



**Simple, with Tsh Oxenreider**

**Episode 223**

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## Segment One

Tsh: [00:04](#) This is simple. I'm Tsh Oxenreider.

Okay friends, every now and then I use this podcast as a chance to catch up with a writer friend of mine and that's the case in this episode. I'm talking with my friend Shawn Smucker who writes fiction and nonfiction for kids and adults and y'all, if you don't know him or his work yet, get ready because you should. He's one of my favorite modern writers both as a human and as a creator of good work. If you like this podcast you will like Shawn's books, and like we do here on the show every now and then Shawn is sharing with us his good list, a thing, a habit, a work of art, and a philosophy that's making his life just a bit better.

If you like these sorts of episodes and I think you do because the good list episodes are the highest downloaded episodes here on Simple, then you're going to want to make sure you caught the latest episode from last week, the bonus announcement episode where I shared with you that this show, Simple is ending in just a few weeks but a new show is beginning and I think you're going to love it. It's called The Good List. In each episode, I'll share with you one idea, habit, work of art, or thing that makes life better. Episodes will be short and sweet and I just really think you're going to love it. Check out the show notes and this episode number 223 to find the link to last week's episode and to sign up for the email list to know when the first episode of The Good List drops in early 2020. Okay, so with all this in mind, let's get right to it. Here is Shawn sharing with us his good list.

[01:41](#) Okay, Shawn, I'm really, really, really excited to talk to you because I think that the listeners of this podcast would really like your books. It's really good to get you in front of them. We're going to talk about your good list, which I love doing with authors. And as listeners know, we always start with a thing which is anything big or small, that's just making your life a little bit better right now. So what is the thing in your life, Shawn?

Shawn: [02:07](#) Yeah. Thanks for having me Tsh. It's great to hear your voice. My thing is kind of a big thing for us, but it's relatively new and that would be our public school system. My wife homeschooled our kids for about 10 years. We have six

children. Our oldest is 16 all the way down to three. She has homeschooled our oldest four pretty much their whole school careers until about a year and a half ago. We made the decision to send our kids to public school. We live in a city, a small city, but they're Title One schools, which means I think it means 50 to 75% at least of the kids or the households that are represented are in poverty. We jumped into this opportunity, not really sure what we were getting into just because I grew up in the country. I was very comfortable with your rural elementary schools where everybody knows everybody. The public school system was a little bit intimidating for us. The high school has 3,200 kids. My son's class is 800, so it's just not anything at all like what we had grown up with. But it's been absolutely amazing.

Tsh: [03:23](#) When you say your son's class is 800, what grade is he in?

Shawn: He's a sophomore.

Tsh: Okay. So we're talking high school. I wasn't sure. I know because you've got so many kids. I couldn't remember who is what age.

Shawn: [03:36](#) Yeah. Our son, Cade is 16. Our daughter Lucy is 15, so she's a freshman and then we have a middle schooler and an elementary schooler and then we have two preschools.

Tsh: [03:49](#) Got it. Okay. Is 800 big or small to you? I'm curious.

Shawn: [03:55](#) 800 is huge to me. The school that I went to, the class was like a hundred, maybe my senior graduating class was a hundred. We lived out in the country, our high school had maybe 400 kids total. It feels very overwhelming, or it did at first to think about going into that.

Tsh: [04:16](#) I'm curious if your kids have adjusted, have they enjoyed being in public school now?

Shawn: [04:23](#) They love it. They absolutely love it. It's been such a great experience. Our time homeschooling was amazing. I work at home, my wife is at home. We had a lot of years where we could travel. We did a four month trip around the country, five or six years ago. We took advantage of that. Also, my wife's parents live in North Carolina and so we visited them a lot. We would spend extended holidays, we'd always go long before Thanksgiving and stay long after that sort of thing. It was hard for us to think about giving up mostly the freedom, I think was the main thing. But now that we're in it and the kids are in it and loving it, we feel like we're getting to experience a much more of a sense of community in our city, getting to know our neighbors and experiencing more of the diversity in our city. It's been a really, really cool thing.

Tsh: [05:18](#) We have a, I mean, it's not the same experience, but we had a similar experience when we decided to go from homeschooling to being in a school. And also when Kyle decided to go back to working a more quote, regular job, it's still not very regular, but regular for us. We felt that little trade off of the freedom to travel and the freedom to just go where we wanted. When we realized that we actually were not doing that very much anyway. Meaning, we were still traveling but not enough to bend our entire life around just a few weeks of the year and sacrifice of things that we would benefit from. Like being part of a school, we realized that the trade off is worth it and the seasons are really short. I mean they feel long, but we know from experience with kids already that we blink and they'll be gone. That was a similar decision we made as well that even though we miss a little bit of that freedom right now, it's just better for us overall and we'll take that trade off.

Shawn: [06:20](#) Yeah, definitely that and that's such a great point because I think we too had kind of gotten into this mindset of loving the freedom, but we weren't really taking advantage of it that much anymore. Also for Miley, she was just burnt out with homeschooling and she wanted to be able to focus more on writing again. For her, getting the kids back into school was a first step. I mean, we still have two little ones at home, so that's fairly limiting for her. But just taking that first step of getting the kids out of the house for a few hours a day has been helpful for her.

Tsh: [06:52](#) Yeah, I bet with six kids and her having done it for a decade, that's really great of y'all to make that shift. Very cool. Okay. That is a great thing to start off with. Let's move on to the second part of our list, which is habit you've adopted. Now this can be anything from something that you feel is a little obvious, like going to bed earlier all the way to some really cool hack that we would have never thought of. Anything in between. Shawn, what habit have you adopted recently in your life that is making things better?

Shawn: [07:18](#) At the beginning of the year, I started writing handwritten notes to other writers.

Tsh: [07:25](#) Yes you did! I know this because I got one and I love it and I keep it in my desk. Talk to us more about it.

Shawn: [07:31](#) Yeah, thanks. I'm glad to hear that. I can't remember exactly where the idea came from, but I know that there's something about social media that really appeals to me in, in the way that since I work at home by myself, it's a way for me to have that office atmosphere right where I'm like interacting with people. I have exchanges. I'm not just isolated in a cave, but I started to feel like there was just something missing from that. There was something, it was so fleeting, come and go, you stick a tweet out there and it's gone in 30 seconds and at the

same time I was, I was crossing paths with writers, so I wanted to encourage in a more meaningful way. I thought, you know what? I'm just going to try it. I'm going to start once a day writing a handwritten note and see if this is something that sticks. If it's something that I can maintain over a long period. Starting, I guess it was actually November, December is when I started trying it out, just sending things out to people. Then once the new year hit, I thought, I want to really commit to doing this every day. Just one note. It sounded, and I think it sounds to a lot of people like a big commitment, but in fact it, it really takes probably, I don't know, maybe five or six minutes to actually write the note. I find it more of a hassle to actually address it and put the stamp on it than to actually write the note. Just getting around to actually sending it is usually more of a challenge.

I started doing that and I initially was writing to writers who I knew from online or from other areas where we had met and just sending them out. I really had no expectation of anyone writing back to me, that wasn't at all what I wasn't trying to create correspondences or put a burden on people where they feel like they have to write back. I really just thought, I'm going to send these out and hopefully they'll encourage people. As the year went on, I would once or twice post mostly on Twitter and just say, hey, if you're a writer and you'd like a note of encouragement, send me your address. I probably had maybe 40 or 50 people like that who just replied and said, oh, I'd love that. They'd tell me a little bit about where they're at.

As the year has gone on, I haven't been quite as faithful as I would've liked. When I started January, February, March. I was pretty good about every morning, just quickly writing out a note. Then once the summer rolled around, I got a little bit off track and then the fall is very busy for my family for different reasons. I did fall off there again, but I'm back on it again. I've written about 110 notes this year, I think, which I only say that number because I want to encourage people, it doesn't take that much time. This hasn't changed my life as far as I've had to restructure things. I've had to say no to other things so that I could do this. It's really been an easy fit just to slip it in the morning, write a quick note. The feedback that I got from folks has been, it's been overwhelmingly positive. I mean I've had people write back and say, I wasn't gonna write anymore. I wasn't going to work on this book anymore and then I got your note. I think that as writers, we're really craving that little shot of you can do it. Keep going, keep persevering. It's been a great habit for me.

Finally, the other thing I want to say is, it's actually been hugely encouraging to me because when I sit down every morning, like there are days, as a writer where I'm discouraged and I'm thinking, why am I doing this? Is anyone even reading what I'm writing? But then when I sit down and I tell somebody else,

keep going, you can do it, enjoy the work. Then suddenly I'm like, oh wait, I can keep going. I need to enjoy this. I got to enjoy the work. It really keeps me going too.

Tsh: [11:21](#) It's funny how we end up saying and writing the things that we basically need to tell ourselves and we're telling other people but basically doing it for us. I think that is so needed sounds so trite because it's more than needed. I feel like it is a connection point that is so missing from our world. And I mean both like world at large, like our modern culture and this world of writers is so needed that, I mean this is why I keep your note in my desk because I get like three pieces of mail a year that are worth keeping. I hardly get anything like that and it's such a big deal. Like you said, I don't doubt for a second when I look at your note that it probably didn't take you very long, but the fact that you, I think we all love being thought of and there's just something that's just so connecting about thinking somebody thought of me for 10 minutes and bothered to put a stamp on an envelope and stick it in the mailbox and move on with their day. But I was thought out for a few minutes I think. I think we miss that. In a world online where everything's about scaling, there is something that I just really love about work that does not scale. Writing notes does not scale. You can create member sites or courses or write mass emails and those are all great and they have their place. But I don't know, this is something that's not, like you say necessarily profitable or going to be something that you're going to see a huge ROI on other than someone who's going to keep writing who maybe otherwise would not and we've been miss out on their book. I think it is so good that you're doing that.

Shawn: [13:03](#) Yeah. When you said that we want to be seen or we want to be thought of, I think that's a huge part of it because if you consider the way social media works and how we've all been grafted into this new system, I post something to the world and then certain people like it or share it or respond to me in the comments. We've become very used to, we're now on the receiving end of all of these posts that could be for anyone, right? But then when you get a note that someone took the time to write just for you and they didn't do it for likes or shares or comments, they just did it to say hello and encourage you. It's so different. It just feels so different from all of the other communication that we're involved in today or so much of it. I think you're right. It does have a lot to do with that idea that someone is thinking of me.

Tsh: [14:00](#) I think anybody listening who's not a writer, I think this is applicable in any community or concept. Just anybody that you connect with online, anyone in your own community, I think, even just getting a note from someone you go to church with or see every now and then at your kid's school or whatever, I think it is such a good idea. It's so funny that this was not that long ago, just the way

we corresponded with each other. I have notes from the 90s or notes, letters from the 90s that I kept with friends that my kids don't even know how to address an envelope without asking me now. This is a big deal. I love it.

We've got your thing and your habit. Next move on to always my favorite, and that's a work of art. This can be anything from a dumb Twitter account all the way to some beautiful book or movie. These things just really make everything better, I think. Shawn, what is your work of art right now that's making your life sweeter?

Shawn: [15:03](#) My work of art is gonna make me sound like I'm some art connoisseur and I'm really not, this is probably one of a handful of paintings that I can actually name. The work of art is Rembrandt's painting, "The Storm". It was something that really came to my attention a few years ago. I went on a silent retreat and so I knew that I wanted to spend that time with some almost like icon type images that that could center my thinking and keep me from wandering and give me something to consider. I had reached out to a few friends and Russ Ramsey got back to me and said, hey, you should consider Rembrandt's "The Storm". He also sent me this PDF of a piece that he had written called "Rembrandt is in the Wind". It's probably 10 or 12 pages, but it's just beautifully written. He talks about how this painting was stolen many years ago and he retells that story and then he combines it with his analysis of the painting. That was a couple of years ago, but recently again, I stumbled on this painting in the folder where I had left it and I've just been looking at it again. There's something about it that so resonates with me. If you're not familiar with it's basically Jesus and the disciples in the boat during the storm. You've got these huge waves all around the boat. But within the boat, it's just a microcosm of all of these different responses. You've got some of the disciples are madly trying to get control of the situation. Others are down, huddled in the bottom, afraid. Some are, you can tell they're imploring with Jesus, please do something. But it's such a beautiful painting. Just in its own right, even if you're not a Christian, if you're not religious, there's just something about it that is extremely beautiful and moving. That's been something that I've returned to recently and have had been just pondering again.

Tsh: [17:18](#) I'm looking at it right now and I haven't looked at Rembrandt work in a while. I love art history. The thing he's so good at is light. The shadows and light in this art are phenomenal. I look at it and I think, how do you do that? I don't get it.

Shawn: [17:37](#) Because some of it's so dark, right? How do you even create the contrast of images in that darkness? Because you almost can't even see it. Then some of it is like blindingly bright. Like you're saying, it looks like a photograph. How do you do something like that with paint? It's amazing.

- Tsh: [17:58](#) Yeah. I love it. I have to ask as a writer, you write long form, do you, I'm curious what your take is on, maybe this is you outing yourself as not an art connoisseur like you just said, but is there any connection with art and your writing process or is that just a one off thing with this particular work of art?
- Shawn: [18:20](#) I would say it's probably something I need to explore a little bit more because I did feel so moved by that painting when I first took some time to look at it. I find music very moving and so music tends to be more of an inspiration to me than I would say painting. That's a good question.
- Tsh: [18:40](#) When you write, when you work on your books, do you listen to music with lyrics or does it have to be instrumental?
- Shawn: [18:49](#) I can listen to music with lyrics, but it has to be a very, I don't know, it's hard to explain. If the lyrics are very primary in the music and above the music, then it's hard for me to concentrate. There's certain kinds of music that I really do enjoy listening to and I will usually make a playlist for while I'm working on a particular novel because I feel like it helps me to generate that mood and to stay in that particular mood throughout. But I would say that less words the better. What about you?
- Tsh: [19:26](#) I was going to say, I do the same thing. I even create playlists for different books. Are you on Spotify? Because I'm gonna look this up.
- Shawn: Yes, I am. I have two lists that I've had. The one that I, what was it? I'm going to have to look.
- Tsh: [19:43](#) We can put it in the show notes. We'll just put your Spotify account in the show notes so people can listen because this is something I've wanted to ask. You are pretty prolific. You write, maybe it's just on my end as a reader and a friend, but it seems like you write rather quickly. Do you write quickly?
- Shawn: [20:02](#) I was trained to write quickly because I make a living co-writing and ghost writing books and so for about 10 years now I've been doing that it really is almost necessary I think if you're going to try and make a living at that to be able to write quickly. There is a certain pace that I've generated now I would say that when it comes to fiction, I can write my first drafts relatively quickly, but the revisions take a lot longer than the revisions for a co-writing project because a lot of times with the co-writing project, I'm working with somebody else and I'm getting their story down and I'll get the 50,000 words written, but then it goes to them and they really wrestle with it a lot from there on. I mean I'm with them throughout the whole process, but when it comes down to final word choice or are we going to put this or not include it, then that's up to them. Whereas with

fiction, once the first draft is done, a lot of times I feel like the real work has just has just slowly started to begin.

Tsh: [21:04](#) Thank you for saying that because that is something I have really sensed as I'm trying to wrestle my first work of fiction to the ground that I feel like I can perhaps fly through the the plot points and the character development initially, but then when I go back and I really want to flesh it out, it feels like a different process than writing nonfiction to me. Where nonfiction, I feel like I really deep dive at first and then, I don't want to say the cleanup is easy, but it feels a little bit more like, oh, I'm going to just reword that sentence or I'm going to choose a better word or maybe move this paragraph up to there. Whereas fiction, it just feels like the entire crux of what I'm saying rests on some of these things that if I change, I have to, I don't know, I'm tempted to, well, I'm going to start all over and that feels just like a lot and it can freeze me from moving forward. It's cool to hear that you've developed that discipline to figure out how to make it work.

Shawn: [22:02](#) I have a very similar process. I mean it sounds like we would be very much alike. I think with fiction, what I've learned, at least in the way that I write is that I learn so much as I'm writing. By the time I get to the end of a first draft, I feel like I've only just now finally discovered what the book is really about, what the themes really are, what the main metaphors actually are. I'm sure there are some, some novelists who map that all out up front. But for me at the end of a first draft, I feel like, okay, now I know what's going on. Whereas like you said with nonfiction, you're going into it knowing the general story, the general message that you want to talk about throughout and so you're able to craft that as you go where I think that's probably the main difference is for me.

## Segment Two

Tsh: [26:22](#) This most recent novel of your, *Light From Distant Stars*, is this your first novel written for adults?

Shawn: Yes it is.

Tsh: Okay. So your previous, I'm trying, like I said, I feel like you're rather prolific. You've written two other novels before this? Your series for kids?

Shawn: Yes.

Tsh: Then several nonfiction?

Shawn: Yes, *The Day the Angels Fell* was the first one, and then the sequel was *The Edge of Over There*. Then after those two I had a book that came out called *Once We Were Strangers*, which was more of a memoir style, but now *Light*

*From Distant Stars* is the first novel that I wrote that was directed more towards adults.

Tsh: [26:55](#) Okay. It's very cool. I adore it. Well first of all, let's get back to the art thing. Did you have any say in the cover design because it is gorgeous?

Shawn: [27:06](#) I love that cover so much. I had general say. In the form that I fill out, it asks for what sorts of covers do you envision for this book? Can you give us some examples? I sent them three or four covers that I really liked, along with a few thoughts. But what they came back with, what my publisher came back with, as soon as I saw it, I thought, oh my gosh, this is it. This is perfect. Especially with the two little kids running along the bottom there. It just felt like it hit the tone of the book perfectly.

Tsh: [27:37](#) Yeah, it really does. That's what I was going to say is if I feel like as I'm reading the book, it matches the covers so well. So you've written this for adults, is it different writing fiction for adults than for kids?

Shawn: [27:50](#) I think the only difference for me is there are probably some things in the book that I wouldn't have included if it was for kids. There are some themes that I wouldn't include. Now that's not to say that a ton of YA books these days don't include them. I actually think a lot of why a books are edgier than a lot of adult fiction.

Tsh: You're right.

Shawn: I found myself a couple of years ago directing my children to the adult fiction section of Barnes & Noble or whatever bookstore we were in because I felt like YA, I don't know, YA is pretty edgy. I think maybe it has to do with the questions that I ask when I start writing a book. Whenever I start a novel, it's usually comes out of questions that I have.

*The Day the Angels Fell*, the YA book that I wrote, the main question was, could it be possible that death is a gift? While I think that's a question that a lot of us struggle with or try and work through, there was something, particularly for me, my kids were at that age, I guess, where maybe they were starting to think more about death and I was talking with them more about it just because of some experiences that we had had as a family. I thought, this might be a good opportunity to explore that topic with them. Whereas I think the questions in *Light From Distant Stars* are just more mature questions and questions we have as we get older that I'm not sure that kids could probably relate with. Maybe it's not as much material or explicit material as it has to do with what are the questions and *Light From Distant Stars*, the main questions that emerge have to do with parents and kids and as we get older, how does our relationship change

with our parents or as we get older, how does our faith change? Those are questions that maybe young people wouldn't be as interested in.

Tsh: [29:48](#) Right? Right. Maybe it's more like your target audience is different because you're asking different questions. But the process of telling a story to give us the space to think about things that we are currently thinking but aren't either aware or aren't giving ourselves the space to do is roughly the same. It's just maybe the type of questions. I agree with you about the YA thing. I have a 14 year old and it is downright tricky now, whereas before middle grade and even some younger YA, it was easy to skim and then pass onto her. But she's such a fast reader now and these books that she's, her reading level is so much more advanced now that it's like, holy cow, there, there's some stuff in here that is just crazy that they would think this is okay. It's really wild.

Shawn: [30:41](#) Yeah. I'm very interested in that and I feel like it started, and I love *The Hunger Games* and my older kids have read that, but I feel like *The Hunger Games* was at the beginning of this movement bringing super difficult topics into YA. I would have to think about a little bit more before I came to whether or not I have a strong opinion on it or not. But I do think we just have to be aware of what it is that our kids are reading. *The Hunger Games* super violent, but I think it's not glorifying violence, right? It has very strong messages about what happens when a society begins to operate on violence and when violence becomes a core tenant. For our kids, I think that was something that we talked with them about quite a bit as they were reading that. Maybe that's it, maybe it's just trying to be aware, but like you say, I mean kids read so much that it's impossible for me to keep up with them. I don't know if you have any wisdom on that. I would love to hear it.

Tsh: [31:49](#) I had a chat with Nicole Bennett who a YA Instagram account. She's an adult about this very thing and we feel similarly, she's just choosing to read these books before she passes them on to her kids. In many ways I'm choosing to skim/read Common Sense Media/ask around, do all these haphazard steps/ just hope that even if there's something that's less than ideal, we'll have a good conversation about, because in many ways that's how we raise her. I'm not super sheltering her from things yet at the same time talking about him a lot so that it's not this taboo subject or scarring because we're just throwing her in the deep end or something. It's a kid by kid thing, I think that's because this is my daughter. I think when my middle guy gets to that age, it'll be a different reading experience altogether. It is a tough field to navigate as parents, I think this day and age.

Shawn: [32:48](#) Yeah. My oldest two still make fun of me for giving them *Flowers for Algernon* when they were like 10 or 11. I mean I had like a general memory of what happens in the book, but apparently there's a scene in there that I

completely forgot about and they were, oh my goodness, I can't believe dad gave us this book to read.

Tsh: [33:08](#) That's hilarious. Well as an English teacher now I get a little bit of that panic feeling as well. I'll assign stuff and then I have learned the hard way. Let's just say that even if I've read it before, but 20 years ago, I need to really skim it if it's not an obvious classic that we've all, *Scarlet Letter* kind of thing. If it's something a little more either modern or controversial or used to be banned or whatever, to look into the reasons it was banned and why it's considered controversial even now, that kind of stuff. I've had to backtrack on some ideas. It's a tough field. It's a tough field and I don't know if it's like them just trying, them, whoever they are, trained to encourage teens to read more in general. Maybe kids who otherwise wouldn't read with that idea of shock value. But I don't know. I just don't understand the appeal or the driving motivation to appealing to teen readers by giving them something that would shock them. I don't know.

Shawn: [34:08](#) No, I agree though. When you read, it's so interesting if you even just read like the Newbery Award winners from the 40s and 50s and then you hop forward to the Newberry or the Prince awards or things like that that are more modern. It's amazing the difference. It's really amazing. Maybe I'm just becoming an old prude though.

Tsh: [34:32](#) Well I feel it too, when I'm thinking about writing fiction, part of me wants to write why YA that is not necessarily all tied up in a pretty bow, like not willing to discuss tough stuff but is a gift almost to the teens and the parents to say, we're just not going to talk about things that are best left unsaid, but we are going to, like, our mutual Twitter friend, Matali Perkins, who's just going to be on the show soon. I think she does that really well.

Shawn: Yes, she does.

Tsh: I really appreciate YA authors who are willing to do that. Would you ever write YA?

Shawn: [35:14](#) *The Day the Angels Fell* is classified as YA, but I felt like it was, I feel like they did that mostly because of the content was about death and they felt like it was serious for a middle grade reader. But as far as content and things that might be considered controversial, there's really nothing in there like that. I think that's why it would probably normally fall more into middle grade. I love YA. I would definitely, I have ideas for books that I would love to write for YA. I'm at that point where, I don't know, this is a side thing, but my agent and publisher are trying to get me to figure out what kind of books I want to write so that they can figure out how to market me. It's just hard for me to commit to one thing.

There's so many different things I want to write, but I also see that, the first two books I wrote were considered YA then I went nonfiction, now I'm fiction adult. I think it can be a little bit difficult to build momentum with an audience if you're constantly jumping around like that. I don't know. I'm trying to figure that out right now.

Tsh: [36:24](#) But you know what I have to say though, as a reader, I mean maybe this is because I'm a writer who is very much in the same world you're in that department. But I feel like as a reader, I don't mind when my favorite writers hop around. When I think about other artists of different genres, think about Tom Hanks. He's the one I always talk about. He is an actor and he does serious movies, but he also does comedies every now and then. He also produces and directs. He also writes novels and short stories. He does all sorts of things and we don't think like stay in your lane, Tom. This isn't what you're supposed to do. We think, oh my gosh, what a gift to the rest of us. He writes amazing books, let's read those. I'm a fan of knowing yourself and knowing where you really are best contributing for the greater good, but also playing around and experimenting and trying new things is something I always admire another people.

Shawn: [37:18](#) I think that's what I enjoy the most about writing fiction is just trying new things. We'll see.

Tsh: [37:23](#) I'm really glad you write fiction. I know you've been told this before, but I feel like your lane or just the type of work you give us is really needed because you are a Christian and so you write from a Christian perspective, but you don't write Christian novels. I know you've brought this up on Twitter before, like what does that even mean? But I don't know. You do a good job. I feel like you stand over there with Leif Enger and those type who write, soulful, you know, Marilyn Robinson, soulful novels that help us think, but bring us, ask us to think about the bigger picture questions that might tie into our faith. You do good work.

Shawn: [38:12](#) I really appreciate that. I really appreciate that, Tsh. It can be a challenging spot to be because I do feel like I'm pulled in two different directions a lot of the times there's a part of me that wants to be a certain way and then there's a part of me that other people want to be a certain way. It's a balancing act. Someone asked me the other day, how is *Light From Distant Stars* doing? I'm never really sure how to answer that question. Do you want sales for years? Do you want my deep personal anguish about how it is or how it's not or whatever. My response to him was I'm really happy with how it turned out and I feel like it's, it was just another step for me in my creative journey. I feel like that's now more about how I want to look at things.

Tsh: [39:12](#) I get it. You're in Enneagram four, too, right?

Shawn: I'm actually a nine.

Tsh: You're a nine. I thought you were four. I was going to say what you're saying sounds kind of four-ish in terms of that being authentic and true to yourself, but you nines are good at chameleon-ing all the other types. That's probably where I'm getting it. I'm picking it up on myself and projecting it onto you.

Shawn: You're a four so I'm trying to make you feel comfortable by acting like a four.

Tsh: Right. Thank you so much for doing that. I appreciate that.

### Segment Three

Tsh: [41:49](#) We've talked about your thing, your habit, your work of art. The last category in your good list is a philosophy. This is a way of thinking. This is a bit of advice you were given, some wisdom from someone smart in your life that you live by. What's a philosophy right now that's making your life better, Shawn?

Shawn: [42:07](#) That was actually a perfect segue because the philosophy that I've really come to to focus on recently is just loving the work. Just focusing on the actual act of creating and being okay with where those things end up. You know? So writing a book and obviously doing my best to promote it, to get the word out, to connect with people. But then once it's out to let it be, to let it be in the world what it needs to be, what other people want it to be. Once you write a book, you're really giving it to other people and they can interpret it how they would like. What I'm trying to do is after I release a book and promote it to the best of my ability is to really come back and just continue loving the work because there's just so many ways that as a writer or as a creative person, I think, there are so many roadblocks that can hop up and keep you from being happy or being content in the work. If your book doesn't sell the way you want it to sell or if it doesn't get the reviews you want it to get, or if you're early in the process and you can't get an agent or you can't get a publisher. There's just so many places along that creative journey that can derail you. The only real thing that has come to me as being a consistent way to continue being a creative person throughout all of that, no matter what the results are, is to just continue to love and enjoy the work.

Tsh: [43:43](#) It reminds me some of Amy Lynn Andrews, who's just a really great thinker, she talks about how she helps her kids think about what they want to do when they "grow up" and she says, instead of asking what do you want to major in or what field do you want to be part of? Ask how do you want to spend your days? Because how we spend our days is honest to goodness the 90% of the work we do, right? It's like you can think you want to be a writer, but if you're thinking about the accolades and hitting bestseller lists or going on a book tour

or seeing other people talk about you or whatever, that may happen. It very well may not, it may happen, but it's definitely not gonna last for very long. And then the next day you'd get back up and you go back to work. You sit back at the table and you get your hands going on the keys and write more words. That's what writing is. Writing is the process, not the end result. I really liked that and that's really helped me reframe my thought about what I actually want to do in my work versus what I want the end result to be. What you just said embodies that idea really well.

Shawn: [44:55](#) That's totally it, what you just said because the first time that this really hit home to me was when I was in the middle of writing *Light From Distant Stars*. I was literally in the middle, like in the thirty thousand, forty thousand, fifty thousand words range and the middle is always so hard. The middle is for me, how do you keep it going? How do you keep all these plates spinning? How do you not lose threads or what what do you do if you do lose a thread? I was feeling a little bit stressed about the whole thing and then it suddenly hit me. It was like the majority of my life, if I'm going to be a writer will be spent in the middle. There are only a certain number of beginnings and endings that I'm going to write and they really take, like a good beginning might take less than a week to write and a good ending is probably going to take less than a week. If you're talking a process of writing a book that takes four or five months, or a first draft, you're talking four months of in the middle.

It shifted my thinking on how I view the middle and how I view the work. The writing is the work and that that's what I love and so I need to embrace the work because if I don't, like you're saying, if you don't like the work, I mean you might get accolades on book release day and a couple of weeks after that, but these things come and go and it's really the day to day that, I think was Annie Dillard in *The Writing Life*, that said something like, a routine is a net for catching days because what you do with your days, your days become your life or something like that.

Tsh: [46:33](#) How we spend our days is how we spend our life.

Shawn: Yes.

Tsh: Me too. I think of that, too. I'm curious how you balance that ideal working philosophy and mindset with thinking about what your readers might want. Do you know what I mean? Do you ever get bogged down by, I want to just enjoy the process, but at the same time I want to have an end result that might actually turn into a book that readers want to read. Do you struggle with that at all?

Shawn: [47:03](#) Yeah. It doesn't feel like a struggle to me, but it's definitely something that I think about a lot. Even just the other day, because I'm in the middle of this conversation right now with trying to figure out what my longterm, like what am I building? Steve Wiens likes to ask, what are you building? Not what are you doing, what are you building? I've been thinking a lot about what am I building as a novelist and where do I want to go? I put the question up on a couple of my social media places. What do you think about when you read a Shawn Smucker novel? I was just really curious to see what people think. It wasn't that I was, I wasn't asking that question so that they could create who I am or form who I am. I was very interested in getting the outside perspective on what is the expectation or what is the hope. A few of the answers really did help me rediscover myself or rediscover what it is that I love about writing because I think you can get lost in the process, especially a promotion and all of that and maybe forget a little bit about why you started or what it is that you enjoy about it. A few people just reminded me that I love the mystical side. I love the magical side. Even though my books are very grounded in reality, there's usually some sort of mystical element or magical element and just hearing that reminded me that ever since I was a kid, I've been very intrigued by what's happening in the shadows, what's taking place at the margins. I do think about it. I wouldn't say it's a burden, but it is something that I think what are people gonna, how are they going to read this? Are they going to enjoy it?

Again, I think you just have to circle around again to loving the work and hoping that if you love the work and you care for this thing well enough and then you release it, that people will somehow connect with it.

Tsh: [49:01](#) I think we love reading books that were a joy to write and that doesn't mean every day has to be rainbows and that parts can't be a slog. But I feel like maybe this is just me being optimistic, but I feel like I can tell when a reader really, I mean, when a writer really enjoyed writing their book versus not, I don't say phone it in, but almost did it because it was their next thing that they were "supposed" to do. Or maybe they thought it was expected versus a book that felt like, oh, this comes from them. They genuinely wanted to write this. I think both have their place. There are times we need to put food on the table and it's perfectly okay to write a book that needs to be written for that purpose. But I don't know, especially when it comes to fiction. I love reading books that were written with that kind of mindset.

Shawn: Yes. I totally agree.

Tsh: I'm curious, final follow up question to this. You and your wife started a podcast about writing and I wanted to ask you, because I love having writers on my show, I don't get to do it as often as I like, but is it a challenge to talk about

writing or is that a topic that you guys have like an endless amount of things you could bring up? I'm just curious.

Shawn: [50:19](#) Right now it feels endless. Get us in 15 episodes and we might start to think differently. We talk about, so the podcast is called The Stories Between Us and we talk about writing nonstop. When we go out on date nights, when we're standing around the house, when we're going to bed at night, and a lot of it is because it's just so central to who both of us are. I've been writing full time for 10 years. Miley had to, or she chose to take a step back as we started having children. But over the last three or four years, she started to realize, and I'll never forget when she looked at me in the bedroom and said, I'm losing myself. I don't even know who I am anymore. I have to figure out how to get time to write because the changing of the diapers and the making of the meals is eating me alive. Really from that conversation, we entered into a new phase of our marriage and a new phase of her rededicating herself to writing. For the last two years since we had that conversation, we have been talking about this all the time, mostly because I want to make sure now, okay, are you, are you feeling good about this? Are you making time for it? Are we creating space for you to do that? As we had these conversations more and more, I just thought, man, I just feel like there's so many people out there who would benefit from listening in on the struggles that we have, the battles that we have, the frustrations that we have with each other, but also the way that we cheer each other on and how we encourage each other. I hope it will be that for other people that they can listen in and get a sense of that.

Tsh: [52:05](#) I love this idea and I love husband/wife shows. There's so few. I can count on one hand the ones I've run across, but I love the idea that you do feel like you're listening in over like a dinner table conversation, in all the right ways. It feels really almost like a gift to the rest of us that you're letting us in on these conversations because it is rare to have two working writers in one marriage. That that doesn't happen very often. I could have a show with Kyle, but he would talk about tools and I would just smile and wave and not know what he's talking about. And he could do the same with me, you know? It's really cool that y'all have that common ground.

Shawn : [52:46](#) I think if the podcast takes off, it will totally be because of Miley. She's such an authentic communicator and I know authentic is really thrown around a lot these days, but she is not a social media person. She is willing to say whatever's on her mind and she challenges me all the time in these episodes. I'm like, seriously, you're going to make me answer that. Honestly, I'm a nine. I would rather just appease everyone. But she really pushes and she's very honest about where she's at. She's just querying for agents now. She's just at that point.

It's very fresh for her entering into this process and she brings a lot to the podcast.

Tsh: It's very cool. We'll put a link to that in the show notes along with everything else we talked about.

Shawn, just thank you so much both for having this chat with me, but also sharing your work. I'm so grateful that you just continue to do the work and that you like it. I'm not saying this to be either hyperbolic or just to butter you up, but I really feel like I can tell that you love your work because it shows in your output. Thank you for doing that.

Shawn: Well, thank you Tsh. That means a lot. There are folks like you and a few others who have been a huge, huge cheer cheerleaders for me, so I really appreciate it.

Tsh: [54:05](#) Likewise, same with you. I have that note in my drawer, so I appreciate it.

: [54:21](#) You can find Shawn at [shawnmucker.com](http://shawnmucker.com) that's S, H, A, W, N as well as on Instagram and Twitter @shawnmucker. To keep up with me, I'm on Twitter @tsh and Instagram @tshoxenreider. Head to the show notes for this episode number 223 at [thesimpleshow.com](http://thesimpleshow.com) where you can find all sorts of things, links to things we talked about, like Shawn's books, including the latest one, *Light From Distant Stars*, and how to find out about my new show, The Good List. The show was produced by Chad Michael Snavely and thanks also to Caroline TeSelle, Andrea Debbink and my furry intern, Ginny. Thanks so much for listening. I'm Tsh Oxenreider and I'll catch you back here soon. We've got two more episodes left here on Simple.