. You can't do this, is a bad idea, et cetera, et cetera. So we have to treat those voices if we can. It's not easy, it's not easy for anyway.

It's certainly not easy for me to dismiss it, just like we dismiss any other form of resistance when we hear that voice in our head.

Matt: One of the things that really landed for me on resistance was you saying the greater the resistance, the more important this thing is to our souls evolution. And I think I paraphrased that.

No, that's absolutely true. Can you speak a little to that? Because when we're staring at decades of rejection, when we're in the shit, it's hard to look at it that way. Can you explain that

Steven: a little bit? I just think it's a law, just like Newton's Law of Physics that or law of motion or whatever the hell it is, that the, great, the more important a project is to the evolution of our soul, the more resistance we will feel toward it.

So if we're trying to decide between pro at the start, between project A and project B, we can ask ourselves, which 1:00 AM I most afraid of? And that's the one that we should do. And the way I visualize this is, if you think about a, tree in the middle of a sunny meadow. The tree is the dream.

The three tree is the project that we're, we want to do immediately. That, at, that, when that tree appears, a shadow is gonna appear, right? The tree produces a shadow. The shadow is resistance and just, and the shadow is equal and opposite to the tree, equal and opposite to the dream. So the bigger the shadow, the bigger the dream.

So if you're feeling massive resistance, then that's a good sign because it tells you that, you've tapped into some project that's really, important to you. Anytime I see some writer, any artist that says oh, I love my new project. I'm so excited, it's gonna be so good. And, I'm writing it so well, I think this is an idiot.

The, proper. Answer is, I'm freaked out. I have no idea if this is any good. I must be a complete jerk to try to tackle this. It's way beyond me, but I'm gonna do it. That's what you should be saying. Again, following the law of resistance, the more important the project is, the more resistance we will feel.

I love

Parul: what you said about the bigger the shadow, the bigger the dream. It's a good reminder. I would love to talk a little bit about a theme that comes up in government cheese, and that's pain. And I think it's possibly mentioned the war of art as well. It's this idea of how you write from. You can write through pain, write about pain, and you say, how do we endure pain?

How do we transcend it? We turn it into art. And I suppose I have a question around when is the right time to actually write about pain? What if we're in the middle of it or too close?

Steven: That's a great, that's a great question. I, at least in my experience, while you're in the middle of it, you can't do it.

What you're really trying to do is to get to this maybe a wrong phrase, to get to a professional remove from zoom back out just enough to be able to see yourself from the ceiling looking down at yourself. At least for me, when I've been in that pain and tried to write about it, I can't do it.

I, can write it, but what I write is no good. It's too close to it. It's like a journal, that's what a lot of my bad early writings were like. They were like the journal of somebody in therapy, and if you were to show it to somebody, their reaction would be, they'd be embarrassed.

They'd be embarrassed for You They'd say, oh, you're poor bastard. Good luck. Yeah. So it, it seems at least for me to transcend it, you do need to get some distance from it. The broken heart's gotta heal a little bit. I think it's a great tip.

Matt: Thanks for sharing, Steve.

Yeah it's good. This is it's interesting because we interview writers of all sorts and, this is a theme. I don't know if Tim Grahl but he Oh yeah, I do. Yeah. Yeah. He, put it right from the scar, not from the wound, and he probably borrowed it from someone. So it seems like there's

Steven: some Oh, I like that.

I think that's really good. Hey, God bless him. That's a good one. Yeah

Matt: So there's a, couple other titles of books that we'd like to introduce in addition to the War of Art, but you have these catchphrases that just reading the title, you're like, you get it. So one of them's and earmuffs, there's, there will be some swearing cuz Steve, you like to put swear words in, in, lots of your books.

One of them's do the work. Another one is Put your ass where your heart wants to be. But the one I want to ask about is nobody wants to read your shit. These are hard pills to swallow. Love that time. And you say in that book, sometimes young writers aqui acquire the idea from their years in school that the world is waiting to read what they've written in the real world.

No one is waiting to read what you've written. Some, tough talk. Why is this important to realize as writers? Ah,

Steven: that's a good, that's a great question, man. I think it's where this became really clear to me was when I worked in advertising and I'll bet there are plenty of people listening who have worked in advertising or try to write copy is You, realize from instant one.

When you're writing an ad or doing a TV commercial, then nobody wants to hear it. If they've got a remote, they're gonna click right through it. If they're, it's a magazine ad, they're gonna turn the page, they hate it. I don't want to hear an ad for preparation h or for anything else. And you also realize if you're living in New York and you're doing a one act play, that's gonna be off Broadway.

You can't even get your mother to come to see it. It's pe It's not that people are, mean or anything, but they're busy so, the bottom line if you are a writer or any kind of artist, is you gotta make that thing, that project, that book That's so good, so compelling, so funny, so unique that people would be crazy not to come and, look at it, but it's, always just it's really important to understand the concept of resistance that you're gonna sabotage yourself. The other thing that's really important to know as a writer is that nobody wants to read your shit. You gotta make 'em you, as you're sitting down, as you're writing any paragraph, and I'm sure we all do this, we you have to be thinking in your head, how is the reader gonna read this?

Is this interesting? Is this sentence interesting? Is the next sentence interesting? Is this chapter, will this chapter pull somebody through? Cuz remember, people are busy. They got so many other distractions and things to do. So it and it's just

a way of cracking the whip over yourself and just saying, this better be really, good what I'm doing before I put it out there,

Matt: man, it's a great reminder.

It's a great practice in empathy too. Yes. Because sometimes we forget to put the reader hat on when we write because we need to get it out, but actually we need to put that head on and practice that empathy.

Steven: Exactly. And like even if if we were opening a restaurant, And we're hoping people are gonna come in off the street and eat our food.

We gotta when we sample our own food, we have to keep asking 'em, is this good? Is this really good? Is this really, good? And is, our as we go through a meal from appetizer to entree and so on and so forth, are they going in a proper order that's gonna the palette is gonna move from one to the other and et cetera.

Empathy, just like you said. Yeah. Which

Matt: is a good transition, I think, into some of your fiction work. Yes. Which you practice this wonderfully,

Parul: I was gonna say, empathy for the readers is definitely evident in your historical fiction. It's interesting to go through your work and see how you're drawn to wars and drawn to talking about battles.

You make moments in history so interesting because of your empathy for the readers. And what I found really curious was how you. The story within your stories are always about overcoming adversity battles of the, there's some smaller army the smaller force against the larger enemy.

And I'm just curious about your interest in, war battles, how you, and why you have been drawn to these very specific battles. So for example, the Li Lionsgate is about the six day war in Israel in 1967. We've got Tides war, which is the Peloponnesian War. I'm just curious about Yeah. How are you choosing the battles and how are you deciding on the characters to

Steven: focus on?

I, certainly see life as a battle. It's the, war of art is the internal battle against our own s self-sabotage, the fight that we fight inside our heads. But I think life is a

battle in, the outer world too. In a way, When I write about warfare or something it's a metaphor for what's for the inner war.

But to take it another step beyond this, Powell, it's like I'm a, I'm definitely a believer in the muse. I believe that our ideas come to us from a place that we, that transcends reason. We don't really know. And a lot of times, almost all the time, I'll say, I get seized with an idea, and it's a complete surprise to me.

It's not like I sit down rationally and think what subject should I work on next? In fact, every time I've tried to do that, I, it's been a disaster. But rather I feel a calling or I'm seized by an idea and I'll and, I'm compelled to do it and for whatever reason, Like my books gates of Fire and Tides of War.

The first two books after the first one were warfare in the Ancient World. And it, when I thought of it, I thought, why me? Why I don't know anything about that. But once I got into it, which was not too hard, I thought, wow, this is really fascinating. So it's a mystery. I really can't answer that, the why I'm doing that in any sort of rational way.

It's just the muse knows what she's doing, even if we don't.

Parul: I like the surrender that you talk about. That's what I've been thinking a lot about surrender in reading your books because you talk about some, essentially letting them, letting the creativity flow through you.

Matt: I'm, curious how, when you hear the call from the Muse with these ideas how, does it actually show up?

Is it literally a voice in your head? Are you noticing things in the world? And you're connecting the dots. How, does the, muse speak to you to say, okay,

Steven: is what's nice in different ways? To me one way that it comes is either I'll have an idea or somebody will suggest something to me and I'll immediately reject it.

A friend once said to me you should write a book about Alexander the Great. And I go, oh, that's the dumbest idea I've, ever heard and what'll happen is it'll percolate for, and a month later I'll, it'll, the idea will pop back into my head and say maybe I should think about that a little bit.

And then I'll reject it again. And then a month after that, I'll maybe I'll say, let me just write a fi, put a file, start a file if I were gonna do this, what would I do?

What, how would I do it? And I'll write something maybe for a couple of hours, and then I'll, forget that too.

I'll walk away and just forget it. And then three months later I'll, find it again. I'll go, wow, that's a good idea. And then it'll grab me. Now, another thing I'm, maybe I'm getting into too much detail on this or blathering on, but No, please book that I wrote that was about Alexander the Great, the way that happened was two sentences came into my head and I knew they were the first two sentences of a book, but I had no idea.

And the two sentences were, I have always been a soldier. I have known no other life. And I thought, ah that's a great start to a book. But I said to myself, who's saying it? Who is this person? Is it a contemporary person? Is it, and it was like months before I after going back to it a few times, I said, oh, this is Alex's the end of the great and that this is gonna be his story.

So that's how that that, that, one came to me. It's all different

Matt: ways. I, love

Parul: hearing about how these ideas come to you. I'm curious, how faithful are you to an idea and a story once you start researching and writing it? Or are, do you find that you're attracted to lots of other ideas that come

Steven: into your, you mean like faithful to the historical reality of

Parul: it?

No, faithful to the story, meaning you don't put it down and start writing something else.

Steven: Ah, I'm I'm pretty faithful. I'm, definitely a believer in doing one thing at a time, although I have violated that a few times. But I think once I really live my life project to project like an actor or director in the movies or in on the stage, right?

So once I'm into something I'm, faithful to it. Because, and I really believe believing in the muse as I do, I feel like the goddess sort of gives you an assignment and you better stick with it. Or she's gonna be pissed off. She gave you this thing to do, you better do it.

Matt: You have years of listening, tuning into that frequency of the muse.

And I'm curious if anyone's listening, saying, I've never heard a whisper. I don't even know what she sounds like, how to pay attention. Do you have any ideas or advice on, how someone might start to listen? What that those early days of listening might look like?

Steven: I, really think ideas are coming to us constantly in the shower.

Usually in those moments you're driving, you're in the, on the subway or in the shower somewhere where your ego is disengaged or even when you're half asleep in a kind of a twilight state or something like that. But I think what ha what we do sometimes is we just dismiss those ideas. We don't take 'em seriously.

They come and go and probably all kinds of great ideas have gone in one ear and out the other. For a lot of us. I think a big part of the skill of being a an artist or a creative person is recognizing those ideas as they pass by. Roseanne Cash has this thing where she says A singer has to have a catcher's, MIT has to travel the catcher's MIT so that when the ball comes through, she can grab it and she says otherwise it'll wind up in Lucinda Williams' house.

So I, think we just have to be as aware as we possibly can be of, any, anything that's passing through, cuz the, it's from the cosmic radio station, that's one of my analogies. And, the radio station is always broadcasting and we just have to learn how to tune that dial just listen a little harder.

There's a, another book I know that I wanna recommend that I know you guys know, it's by Rick Rubin the, music producer, the Creative Act. And he talks about, his word for the muse is source with a capital S. And in his view, source is broadcasting constantly and to everybody, not only to artists or, but to everybody.

But it just, it passes over our heads a lot of time. And but he feels like we live in an ocean. Of great ideas coming, And the

Matt: artist is one that can listen and catch Yeah. Capture and run with those ideas. Yeah. Yeah. Really, I love that book. Yeah. Just finished it. Highly recommend.

Parul: Stephen, we'd love to talk about the foolscap method. It's something that I've heard in association with your name many times before. My understanding is that Norm Sta gave you advice on how to outline your book, and he said to

you, Steve, this is my impression of him, Steve, God made a single sheet of false cap to be exactly the right length, the whole, the outline of an entire novel.

And so I'm curious whether the foolscap is where you start, when you think about novels, whether it's fiction, nonfiction.

Steven: I do, although I will let me describe it a little bit. I actually have done an Instagram. Series of five minute short videos that anybody can find. That's, we'll make sure to share this.

The foolscap method and basically the concept is that on a single sheet of yellow foolscap, a legal pad from my friend Norm Stahl, who just passed away a few months ago great mentor to me and great friend. In fact, here he is, right here. I keep his picture from the sidewalk. Oh God bless him.

So he just said, God made a single sheet of yellow fools cap the exact right length to hold an outline of an entire novel. And so the, breakthrough of that, the concept of that, is that not to become so precious or over-prepared or over-researched that you write a Bible for every character and all that kind of thing.

He says just on one page you can get the whole idea. And I've evolved my own version of what it is, and I have 10 different points that I want to answer. But what it'll do, I think, is if you can get it all on one page, this is, it goes back to Seth Godin's, this might work, this might not work.

You can look at it and say I think this will work. If we say, okay, we have the idea for the movie Rocky. It's Rocky, he's in Philadelphia. He gets a chance to fight the champ. And the final scene is he does fight the champ. It's, and we look at him, we go this could be a pretty good movie.

So that's the full, that's the fullest gap method. The idea of getting it all down on, on one page as a way of evaluating something and also giving ourselves confidence that this could be a good idea. It works from page one to the end.

Parul: And we'll link to the videos and to your Instagram later on in the show notes.

I'm just curious if you can if you're able to talk us through some of the, I know you said there are 10 components to the falls cap for you, even just the top three questions that you are asking yourself.

Matt: Okay.

Steven: When you're looking at the first question and really this is in a way, this is what an editor, what a really good editor does.

So you're being your own editor. So the first question I always ask is, what's the genre? Is this a love story? Is this a western, is this a science fiction? Is it two genres combined? And I just want to identify that for sure. And the reason I want to identify that is genres have conventions, right?

If we are, if we're doing a love story, we have to have them meet cute. We have to have a rival, we have to have the lovers go apart before they come back together. So if I know the genre, I've already got a kind of a, at least a vague roadmap of what the story would be. That's that's number one. Number two for me is hero and villain.

Who's the hero? Who's the villain? If we're writing Moby Dick, ah, it's Captain Ahab and it's the white whale. And then there are other kind of rules of, oh, the third one that I always if we're gonna pick the most important is how does it end? What's the climax? And when we know the climax, we can work backwards from that to, so if you if, you can answer these, like I say, these 10 questions, you really get a sense of what the story's all about.

Just for a small example here, what we're talking about. Yeah. No I love, one of the principles of a story is, Hero and villain clash in the climax, right? If it's a western, it's a gunfight between if it's John Wick, we know he is gonna take on the villain. If it's Luke Skywalker, he's gonna be going after the death star in the final moment.

So if we know who hero and villain are, then we can grope towards the climax. How do they clash over what, where anyway that's a nutshell version of the Foolscap method. Yeah. I'm 16 on the other hand, Carol, I'll say this. Yeah. I have also started books with just wing it completely with no idea where I was going.

And that can work too sometimes. That's a, I sometimes will advise people to do that. Just start go follow your instincts and just keep going. And sometimes that'll work.

Parul: And for government cheese, I'm curious did you at all. Go back to or start with a fools cap when you were getting stuck or at the beginning when you were outlining?

Steven: I did. I definitely did. I said who's the hero, who's the villain? And, all of those things. But I also I couldn't quite really get it, so I just started and sometimes that helps too. If you're stuck and you can't really, you don't, you can't really answer all those questions.

Sometimes if you just plunge in after a month you go, oh, that's the answer to what this is. So I'm a believer in both ways of doing it. Oh, thinking it out, but also just trusting your instincts. Yeah.

Parul: That's really helpful cuz obviously we're in different stages or different mindsets depending on what we're working on in the time.

Yeah. The time of day we're

Matt: in. Yeah. Let's turn back to government cheese and keep going deeper into it. You've, infused your story in the War of Art and in other books, and you talked about why this and how this book came about. Diana encouraged you to write it and eventually you did.

And you also mentioned where you got stuck, the self-doubt. Were there any, was that the dark night of the Soul moment with this book, or were there any others as you were writing it? Was it who the Hell Cares, or was there any, anything else that came up for you?

Steven: No, that was pretty much the self-doubt, just all the way through.

There was no like, real moment when I was ready to give it up or anything like that, because Yeah. Like I say you guys, I'm, I know you're familiar with John Keats's concept of negative capability. Does that ring a bell? Remind us vaguely. This is really good. This is worth Googling. Okay. John Keets wrote a letter to his brother in 1804 or something like that, and he defined this quality that he thought an artist had to have.

And he said above all others, he thought Shakespeare had this. And he called it negative capability. And what he meant by that was that while we are in the midst of doubts and uncertainty to be able to keep plowing forward and not let those doubts overcome us. So to answer your question, Matt, like there wasn't any particular moment of the dark night of the soul.

It was a constant dark night of the soul where I just knew from experience, just keep going. And the analogy I sometimes use is like Columbus sailing to the

new world. Like he thought the world was round. But everybody else was telling him, it's not round, you're gonna sail off the end.

But somehow he had to find the courage to keep going and, do it day after day. And we do too as artists.

Matt: So you mentioned this was a book that you just started to plow in. What did day one look like for you? What was the first, those first few words that you wrote down, the stories that you told?

What, did Day one look like for this book?

Steven: Ah I'm not sure I even remember. I think I, I started there was like one particular really black moment in my life where I got fired from a job driving of delivery trucks because I stole a can of grapefruit juice. And so I thought, let me start there and I don't even know why. And then I had another thought to add a chapter before that, a chapter about the typewriter that I had. But I, can't quite remember Matt. I just plunged in. Yeah.

Matt: That's good. And I'm, curious because that we've heard, I don't know if this is advice necessarily you're giving but, sometimes we've heard people say, when you're not sure where to start, you start with that, moment that's on your heart, the heaviest thing, the thing that you just need to, work with.

Yeah. I, don't know if that would be advice to just start with.

Steven: I think that's sometimes that is pretty good advice. Yeah. Start at the, moment when you're getting your stomach pumped from an overdose of whatever that kind of thing. Carrie Fisher started post guards from the Edge with Yeah.

Matt: Wonder if we zoom out a little bit? What you, mentioned. Going through the wilderness and this book is about your wilderness period. What's your hope for the book, us as readers and writers writing this book? What's your hope for government

Steven: cheese? My selfish hope is that I will at least have gotten that if I die tomorrow, if I get hit by a bus tomorrow, that my family, the kid, little kids in my family can, read something and say, oh, this is what uncle Steve was.

This was his thing. That's my selfish kind of hope. But my own selfish hope is that like our audience right now that we're talking to, that anybody, somebody

that's out there and struggling and thinking my journey is meaningless. I'm going nowhere, that they could read this, book and be encouraged and say, it seemed meaningless to Steve too.

And it wasn't. So that, that would be my hope that this would provide some sustenance because I noticed I went on a couple of podcasts before I started this book and one was Rich Rolls podcast and the other was Tim Ferris's pod podcast. And they both were really curious about like the real life connective tissue moments.

Like, I think Rich said to me some, you mentioned I'm driving trucks, right? And he says, but you had an agent. He said, how did you have an agent when you never wrote anything? How did that happen? And I think I'm interested in other people's stories that way too. It's like, where were you living?

You were living there and you were, how did you make money? And how did you meet so-and-so and where did that idea come from? And a lot of times in, books that are written for artists or to encourage them, the writer leaves that out. And it's just principles of do this, do that, whatever. So I wanted to put those moments in just because they're so real.

Yeah.

Matt: It's, a beautiful book. We loved it. We can

Steven: highly recommend it. Can you guys, I'm gonna break in. I, there's somebody at the door that I, go for it. Is it ok? Yeah.

Matt: Yeah. Right back. This, is our favorite part about live interviews. Kids come in the room, cats knock things over. People come to the door.

We definitely

Parul: recommend government cheese. Yeah. What I love about it the, details. I've never spent so much time with the driver in the truck. Yeah. Racing across

Matt: America. So this might be a nice time in about 10 minutes or so we are going to go to audience questions. So if you do have a question for Steve something we haven't covered yet that's burning on your hearts and your minds, put it in the chat.

And in, in about 10 minutes or so, we will start to go to your questions. We've got a bunch. Where should we go next? What do you think? What do y'all think? I think we might do a little more on government cheese and then Yeah. And then we'll go into

Parul: the writing

Matt: practice. We have some and some, yeah. Yeah.

What are you curious about? How are you doing, Carl?

Parul: I'm good. I'm well. How are you

Matt: all doing? This is great. I'm just looking

Parul: to see who's in the chat. Yeah. This, how are you guys finding the interview?

Matt: Yeah, it's fun being together. Yeah, it's fun being with Steve. This is one of our Yeah. Highlights, def definite highlights of our year.

And I'm

Parul: curious if you're in the if Yeah. Fair in the room. Which book of Steve's have you read? Let us know which of those titles you've read. Be curious. Yeah.

Matt: This is good. I Do you remember the first one you read and when?

Parul: Probably the War

Matt: of Art. Yeah. I, read War of Art. Yeah. It was about 12 years ago.

Sorry about that,

Steven: Steve. You guys, that was the u p s guy. We had 80 signed copies of government cheese out in the garage individually addressed. He was coming to pick 'em up. All right.

Matt: Love it. And actually, yeah, we wanna talk about that because you put so much work into, essentially created a publishing company and you've printed

these, you're publishing them, you're sending 'em out, seemingly you're yourself you, and Diana.

It's really

Steven: Diana. Yeah. I'm, I've, I'm just a moocher

Parul: and this is this is SAR Sara Perilla

Steven: Media. Sas Perilla. Yeah. Do you know that Sas Perilla? It's a drink.

Matt: Sas Perilla. Sorry, I'm totally butchering. Like whoop beer,

Parul: SAS Perilla Media. And it's an, honor of your No I, don't, I'm afraid I don't know it.

It might be you. Ah, us

Steven: We learned some. Did you ever see the big, do you ever see The Big Lebowski, the movie, the Big Lebowski? Yes. Yeah. You remember there's a scene where Jeff Bridges is at the bowling alley and Sam Elliot as a cowboy kind of comes up and sits next to him and Sam Elliot orders a drink and he says to the bartender, can I have a SAS Perilla?

And the guy gives it to him, and it's from the old Western movies, the Cowboy would always order a SAS Perilla. And then he'd definitely does

Parul: the drink. Your dad had that he called sass,

Steven: right? Yeah, A glass

Matt: of sas. So can you tell us about this decision to, to run this, build this publishing company and print these yourself?

And it's beautiful. When these books arrived, just to explain to everyone, it's, I don't know if you're doing all of them like this, but at least the early ones that we got, Signed copy in a beautiful box. Signed box sealed. Beautiful bookmark. Yeah. So first well done. We, you wowed us.

Parul: Yeah. Probably one of the best de one of the best deliveries I've seen of actually,

Steven: ah, definitely.

That was all Diana's doing, designing it. But the way where this idea came from, it came from our friend Jack Carr, the thriller writer that does the James Re series, the terminal list. Yes. And we saw a few years ago he did this, it's a v i p pack. He, not as a marketing device or anything, but he was just sending it to friends.

And so he sent out, this was his third book, I think, Savage son. And he sent out a, beautiful little box with A few little premiums in it, a coaster, a little utility knife, a signed copy of the book. And, when you open it up you go, wow, this is great. So we just thought, let's do this too.

It. And just to surprise people, it's also following Seth God's advice to underpromise and overdeliver. And cuz we, cuz this was signed copies, so people had to pay extra. It was like 40 bucks to get a signed copy and we wanted people when they got it to think, oh, this is really cool.

So it was all Diana's doing. She's the brains behind all of this.

Parul: So I have a question around your decision to, to work on in, to work within your own indie press. So before this you also had black Irish press as well. Yes. And on one of your blog posts there, I saw someone ask about your decision to publish, I think it was Gates of Fire with a larger publisher, and you made a comment to say sometimes a larger publisher is just better for distribution.

So some books, I think you're saying, are suitable for larger pub publishing houses and some books are suitable for indie publishing. Is that your philosophy on

Steven: I, believe that I'm, I may be wrong, but certainly I feel like for me, my, my fiction, my historical fiction a book like Gates of Fire or Tides of War or any of those I think are better coming out from a mainstream big Five publisher, I'm not sure why, because publishers don't really do very much these days.

They really throw it back to you, the individual writer they're asking you how many followers do you have and what social media are you gonna do, and that kind of stuff. But still I, think it sometimes those books need more. Credibility. Whereas for me, my other books about writing, like the War of Art and all of, there is a following for them already.

And and also this is interesting. I really can't find a publisher for those people don't wanna bring 'em out, believe it or not, believe it or not. So, it's, it makes more sense to publish it independently. Yeah. And

Parul: presumably it's like you say, if you have an audience, it's, it makes more sense for you to Yeah.

Matt: Yeah. And we've heard that you, mentioned on other podcasts that this is it's, been a lot of work

Steven: this book. Yeah. Unfortunately, Diana does most of the work, but yeah it is a lot of work. A lot of work. Yeah. I don't know if I would,

Matt: recommend it. That's what I was gonna ask is, do you think you might, you would do this again or is this kind of the, the.

best thing you'll never do again, kind of thing.

Steven: I,

would do it again, and I intend to do it again. We intend to do it again. Mainly because most of the work is front loaded. We've already done it. We're we've set up an account with Amazon we know the various people that we're in business with to help us do eBooks or help us do audiobooks, that kind of thing.

It's, but at the front loaded part of the work, it is really hard and we've needed a lot of help.

Matt: Oh, we

Steven: recommend that we're again, yeah. The big thing is how do you get the word out you it's, one thing to release a new book or a new album or whatever, but how do you, get the word that's the problem?

And I have not figured that out. Yeah.

Matt: You might not have figured it out, but you might. I'm curious if you have clues on what's, what has worked what, are some of the things that have shifted? You've been on some massive podcast Rich Roll and Tim Ferris and Joe Rogan. Have you noticed those shift books or is it your own fans on your mailing list?

Do you have a, hunch what's working? It's

Steven: only a hunch cuz it's not if you go on Joe Rogan that you can now track sales or anything like that. But I certainly think that those kind of big podcasts, they really help, they really do move the needle. And certainly Instagram and having as many followers as you can.

I also have a, blog that I do once a week, like Seth Goat and he does it every day. There are a lot of people who every day that certainly helps. But I haven't found any magic bullet. It's just a lot of a lot of work and I don't know. You hope something catches fire.

Matt: It's, almost reassuring knowing that you don't know because a lot of people feel like they're missing out or it's some magic answer. There's missing, they're missing something. Yeah. Don't think

Steven: there is.

Matt: They dunno. Yeah. That's reassuring.

Steven: Thank you. Do you know, here's a, do you know who Joanna Penn is?

Yes. Yes. A creative pen in Yeah. She's in England, right? And she does a really interesting, I follow her and I've been on her and she's an indie writer and she will interview other indie writers about how they do it. And there's a lot of interesting stuff. There's the, her last book she did about, it was called Pilgrimage.

It was about a, three pilgrimages that she took and she put that out via Kickstarter. Yes. Which I thought whoever thought of that, so I actually ordered a, book and it would cost like 89 bucks or something like that. But and then there are other, people that she interviews that like they're writers of let's say science fiction, fantasy world a planet or the war of planets or whatever it is, and they create certain characters that have a following and then they will bring in other writers.

Like one guy was talking about, he brought in 10 other writers to keep writing that universe. And that's not for me, but Right. It goes to show you and the guy was also doing NFTs the whatever crypto, I don't even know what it is. But there's, so there are a lot of people are exploring all kinds of ways of getting their stuff out there,

Parul: I think.

Yeah, we are definitely very curious about that kind of bleeding edge of publishing and where it might go.

Matt: Yeah, it's fascinating. People are trying all sorts of things. Joanna Penn is a great person to follow. We'll make sure to share a link to her work as well. Yeah. So we've got maybe a few more minutes, maybe one or two from us and then we're gonna go to the audience.

So if you do have a question, now's the time to put it into the chat. All right. Where should we go? I,

Parul: gosh, it's really hard to choose a question. Maybe we'll go to the title. I know Tim Ferris asked you, this is what Tim Ferris asked you about the title, but I think it's really important cuz it links into the end of your book as well where you talk about.

This idea of being a writer and, the notion of government cheese, which is a British person. I'd never heard of that concept. Government cheese. I wonder if you can tell us about the title.

Steven: In the days before food stamps or voucher programs, and I think it still goes on today, a way of helping poor people who couldn't put food on the table was that the government would, take surplus food, and that was what government cheese is and would give it away.

Dried beans, powdered milk canned peaches, cheese, that kind of thing. And one of the jobs I had was driving trucks and delivering surplus food to poor communities in the American South. And I always felt, or I, as I thought about it, they, it was one of my favorite things to do. Partly because I thought this is really doing somebody some good.

It's putting food on people's table, pe keeping people alive. But I felt that it was also a metaphor for writing for the writer's life. As writers, we are delivering a load, right? We drive in and we del we back the truck in, we open the doors and there's this load, and we hope that people will like it, but we didn't make the load.

We're just driving it there, and so I feel there's a certain anonymity in a good way to being a writer. I know everybody wants their name out there, but really these books are coming from someplace else. We are just the driver. And when

you delivered the surplus food, I would, it would always be to churches and you would pull into a, lot early in the morning, a parking lot.

A car park, as they say in the uk, and you would just park the truck and they would the the minister would usually ask you just to step aside don't have any, you don't have anything to do with it. Leave it to us, we'll offload it. And that's how I feel about writing that.

You, you deliver the load and you step aside.

Parul: I,

feel the sense of freedom when you talk about it that way. I, and I think just reflecting on what you've what you, we've been talking about today, what you've said, how if we listen hard enough as artists, we can hear what the muse is offering us and deliver it.

We're, just, it just flows through us. There's a freedom in it. Cause I, in our community we, listen to the writers in, the moments of self-doubt, of over worrying, over-identifying with their work. So it's been really helpful. Your, memoir is wonderful. It's a wonderful insight into the writer's life.

Steven: Thank you. Thanks for talking about it. So if

Matt: anyone and, you talk about the muse and, delivering the truck, if someone's having a hard time getting it, believing that they need to believe in something greater than themselves, that this isn't just about me. Yeah. Any, words to help convince them?

I guess

Steven: I, think we've all had those moments when we, write a few pages on Tuesday and we look at 'em again on Thursday and we go, wow, this is really good. And in fact you, look at it and you say, this doesn't even seem like it came from me. This is like not my voice, or how did I know how to do that?

And when that happens, I think you have to believe in something. You have to say, where did this come from? It's coming from somewhere. And certainly Songwriters talk about this all the time, right? They're driving down the highway and a song comes to me like, screech the side of the road and dictate it into their phone as fast as they can.

So I, think we just, when that happens for us, we just have to really believe in it. And, hang on to that self-belief. Nobody teaches you that. And it's really hard, particularly if we grew up in a family or in circumstances where we weren't believed in it's that's a great thing to have if you can, get it self-belief, even if you're not believing in yourself, believing in your work believing that whatever's coming through is of value.

Cuz it is, it's a

Matt: great,

reminder, Steve. Maybe final question from us, then we'll go to the audience. So one of the things we'd like to talk about here is our, mountaintop. The things that we're aiming at the mountaintop and the distance that we're climbing, what is that for you right

Steven: now? Like I say, I'm a believer in the muse.

I'm a servant of the muse. And I look at the writer's life as like a practice, like a yoga practice or a practice in martial arts. And really all I want to do is keep going and just do the, next, whatever the next one is. And then, so there really is no mountaintop for me. I'm, just trying to keep, going and keep as long as the goddess has given me ideas I want to keep doing them and be worthy of them.

So far they haven't run out knock wood.

Matt: That's beautiful. Steve we're so grateful for everything that you give us, give writers. Turning your insights out for us to learn and to feel less alone in our journey, especially what you've been doing with videos lately. We've noticed it.

The Instagram, the YouTube, seems like you're really giving back a lot. And I think on behalf of all of us writers, thank you for, sharing this with us today, but also your

Steven: wider career. And thank you for, having me and for, like I said before, before we came on the air. Thanks for reading my stuff. Thoughtfully and having such deep and interesting questions.

Matt: We're fans. This has been such a fun time for us. We're not done yet. So we have some people in the room who have been listening. And if you would like to turn your camera on we've got 20 minutes and we've got some questions

that have flown in. So if you like to share your face and Steve can see the, wonderful writers all over the world who have been listening to us, watching us lapping up every word of wisdom.

Steve, here they are. Here they are. So how this will work, if you ask the question in the chat we will give you a chance to ask it. We'll see how many we can get through. If your camera's on and you ask the question, we may pass the mic to you to ask it. If your camera's off and you ask the question, we'll probably ask it on your behalf.

All right. Where shall we start, Carl? All

Parul: right. We might start with, let's see grace, your camera's off, so I might ask it on your behalf. Grace asks, what do you think about writing the compassion, understanding in peace?

Steven: I'm not sure I know what that question means.

Parul: Grace, if you have any clarification yeah, grace, if you have any clarification, do put it in the chat.

Otherwise, we have a question from Jody. Just gonna see if Jody's camera is on. Is on. If you'd like to ask it, Jody. I, oh, it's so cool to see you two together, and thank you so much for being here.

Steven: Steven it's, such an honor.

Parul: So you, were talking about how you feel like war

Steven: that life is war or war, right?

And,

Parul: so as, a person who's prone to depression, I'm curious if you have that philosophy, does that sometimes get you down? And if so, how do you handle those feelings? I know that's not really a writer's question, but it does

Steven: Pertain No, it doesn't get me down at all.

I, do think that that is the nature of life. Like I live out in the country. Me too. We can watch hawks circling overhead and or all the other wildlife around here.

Coyotes and stuff. And it's nature you gotta make a kill every day to feed the little babies. And I sometimes wonder, why did God design it like that?

It seems like a pretty dark way of living, right? You have to kill something else and eat it. How horrible is that? But the, that does seem to be the nature of, life. So, no, it doesn't get me down. I, wish we just had a solar panel on our head and we didn't have to live that way but, life is a war.

I think it's a battle. I think we

Parul: can may I be so presumptuous as to Try to ask Grace's question for her, because I think I know what she was getting at. Cuz it's where I'm coming from too. Uhhuh. And it relates to this

Steven: like when I write, I'm trying to

Parul: bring you,

Steven: were talking earlier about empathy to your reader, but I'm wondering,

Parul: my whole goal is to spread empathy towards

Steven: people in

Matt: general.

I mean through my Oh, I see what you mean. Ok. I get it. And

Steven: I think that might be what Grace was asking, and correct me if I'm

Matt: wrong, grace, but

Steven: Yeah, thanks for, and I'm trying to do that too one of my mantras that I use for when I look at the course of a book is get to, I Love You that a book should, or a movie should always end with one character.

Not necessarily literally saying that to another, but expressing it one way or another. And usually those characters should start as far apart as possible and, come together. And so maybe that's what Grace meant by yeah, definitely. Because I think if life is a battle, the greatest moment is when you can make

peace with, your enemy so, the two things are two sides of the same coin. Yeah. I love that. Thank you. That was great. Okay.

Matt: Thanks Jody. Melissa has a question, Melissa, if you'd like to ask it about routines and structures and the news.

Parul: Hi, Steven.

Steven: Can you hear me? Yeah, I can hear you. I can see you, Melissa. Oh, great.

Thank you. This has been amazing. If I may say you look wonderful and very healthy. You clearly, so do you, but you spend so much time writing. How do you take care of yourself? What are the rituals and practices you do for self-care and for inviting in the muse, for creating the conditions that make it more possible that she wants to join you?

I I'm like everybody, I go to the gym first thing in the morning. I definitely exercise. I try to eat well at all of those things. But, one thing I will say, and maybe this will be helpful to people, is even though I'm a professional writer and I don't have any other work that I do, I'm still lucky to get two hours a day to work.

It's like right now, although I'm doing this program, I'm not writing and, I'm thinking when I finish I'm gonna have to get it together and see if I can get a couple hours in. So, it's not like I have endless time, even though I'm a pure professional. So I think a lot of people think, oh gee, I've, I can only get two hours.

That's really nothing. But here I am to tell you. That's all I get too. So be of good cheer. Go for it. Even if you can only get one or two hours. Thank you. Thank you

Matt: Steve. Yeah. Makes us even more grateful. You've chosen to spend this time with us, Steve. So not lost on us. I'm

video1430611698: gonna

Parul: ask Erica's question on your behalf Erica, if that's okay.

Erica asks, what do you do when new ideas come in order to remain faithful to your ongoing project?

Steven: I, will make note of them. I'll open a new file, I'll open a new folder and it's if we have a garden and we're harvesting one part of the garden, we're gonna plant another and we can take a little time in the day to, in fact, I'm really a believer that there should never be a dead spot between books.

There should never be a gap between books. So that, like that new idea, I'll open a file, I'll open a folder, and I'll work on it in side times. And if I can get it right when I finish the project I'm doing now, I'll already have six or seven chapters, part of a foolscap. I'll already have that for the new project and, be able to plunge right into it right away.

So I definitely respect a new idea that comes in like a, seedling. And make sure that it's, in a, safe box and the skunks can't eat it at night. Great.

Matt: Thank you for the question, Erica. Thanks Erica. Maria wants to know, do you feel like you've made it as a writer inside?

And

Steven: so I have in the sense, that I, don't have to do anything else. Yeah. But again, it's a practice for me, a lifelong practice, and I'm, just trying to, follow my gift wherever, it goes. And it's always a surprise and I'm just trying to keep, faith with that. Thank you.

Thanks

Matt: Maria.

Parul: Let's see, grace. No Sanne asks, I'm gonna ask on your behalf, Sanne. Oh, Sanne asks, when writing about the deep past, how do you balance giving us the information we need to know without interrupting the narrative flow, which you do brilliantly. Of course. She says,

Steven: ah, that's, it's a challenge in historical fiction.

Definitely. I guess it's the story comes first and the information, I guess is, I guess it's just a judgment call. Putting enough in there that the reader feels like I'm really been transported to this other time, and I get it. This is how a sword worked or whatever but.

But making sure that the story keep, it's a balance thing. Making sure that the story keeps going. You don't wanna be too thin. I'm actually working on one of

those right now, and I don't wanna be too thin on the historical stuff. What did people eat? What did they wear? What did it look like?

What were the beliefs of the time? But I also don't wanna be too heavy on that and forget the momentum of, the story.

Parul: Great. Thank you for the question, Sianne. Thank you Steven.

Matt: A m c has a question about what you actually write on with the, full scap. Are you actually writing on a full scap, or do

Steven: I actually do, but also I will have, if I have 10 points on the full Scap page, I'll open 10 files in, the compu, in the computer.

And like hero and villain we were talking about. That's one of the notes on the foolscap. I would just write captain Ahab and Moby Dick. But in that file I would really get into it in more, a lot more detail and ask, myself more, about each one of those things. One of the other points on a foolscap is act one, act two, act three.

And I will, I'll really abbreviate it in one line on the yellow foolscap, but I'll get into great detail on the in, the file that I'm working on. Great.

Matt: Is there any place for pen and paper in your world right now?

Steven: Do you have a right? Not in my world, but I certainly think it's great for anybody that feels comfortable doing it.

Yeah. Great. Thank you.

Parul: GEK has a question. Keith asks, I'd love to know how you came across the bug with Gita. And how the idea for Bagga Advances was

Steven: born? Ah, great question. I'm not even sure. I just I've always been a kind of, I loved Eastern Religions and I've always read anything I could find on that.

And I, can't remember a time when I wasn't reading a Bagga Ida. Somebody must have given it to me, or I, guess I, I can't even remember. But at one point I thought, I'm a big believer in stealing ideas from other places, and I thought the

structure of the Ba Gita, which is a mentor protege story, is a great structure for a book.

So I thought let me just steal that and instead of it being about war, I'll make it about a golf match, a fictional golf match. But stealing is a big thing. I love that. Brilliant.

Parul: Okay, thank you for the question, Keith.

Matt: Melissa has another question. What are your daily rituals that help you invite the muse in?

We read that you have or had read a Prayer to the Muse, that's something you had done in the past. Do you have any other rituals? Do you keep with that one or any

Steven: others? That I've, I definitely do every day. I've already done it today. In fact, hang on a sec. I'm gonna get up and I'll come please right back.

Matt: We'd love that. This is special. I don't think we'll get Steve to sing like Julia Cameron did, but

Steven: maybe

Oh

Matt: yeah. Okay. And then we'll go with Anne's question next I

Steven: can't find. What I was gonna get up for is My prayer to the muse was given to me, as in the, in government cheese. I write about this by a mentor of mine, like probably 40 years ago, and he typed it out on his typewriter and gave me it when it was fresh and new and I can't find it right now.

It's so old. It's falling completely. Falling apart. You can't read a word, but I definitely say a prayer. This is it's the invocation of the muse from the Odyssey that I read out loud and say as a prayer the Te Lawrence translation. And that's, a big thing for me. I feel like the office is a sacred space and when I enter it I try to enter it with respect and, so I do say a prayer to get myself going.

Love it.

Matt: We'll make sure to share a link to the prayer as well. Really cool. So Anne,

Steven: actually it's in the War of Art. I don't know exactly what page, but the, yeah, the text of it is in there. Great.

Matt: We'll find it.

Parul: Anne has a question. Anne asks, who reads your first draft?

Steven: It used to be my dear friend and editor, Sean Coin that I was partners with in black Irish books.

And he's a great editor and was just always a plus. As far as helping me to, right now, I really don't have anybody to read. I have to just read it myself. Diana is my girlfriend Diana has reached it, but she's not really a professional editor there, really. So I'm just getting it from somebody that loves me.

Sometimes that's helpful. But it is great to have somebody that really knows what they're doing. A lot of times Sean would I'd, hand him like a, just a pile of pages. I didn't even know what it was. And he would explain to me what it was. He would tell me what the genre was and what the all of the things that are on the foolscap page and so that would really help.

And this is Sean

Parul: Coin. Who has the story. Good method and Yes,

Steven: exactly. Talk about Sean with convention. In fact that's his method that he's evolved over years and it's a great thing.

Matt: Great. Maybe, do you see any more, I think we've maybe gone through most of them. We're running short on time here.

Parul: Maybe just one more here. Yeah. Ahead. I see from Grace, who asks, how do you recommend balancing interweaving writing and research? And we get this in the community a lot, Stephen writers go down a, research rabbit hole. Ah, yes.

Steven: So true advice, tips. This is something I, say from time to time. A good friend of mine is Randy Wallace who wrote Braveheart.

Which you would Rick, and say, wow, that is really so historical, and I asked Randy, I said, how do you do research? And he said, I do as little as possible. And he said, the story is everything. He said, get the story first, like the, story of William Wallace, whatever he wanted it to be, and then do the research or do it as you go.

But it's definitely a rabbit hole. It's resistance. Research can be resistance. So much easier to read another book than to actually sit down and do it. And a lot of times I'll bend history I'll make it work the way I want it to work. It's there never was a things landing or the wall or the wildlings, but it works.

Parul: It seems to me when you've been talking about resistance, and we've had a number of questions from different angles around resistance, it seems like the answer is if and doubt it's probably resistance.

Steven: Yes, If you take nothing else away from this, the listeners, that's a good one to take.

Matt: Steve, this has been such a joy, so much fun just hanging out with you for the last hour and a half.

Thank you so much for your time, Steve. We,

Steven: really appreciate it. Thanks, Matt. Thanks peril. Thanks for having me. Thanks everybody that came in and if you wanna do this again sometime, we'll do it again

Matt: sometime. We would love to maybe the next book, which yeah, please. Let's stay in touch.

So we do, we wanna give some books away, Steve, we're not sure what the best way to do that is. Maybe we can work together offline on this. Okay. But I'm trying to think if you'd like a copy of Steve's book. Email us at hello london writer salon.com. We're not sure how many will be able to give out.

It's going to be a handful at least. But email us at hello london writer salon.com with your mailing address and we'll, you'll hear from us if you've won one. That's how we'll do this. And then Steve, we'll work offline to figure out Okay. It's a deal how we can get those to people. Yeah.

L

Parul: ws. Yeah. We love, we would love for all of us to unmute and give Steven a hand of applause. Please unmute yourself. Let's give him what we've got. Thank you. Thank you. So

Steven: thank you.

Parul: Thank you. Thank, this has been,

thank

Steven: we're

Matt: everyone again. Thank you. So you're,

There we go. Sorry, Steve. Thanks again everyone. Thank you for being here. Steve, any final asks other than buy the book, get the book, read the book?

Steven: No. That's about it but I just wanna say to you guys, thanks for putting together this London Writer's Salon. It's a great thing that you're doing and you're doing it so well.

And with such depth and such real belief and, passionate and everything. Thank you so much for everybody that you know, that you're helping, and thanks for having me on. Really appreciate it, and I, salute you. It's a great thing that you're doing. God bless you. Thank you, Steven. Such an, and keep up the writing, whatever you're writing on.

Parul: Yes. And I recommend everyone by the war of Art and government cheese as a starter. If you're trying to slay the dragons, both of those books will

Matt: help you. Yeah.

Steven: And I do have to say one thing if you want Come to my website, which is just my name. If you would like an auto, a signed copy in one of those v i p things, it's costs a little money if it's going to England cuz we're, in California.

But that's how to get a signed copy if you want it, just go to www steven pressfield.com. It's right there.

Matt: Thank you Steve. We'll share that as well. Oh, great. A quick

Steven: shout. Your dad is on here. Gary

Matt: is on. Yeah. Gary, I was gonna say this was made possible my, so if Carl knows Steve but my dad bought copies of government cheese and with that had a cheeky request to see if Steve would be interested in joining us here.

So I have to give a shout out to my dad. Yeah, it worked. Thank you. Thanks. Thanks dad for connecting

Parul: us. Gary, thanks my coffee. Really appreciate it.

Matt: Oh, this is fun, Steve. We're such big fans. We're rooting for you all the way and we'd love to do this again. Thank you. Likewise.

Steven: This is great. Thank you very much you guys.

Okay. Thank you so much. Lots of love, loved to everybody in the UK and around the world. Okay. All right. Thank you everyone for being here. Thanks, Matt. Thanks, Carol. Bye for now. Thank

Matt: you, Steve, and thank you everyone. We'll share the recording with you after this as soon as we processed it. Next writer's hour is in 30 minutes.

Yeah, so hope

Parul: to see you at our writers' hour. Otherwise, have a lovely, rest of your day. All right, we'll see you soon

Matt: friends. Bye. Do the work and we'll see you later. Cheers friends. Bye. Bye.