



Interview with Mark Gottlieb

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KENNEALLY: Success in one creative endeavor can often lead an author or musician to find further fortune in other media. Frank Sinatra and the Beatles famously jumped from vinyl to the silver screen, and in John Lennon's case, even to books.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. The web long ago emerged as a major launching platform for creative careers. Audiences today go online to enjoy music, art, performances, and storytelling of all kinds. Literary agents go there, too, in search of future bestselling titles. And not only the written word is source material. Literary agent Mark Gottlieb of Trident Media Group has struck literary gold in everything from tweets and GIFs to comics and podcasts. He joins me now from his Manhattan office. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Mark Gottlieb.

GOTTLIEB: Hi, Chris. Thank you so much for having me on the show.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you, because this is an interesting view into the world of trade book publishing, but also an interesting examination of the relationship of media in our digital age. This sort of global digital slush pile that is the web is your source of great content to turn into the books, but it's a result of the current bookselling landscape, as well.

GOTTLIEB: Right. The book publishing conditions of the marketplace right now are such that Barnes & Noble is not in the best condition it could be in. A lot of book sales are occurring on Amazon. So as a result, the retail landscape has put a lot of pressure back on book publishers to really look for one of two things – either that very, very hopeful debut, which might come with some feathers in their caps. A lot of publishers are overpaying for debuts, hoping something breaks out. And then in the opposite end of the extreme, that proven bestseller. If their last book was a bestseller, chances are the next book is going to be a bestseller. So it leaves very little room for any error in between. Sort of the midlist, what we called in publishing for a long time, has really kind of bottomed out. So new authors coming into book publishing really need to have something of what we in the industry would call a platform.



KENNEALLY: Indeed, this is true not only for the book business, but for many creative businesses. It's an interesting reversal of fortunes. Today, when it comes to music, for example, artists themselves are the launching pad for songs and not the other way around. So it seems that this is now becoming true for novelists and journalists and others, as well.

GOTTLIEB: That's right. Book publishers have put a lot of the, I would say, marketing and publicity pressure back onto authors in order to help get their book out there. Historically in the space of nonfiction it had been this way for a while, where publishers wanted to hear from authors who were really saying something from like a Broadway stage, not from a soapbox, but people who really had a very big audience, whether that be millions of social media followers or a huge visitor list on their website or subscription base, or maybe they do speaking engagements across the country to hundreds, if not thousands, of attendees, like someone who might give a TED Talk or something like that.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's an interesting world that you are exploring, and we can go through it sort of media to media – or medium to medium. Let's start with Twitter, which it's not surprising that that would be a place to look for authors who are about to break out. You have found that breakout author in James Breakwell.

GOTTLIEB: Yeah, he's an interesting case. I was reading an article on BuzzFeed about him and his family, because he's a stay-at-home dad with a few daughters, and he writes about those trials and tribulations on Twitter. BuzzFeed, they had called him the funniest dad on Twitter. So I thought I had to go and check it out and see just what it was about. He had built an organic following on Twitter, where at this point he has well over a million followers on Twitter and probably hundreds of thousands of followers on other social media platforms.

And the way in which that came about was interesting. Upon the release of the new Star Wars movie, *The Force Awakens*, a lot of people at the end of the movie were wondering what Luke Skywalker was doing alone on the mountaintop. So James had created a parody Twitter account called Very Lonely Luke, where he would compose "tweets" from Luke Skywalker on the mountaintop. Of course, as these things can sometimes fortuitously happen on the internet, Mark Hamill started following him and retweeting him to his followers, and overnight, James Breakwell built an organic following and then asked his followers to migrate over to his other Twitter account called Xploding Unicorn. From there, because he had a big base, a big built-in audience, I could go to publishers and say this is a guy



who you want to write a book, because he has that built-in audience. He can market his book directly to them.

KENNEALLY: Right. And family humor, as you say – he describes himself, James Breakwell does, as a professional comedy writer and amateur father. (laughter) A very experienced amateur father he is, with four girls under the age of nine. So certainly he’s experienced in certain things. That kind of family humor is something that has been popular for generations. But it’s just interesting today that rather than needing to have a television show or a Broadway show, it was the Twitter feed itself that was where he broke out.

GOTTLIEB: Exactly. The internet opened up that possibility to him. Otherwise, in approaching a publisher without that built-in platform, all you can really say to them is this is a great book. Please make an editorial evaluation. Whereas now, the publisher doesn’t just make an editorial evaluation. They can make a business evaluation. So I think it ends up being a win-win for publishers and authors.

KENNEALLY: What’s interesting about this, Mark, is that publishing is famously a business of the gut, but it sounds as if today, editors when they’re reviewing a submission you send along are looking at the data. They’re looking at the numbers. They check out how many followers, how many likes, how many downloads, all of that.

GOTTLIEB: That’s true. They’ll make an evaluation of a lot of authors. It’s begun to permeate the world of fiction as well. Whereas fiction was primarily driven by the quality of the writing and then, by extension, the author becoming a household name, now publishers are drilling down into even the social media numbers of a lot of authors, and they really tend to look for things like a high level of engagement – not just a lot of followers, but how many people are interacting and retweeting, as opposed to someone who might have inorganically paid for their social media following.

KENNEALLY: You have an example of that with Dante Fabiero, who has had, if I have the number right, 1.8 billion GIF views, and he has taken those views to the book world.

GOTTLIEB: That’s right. Dante had gone on to take a lot of one-panel comics, placed them online via a website called GIPHY, and he also put a lot of them on his Instagram account, and it began getting picked up by places like Bored Panda and other very popular blog sites. Once his comics had gone viral and I could show



book publishers – viral in a good way (laughter) – once I could show publishers that he had that built-in following, it was really easy to do a collection of his comics with them called *Slothilda: Living the Sloth Life*.

KENNEALLY: Mark, you've done that, too, with a couple of webcomic illustrators. Again, these are the kind of book ideas that in the past would have come in over that slush pile and would have meant, as you said earlier, for an editor to make a decision – do I want to do this book? Do I think it's going to do well? But I'm going to take a chance. In these cases, creators like James Chapman with his Soundimals series and even Bruce Worden, who has a collection of homophones, which are words that have the same pronunciation but different meanings – those books have already proven themselves so well online that for the publisher, it's an easy call.

GOTTLIEB: That's right. A lot of these creators now with the internet can use that as a springboard for their writing, for their art, in order to garner attention for themselves in the eyes of publishers. Bruce had created a popular blog, built a very big subscription and social media following, and was able to take this to a lot of similar sites, such as Bored Panda.

And in the case of James Chapman, he was interested in the funny ways in which language can play out the same way that Bruce was in using homophones. James wanted to use international onomatopoeias. So he was interested in how we might say a dog would bark in this language, but in Russian, they might say a dog goes guff, guff. Or in another such language, it would be another sound that we wouldn't really expect. So he put together these sort of fun illustrations for kids, which are terrific illustrations in and of themselves. But what really helped him with publishers was the fact that he, again, had built his platform out online and could show that he had a big following and had been picked up on other sites to become something of an internet sensation.

KENNEALLY: Now, Mark, the old-time image of a literary agent is somebody with a stack of manuscripts in envelopes that have come in through the mail and having to read those deep into the night. But it sounds to me like you could do your work looking at your phone.

GOTTLIEB: There's a whole mixture, I would say. There are still – like in the olden days, you might picture someone in a tweed blazer and the elbow patches, and, yeah, manuscripts coming in through the transom. We still get query letters through our website. People certainly know our agency and the work we do, and



we do a lot of work traditionally in reaching out to MFA programs and attending prestigious writers' conferences and workshops and things of that nature. But you're right that a good chunk of my time now is spent perusing online, looking for new talent in that way, because the internet has just opened up that world.

KENNEALLY: And certainly it's not just the internet, but the devices we carry. People become obsessed with some of these creators and can't wait for their next post on Instagram.

Another medium that has emerged because of the phone, of course, are podcasts. Many people may even be listening to us now on their phone as they're riding in to work on the subway or something like that. And you have found podcasters who have had the strength of creativity to jump from podcasting into books. Tell us about two examples. There's one here, Andrew Klavan, who began a very successful serial podcast that led to a fantasy novel.

GOTTLIEB: That's right. Andrew is a good example. He had began with the help of a professional actor who could provide voice acting in the podcast he created. He created a podcast called Another Kingdom, which was about sort of a screenplay writer in Hollywood who's down on his luck. He walks in through a backstage door one day. The door closes behind him, and suddenly he's in a medieval world. He doesn't know how he's gotten there. But he travels back and forth between that time and our time. It's something of a portal fantasy. And it works really well chapter to chapter, because every episode sort of ends on a cliffhanger to really carry the listenership through to the next episode.

So what Andrew was able to do was a couple of things. One is he's already a fairly well known writer in the world of fiction and had done a lot of screenplay work with Clint Eastwood. He's also a conservative pundit on The Daily Wire and has written for a bunch of publications. But what we were able to do with his podcast was because Drew had tens of millions of listeners and downloads of his podcast, and it had shown up in places like the iTunes top 10 for podcasts, I was able to go to book publishers and really insist that there's a built-in audience for this book.

That's a little bit more unusual, because it's something from the world of fiction. Normally, publishers aren't looking for those kinds of things in fiction, but the podcasting world and the stories told there have opened up a lot of possibilities like this one.



KENNEALLY: We've been talking about the kinds of books that are fun reads – fantasy novels and cartoon collections and so forth. But there is, finally, one particularly serious nonfiction writer who you have begun to work with. She is Fariha Róisín, who's an Australian-Canadian writer. Listeners may know her as the co-host of a podcast called *Two Brown Girls* that's centered on brown and black voices in film and TV. One of the issues that she's particularly an advocate for is representation of diversity in the media, and you found her a book deal, as well.

GOTTLIEB: Right. I had worked with Fariha previously, where I was able to find her online because she had been writing for places like *Vice News* and *Al Jazeera* and *Vogue* in addition to the podcasting she was doing. It was honestly a complete shot in the dark. I thought I would reach out to her and ask her, do you maybe have a book in you?

And what we were able to do was with Abrams Books, we sold them both an illustrated collection of poetry of hers, which I can tell you years before in book publishing, you couldn't even give poetry away for free to book publishers. I think that all really changed with this Instagram celebrity by the name of *Rupi Kaur*, who I'm sure a lot of people know, because her poems climbed onto the *New York Times* list at the number one spot. They've been huge, huge bestsellers for the publisher, *Andrews McMeel*. And at the same time, I'm sure every poet – or I should say every very serious poet or academic kind of poet is probably very angry at *Rupi*.

But the interesting thing about, I think, *Rupi Kaur's* poetry, and perhaps even *Fariha's* poetry, is that it's almost like a lifestyle poetry, right? People who come to those books, it's not necessarily because they read poems. It's more so that they want to own a piece of the lifestyle of the Instagram celebrity or Instagram influencer.

So, yeah, in the case of *Fariha*, we were able to additionally sell to that same publisher, *Abrams*, a lifestyle book about how women can look at their bodies in a positive light. And additionally, we sold a debut novel of *Fariha's* to a publisher by the name of *Unnamed Press* – all because *Fariha* had built a really strong online platform.

KENNEALLY: Well, what's interesting about all these examples, *Mark*, is that the online browser develops a relationship with these individuals, and that relationship they will follow – once you have a relationship with someone, you may follow



them from podcasting to the book world to film to whatever. That's what's important to you is the individual, the creator, not so much the work or the format.

GOTTLIEB: Yes. It really does come down to a sort of brand loyalty in each of these authors. For instance, in going back to James Breakwell, who writes a lot of these what I like to call anti-parenting books, with his Twitter following and his other online followings, he can easily go back to them every time a book is published and say, hey, buy my book. At this point, he's already on his third or fourth book. We've sold a bunch more books of his to other publishers. And for the publisher, it's like printing money any time he publishes a book, because you have that kind of direct-to-consumer type of marketplace when you've built up a following online.

KENNEALLY: Well, we have been chatting today with literary agent Mark Gottlieb of Trident Media Group and learning a bit about where he goes for the next bestseller. It's not to the mailbox, but to the podcast or to the website or to the Instagram post. Mark Gottlieb, thank you so much for joining me today on Beyond the Book.

GOTTLIEB: Thank you again, Chris. I appreciate you having me on the show.

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