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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Terri White, editor-in-chief of Empire. She joined the business in 2015 from Time Out North America, where she led the New York and Chicago editions. An award-winning editor with 19 years' experience, she has worked for publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Woman & Home, Maxim, ShortList and Life & Style. As a writer, she's been published by Grazia, Q, Red and Elle, and her broadcast career includes regular appearances on Radio 4, talkRADIO, BBC, Sky, ITV News and LBC.

Terri, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for having me! Does everybody say that?

No, actually some...

Thank you for having me?

Well, it's a great pleasure to have you on, but I'm still in shock at the list of all of those achievements. I've already got Imposter Syndrome! What's your secret? Do you get out of bed a bit early or something? Why have you achieved all these things?

My god, no! I'm much older than people maybe think I am. So I turned 40.

You've aged well!

I turned 40 very recently.

Congratulations.

Thank you very much. And I've always had a kind of all-consuming, psychotic ambition.

Me too.

Yes.

Well, you've got ability as well, whereas I just have to work harder. I've got limited intellect and capacity for rational thought, but I'm a grafter.

I mean, I think graft, and I'll tell you what, I think it's one of the most underrated things. People forget. And I'm northern, right? So it's always going to be there.

Me too.

The value and the importance of graft. I always think it's a combination of things. It is talent, it is luck – there's a lot of luck involved – but it's also just really being prepared to put the hours in and put the work in. I think especially being an editor in this day and age, it's maybe not as glamorous and hands off as it once was. Smaller teams, smaller resources. I've always been a very hands-on editor, but you've just got to graft. And I think graft underpins everything.

Graft and grit. The problem is, everyone says they're grafters. I employ 30-odd people, and I've fired a few people over the years where I've hired them thinking they're grafters, and it turns out they're the opposite. And I think they believe they're grafters, that's the thing!

Oh, sure.

I have people that might do six hours a day work and go home thinking, "That was a hard day."

But I think it's important to say that you can graft and have balance. So I've never been good at balance. I've always been 16 hours a day, working every night, working every weekend. Didn't really have much of a personal life for most of my twenties... I was going to say early thirties, but let's be frank, early-to-late thirties. And it's easy when, if you're achieving certain things in your career, it's really easy just to ignore that entire part of your life and instead completely be consumed by work, which then becomes your identity, which then means you give more to work. It becomes this kind of cycle. But actually, in the last few years, I've become a real advocate for more balance. But what I do think is, as a team leader and as a manager, and as an editor who has people of varying ages working for me...

You have to be an exemplar.

You have to be an example. There's no point me saying, "Go home, have a great life and come in refreshed the next day," and then sitting at my desk till 10 o'clock at night, because that is a terrible example – and I don't think any editor should be expecting that level of at-their-desk-working from their team either. And I think there was probably a time in my life when I really believed it was all about the hours; it was all about how much time I was putting in. And I think part of that actually was I worked in men's media for years, and I was absolutely convinced that the only way I could be as well regarded as the men I worked with was to work twice the hours.

To 'outmen' them. The Mrs Thatcher style of outmenning the men.

I have to say I'm no fan of Thatcher, being a miner's granddaughter, but the comparison has been made before, which was I thought if I worked longer hours, if I dedicate myself much more, then I will be on a level playing field with them – because I knew that I really wasn't because I was a woman, or a girl really, at that point.

I'm really proud of the fact that my business is 70% female. It might be a sexist thing to say, but men are a bit crap really.

Well, I mean, Empire, right? So Empire is probably 60/40.

Sixty women?

It's 60% men, 40% women.

Oh.

There was a time where Empire was very, very heavily male, very, very heavily male, which probably doesn't surprise people. It's a film magazine, it's a specialist magazine.

My favourite magazine.

Your favourite magazine. You are, in fact, a man.

I am. I self-define as a man.

And I think that balance in offices is really great, and I have to say, I have worked with some men who maybe weren't as committed or didn't take it as seriously. The women who've worked for me have always been super focused, super on it – these are generalisations obviously, but they're also true. But the men who work for me on Empire are the hardest working, most talented – I would never say this to them, obviously – group of people I've ever employed. And I think that's because of their genuine love and passion for the subject.

We can create a special version of this podcast without that in, and then we'll just block their IP address so they get the edited version without the praise.

Thank god!

On a serious point, Empire is such a delight to read that I can imagine that you are only ever going to attract people who are genuinely passionate about it. Because why would you be a half-arsed film journalist? You're either passionate about it or you're not.

Yes. Well, nobody gets into film journalism really for the money, or the fame, or the comforts, or any of those things! Everybody who works on Empire, we are such a weirdly disparate group of people, but the one thing that unites us is a fierce love and passion for film. Everybody's different. We've got geeks of one type in one corner, and geeks of a completely different type in another corner. But that unifying love, and it is to-the-bone love, is really, really what gets us together as a team. And I think that's what you feel on the pages of Empire.

Do you get starstruck?

It's funny, because I don't really, because I think everybody is just a human being, but the only one time it's happened was when Steven Spielberg was coming to the Empire Awards.

He's *literally* Steven Spielberg as well.

He's *actual* Steven Spielberg.

Yes.

So you've got this idea in your head of 'imagination Steven Spielberg' who exists on the pages of Empire, exists in our cinematic history. The man, flesh and blood, in a pair of shoes standing in front of you, is something else entirely.

That must be weird. Did you feel tempted to go up to him and just say, "You're Steven Spielberg." And he would say something like, "I know."

I thought as the editor of Empire, that may have not been my most impressive move. But we'd invited him to the Empire Awards many times over the last 25 years, which is how long the award's been going for, and he wasn't able to make it, and he was the one holdout who we'd never had through the doors. And we wanted to give him the Legend of our Lifetime Award, which is the biggest honour Empire gives at the Empire Awards. And we kind of put the ask in and we waited. Months went by, months went by, months went by, and I remember where I was when I got the phone call. It was when the snowstorm hit in December 2016... 2016, 2017, one of those.

It matters not.

It matters not, because it is not relevant really to the story. And I was snowed in to a pub, and I was working, and I got a text from the studio publicist saying, "Steven can make it, can you let me know what he should wear?" And I was like... the room swam slightly. And then when he actually entered the room – so he was flying in, and he was going to make it in a really tight timeframe – and I was wearing an earpiece, because I was co-hosting it with Chris Hewitt, our associate editor. And in my earpiece they were going, "Steven Spielberg is 90 minutes away." I had the "voice of God" in my ear giving me constant Steven Spielberg updates.

Like those news anchors do. Like Julie Etchingham on News at Ten?

Exactly! It was like Eurovision. It was like Eurovision, but with like cinematic icons. And I remember Chris was in the middle of probably this really naff joke when the word in the ear went, "Steven Spielberg has just walked in the room." And I'm sure it was some kind of really crass, childish wank joke or something. And I was thinking, "Oh god, talk quicker so Steven doesn't hear this." And then he came up on stage, accepted the award, talked about his love for Empire. And that, I have to say, was the one moment in my entire career where I was like, "Whoa."

I remember, because obviously you quoted him verbatim in the magazine, and I remember being quite touched with that because it wasn't generic LA platitude, Hollywood nonsense. It was real.

Yes.

You could tell it was heartfelt. And there was detail in there about what he loved about the magazine that couldn't have been faked, frankly.

Yes, and it's one of the really special things about Empire that I've never really experienced on any of the other brands I've worked on to the same degree, which is those relationships with filmmakers particularly, which go back decades, people we've supported through the years. Films we've been invested in from the start. Somebody like Edgar Wright for example, who has been really close to the magazine since his very first film, even though we gave it one star initially, *Fistful of Fingers*, I don't think he's forgiven us for that. But those are really important to the magazine. And that isn't to say you can't be impartial when it comes to their films, because we are, even if that creates a difficult conversation. But what it does mean is there is an intimacy and a trust between you and that person. It's why we get such great access. It's why they give us so much of their time. You're not talking about 20 minutes in a junket room. You are talking about proper solid time, often in their home, in Los Angeles, wherever they are. We'll go on set, we'll be the only people in the world on set. All of that comes from the trust and the love that exists between Empire and those filmmakers.

You're clearly passionate about movies and passionate about cinema, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you like every movie.

No.

I mean I like most of the films in the Conjuring Universe.

Really?!

But I thought the most recent Annabelle film was a bit shit. Do you know what I mean? I'll still go and see any other sequel that they make. James Wan's a genius. And it's just old techniques like a book flying off the shelf and making a big bang, but I'll pay my money to see that, because it's scary.

Yes. But it's a tapestry, right? And that's what I mean when I talk about the different kind of tastes and sensibilities on Empire. I like my certain type of film, so I'm

obsessed with Shane Meadows, who I think is one of the greatest working filmmakers. John Waters is one of my favourite filmmakers.

Love him. I watched an episode of The Simpsons with him in it a couple of weeks ago.

Right? I mean, his cultural footprint is everywhere.

He's brilliant.

Tarantino. Like, I have very singular tastes, but then the rest of the team have their very singular tastes, and our jobs aren't to love and know in-depth every single film and every single genre. It's to ensure as a team we have a patchwork of expertise and knowledge and passion; that means we've got pretty much everything covered.

Tarantino's interesting to me because I think most of his films are genius. I think he's clearly a genius. I love watching it, but I wouldn't want to have dinner with him because he clearly is a bit of a dick, in my view. I don't want to separate the art from the artist, but I've got no desire to be around him.

I think if you are a film nerd or any kind of film obsessive, I think you would *love* to sit in a room with Tarantino for two hours, because just look at his body of work, look at the references that are in every single...

He's an enthusiast as well.

And he loves it. Tarantino's filmmaking craft comes from a place of love and obsession. And I think that would make him fantastic company. I'm sure it's incredibly intimidating.

You've not met him?

I haven't, no. We've just sent our features editor, who went to do the cover story on Once Upon a Time in Hollywood. He went into the edit suite with Tarantino, spent a few hours with him, did a big Empire 30 celebration feature with him. So he was very generous with his time. And again, you know, we were there at Reservoir Dogs, or rather Barry McIlheney who was the editor...

Yes, you're the second editor of Empire on this very podcast.

Yes.

Barry McIlheney. Baz...

Baz.

Who was the very first editor of Empire, of course.

He was. He was. But we did a Reservoir Dogs anniversary a couple of years ago, and we got Baz to write an Editor's Letter, again, from the editor who'd kind of been there and supported Reservoir Dogs when it first came out. So, as I say, that's a perfect example. Tarantino's a perfect example of the kind of links back to Empire's legacy of filmmakers that are still working today, and why that makes Empire, I think, so unique.

Is it that Robert Redford doesn't want to have lunch with you, but an up-and-coming actor would be desperate to have lunch with you? Is there like a level?

Not really.

Or do you refuse all those kinds of things anyway because you'd... I'd imagine lots of people would...

Do you mean like a personal lunch?

Well, if I was an actor that was up and coming, I'd want to take you to lunch because I'd want you to be on my side. I'd try and subliminally win you over.

Nobody does that, believe me!

Do they not?

I have had no free food out of this.

That's absolutely amazing.

I have had no free food out of this. And look, we are very strict at Empire, and I'm particularly very passionate about editorial independence, editorial integrity. We are a consumer magazine for film fans. We are not a trade publication for the film studios and distributors. That is a really important distinction. And what that means is there have to be certain processes in place to ensure impartiality as much as possible. Because let's be frank, right? Fundamentally the job of Empire is to say, if you've got £15...

That the latest Annabelle movie isn't great, in your view.

Yes. So if you have £15 and you're going to go to the pictures this weekend, you've worked dead hard all week, and we're going to tell you where to put that money, and actually that film is shit, and we gave it two extra stars because we really liked that filmmaker, our readers would never, ever, ever forgive us. So those things are really sacrosanct at Empire. Of course, there are relationships with people if we've interviewed a certain director or a certain actor multiple times, but there are so many rules. There's things like if somebody has a particularly close relationship with a director, they're not allowed to review their films.

Wow.

If they have a particular dislike for a genre, I would never put them on a genre film that they are automatically going to have a bias towards. We double review pretty much everything.

Incredible.

If it's a one-star or a five-star, I personally see it to validate that review, because they're at the opposite ends of the spectrum. A one-star review can be incredibly harmful, and so we need to be sure we're absolutely right. So all these processes are in place.

Do you get grief? Do you get death threats from people that you've one starred?

No death threats. And one-star reviews are very rare, right? Because here's the thing: I always say, that film has been somebody's life for probably three or four years, maybe even longer. They have lived it, they have breathed it, it is everything to them. They fundamentally believed in it. And also, somebody else believed in it to put a shit-ton of money into it. If we're going to come along and say it is so abysmally bad we're going to give it one star, that is something that we cannot do lightly. And it's very rare you end up in that situation, because most films of that level just wouldn't ever get made or would not get shown once they had been made. Somebody would work out from seeing the dailies or something that it wasn't right.

And to what extent do your reviews actually change people's minds? Because this question comes from a place of warmth, and a place of huge respect for what you do, but I remember reading your review of the new Ghostbusters a couple of years ago. Before I read it, I knew I was going to see it anyway. So in one sense, it did matter what you said because I wanted it to inform it, but in another sense it didn't because I was going to go and see it anyway. And in fact, you kind of hit the nail on the head really, which is that it was an admirable effort, enjoyable in parts and was just a bit patchy.

Yes.

But was still worth seeing on a plane.

Yes.

But I still watched it.

So what we find is that people use reviews in one of two ways, one of which is validation. So they already have their opinion of what it's going to be in that they're going to go and see it, but they want us to reassure them that they're right. And the second one is, they are genuinely unsure. So they will go, "There are three films this weekend that I could see," and if there isn't an Avengers: Endgame out or something, which is kind of a dead cert, they will use the reviews to filter out which

one they see. We know that Empire reviews do have an impact on what films can take, because our reviews travel way beyond a UK audience.

The unexpected five-star review is the one that would get me. I'm undermining my own argument now, but actually I've done that many times where I've been perusing the reviews and then the red five stars are trotted out and I think, "Oh, I will go and see that then."

Yes.

And I would have never considered it, but for that.

Yes. And a two-star, if you're thinking something is solid and worth your money, and you see it's got a two-star review, that is going to give you pause when you are spending your own money – that's a reality. And actually, reviews have become more important, not less important, in terms of Empire's brand. And there's a lot of talk about is it less important because there are now so many people with so many opinions? You know, the complete digitisation of media, especially film media, where everybody can have a blog, and a platform, and an opinion. I personally am a huge fan of the democratisation of any kind of voice. I think a monolithic voice in any culture is kind of dangerous.

But that also means that you go to the editorial safety of Empire, that there's something that you actually respect.

Yes.

The consistency.

So our authenticity and our legacy has become more and more important. So the fact we have been around for 30 years, the fact that we have usually got it right, with a few absolute bloopers, but we have usually got it right. People have trusted us for a very long time. Our average subscriber has been with us a minimum of a decade.

Two decades for me.

That is a relationship based on trust. And so I think that trust has even more value in the kind of frenetic digital culture we have now when it comes to reviews. So actually, for me they've become a *more* core part of the Empire brand.

It's frustrating, because when I think of Bond, Skyfall was such a great film and I was going to see that anyway. And then Spectre I thought was going to be great, and you pre-warned me that it was actually a bit shit really. And I feel terrible for it because I love Daniel Craig, I wanted it to succeed. But other than the opening, it was a load of crap. It was all over the place. Bit like Spiderman 3. Still saw it anyway!

You did though, right?

Yes.

And that's our job. Our job is to say sometimes the difficult thing, and we have to be the people willing to say that. As I say, it's not something we ever do lightly. My favourite thing is to get five people from the office who have got an impeccable critical eye, and we go and see it together, and then we're in a WhatsApp group together, and we hash out all the kind of different flaws with it, all the stuff we think is great. There is so much rigour that goes into our final reviews. It's never just kind of tossed out at a minute's notice. And as I say, without it, with that rigour and without that trust, what does Empire have fundamentally?

What fascinates me as well is, and this might even be the cliché of the critic's journey, but there was that journey and that narrative where critics would become too cruel and cynical and would lose the will to live. And as much as I admired Philip French – and God rest his soul, blah, blah, blah – I grew up reading the Observer thinking, “Why don't they have a film critic that enjoys any movie whatsoever?” And I stopped reading him, because every film was just slated, in my view. Leonard Maltin did the same thing. The only reviewer I had when I was growing up was Roger Ebert. And he was clearly a very clever, erudite man that would analyse the film, but he didn't have that absolute sense of warmth and enthusiasm for the medium that you guys have. And that's why I loved, and still love, Empire.

Well, we're film fans first and foremost before we're critics, right? So that's the lens that we view everything through. We *hope* everything is going to be great. We never go into a film going, “Oh god, I bet this is shit.” We go in with an absolute genuine hope that it's going to be great. But if it's not, we are also prepared to be the people, like other film fans, and go, “Guys, this is really not very good.”

You're prepared to be disappointed.

Yes, we are prepared to be disappointed, and just to be honest, really. But I have to say, I think there has been, maybe not so much any more, but there was definitely an age where the kind of acerbic critic who enjoyed deconstructing a film and pulling it apart.

I'm not clever enough for all that if I'm honest, and I wouldn't enjoy it in any event.

You forget who you're writing for, which is: you are writing for the average person who's going to go and put their money down in the pictures, and you're not writing for other critics. That's the fundamental thing. Also, as I said before, that is somebody's work. I think you have to be able to stand by everything you write on a page. If that director walks in a room tomorrow, you should be able to look at him or her and say, “I totally stand by it. This is what I felt like didn't work.” I think this kind of detachment of writing something quite cruel, and quite personal or reductive, and then kind of sending it off into the ether and saying, “Job done,” I think people forget that there are human beings involved in it, and that actually who are you writing that for?

Because fundamentally, are you writing that for yourself and for people like you, or are you writing it for film fans?

Do you have to keep a lot of secrets? For example, if you get an advance copy of Spectre, I mean, everyone knew months in advance that clearly Christoph Waltz was going to be Blofeld, for goodness' sake. It was the worst "secret" in the world! But then again, you must see that, and then you might have to write a story speculating whether it might be Blofeld, knowing that he is. So how do you balance that? Because of course, many film fans won't want to be told that spoiler.

Yes.

So even though you're speculating, you actually know. That would be weird in any other form of journalism.

So I sign a lot of NDAs, because I spend a lot of time with the studios in Los Angeles. I go over every few months. We see advance materials to decide what covers we want to do over the next year, which films we think look most promising, and those things that it's really important we keep it under NDA.

I think your readers want you to respect that.

Yes. I mean, spoiler culture is a real thing. I'm very cautious about spoilers, and I always say we should never write anything in a review that you genuinely loved discovering for the first time in the cinema, because we are robbing people of that experience.

Although, and this'll be the next question, is trailers do that all the time, and it started with Terminator 2. The first third of Terminator 2 was which one is the protector, and the trailer give it away. "The T-800 has been sent to protect."

Yes. We hear from the readers a lot that they won't watch some trailers. If they are really, really scared of being spoiled, they will just not watch the trailer at all. Some people say to me that they buy the magazine, and they save the cover feature for after they've seen the film. So some people use it to get them excited for the film that's coming out, and there are no spoilers in our features. But some people keep it, they save it, and then they open it as a treat after they've seen the film to see how it fits with what they've just seen. And I think our job is to respect the experience of being in a cinema. The cinematic experience for me has never been more important than it is right now. When you've got all this other noise in your actual life, which includes social media, which includes all of the things competing for your time and attention like Netflix, like Amazon Prime, like Disney+ within the next year, then the cinema is a singular, unique, immersive experience unlike anything you will get anywhere else. Tell me where else you go, and you turn your phone off – hopefully, unless you're a psychopath – for up to three hours, and you just give yourself over to the story that's being told on screen. I think it's one of the most beautiful human experiences we still have. So for me, everything that we do has to be about protecting that cinematic experience.

I know me starting a question saying, “Well, I’m not a psychopath” immediately identifies me as one, but I agree with you. People who use phones in cinemas are psychopaths, and I would kill them all. Because the light is so bright as well, and I end up tutting. But my problem is that I have no attention outside the cinema. I’m forced to turn my phone off in the cinema. At home, I’m sometimes triple screening. So the film’s on, but I’m on IMDB on my phone thinking, “Where do I know the actress from, what’s she been in?” I’m not paying attention to the dialogue, but I’ve probably got my iPad open as well, and I’m on Twitter following that actor, and also just very quickly checking the news to see what’s gone wrong.

Yes. That for me is the difference between the cinema and watching something at home. And let me say, we launched Pilot TV, the cinematic TV magazine, and we are huge respecters of what is happening in television especially. It is the single biggest change to film and entertainment in the last two decades, and it is seismic. But I think what’s become more clear over time is the panic about, “Oh my God, it’s going to rob from cinemas. People aren’t going to pay to watch films.” Just none of that is actually been borne out.

It’s an abundance mentality. And I’ll never cancel Netflix, but if Disney want their own streaming service, I’ll have that as well, let’s be honest.

Yes. But also you won’t stop going to the cinema.

No.

So what you have is, because the experiences have become so different, as you say, you’re sat at home, you’re watching the telly, you’ve got your iPad out, you’re on Twitter. I do exactly the same thing. But when I’m in the cinema I give myself over 100% – and that’s what I think makes them complementary experiences rather than cannibalising, is they are so different and yet fill your time in a really meaningful way anyway. We know that actually the hours they’re spending watching “great shit”, which is how I define it, has gone up and up and up and up. They’ve not said, “Oh, I’m not going to go and see that at the pictures because I’m just going to wait for it to come out on home ent [entertainment] in six months.” That’s not the mentality at all. But they will watch something on home ent and they will also watch an amazing TV series. They will binge on Killing Eve, and then they will go to the cinema and watch Avengers: Endgame, or The Souvenir, or whatever film has taken their fancy that week.

Do you have some pet hates? Because I love The Lion King, for example. I don’t understand why they’ve done... well, I obviously know why they’ve done a shot-for-shot remake of it with photo-realistic animation, because it’s already made a shit ton-of money, and I get that. But I’ve got no interest in... and it’s odd that James Earl Jones is still Mufasa, and yet other people have been recast that are still alive. I find that fascinating. The whole thing is weird. I don’t watch any superhero movies. I get why they’re popular, because teenage boys have the money, I get that. But they just don’t interest me.

But I think it's all about fantasy, because actually when you look at the demographics behind superhero movies, it isn't teenage boys.

Is it not?

That's the interesting thing.

Oh, wow.

And it's actually women.

Women?

So the cinema-going public is made up of 51% women. And that's what people forget, is they always go, "These are the people who are going to the cinema." Fifty one percent of the cinema going audience are female. And when you look at something like Avengers: Endgame, they are hitting every single demographic. I think it's really gone from the '90s, where comic books were for a certain type of basement dweller, and all of that kind of rhetoric that goes along with it. And now, when you have something like Avengers: Endgame and Avengers: Infinity War that came before it, Captain Marvel, Black Panther, these are Shakespearean tales of love and family and betrayal and loss, with some of the best special effects we've seen in film. And they are imbued with so much heart, and incredible production values at the same time, that these are films that actually have this huge appeal to so many people. But fundamentally, I think it always comes back to the same thing, which is cinema is an escape. And that's not an escape to kind of obliterate yourself. It's an escape to discover a new world. It's an escape to consider a different reality. It's an escape because it's too hot outside and Boris is doing your head in. It's everything that's fundamentally...

For me, it's the chance to stop crying for an hour and a half and focus on the mediocrity, and the abject horrendousness.

I mean... I go to cinema to cry. That's my thing! I don't cry in really life, and I cry hysterically at films.

I don't feel emotions in real life, but I'm prepared to for the movies.

Oh, yes, right? Me too!

Just to briefly touch back on what you mentioned earlier though. What is your relationship with the studios actually like? Because it must be a kind of symbiotic relationship. You do need them, but they also need you. And if you give a film a two-star review, even though it's honestly held, and it's editorially right because you believe that, that's got to affect their bottom line financially. If I produced a film and it got a two-star review, quite apart from feeling defensive and hurt that someone had said what I'd done wasn't that great, but I'd also think, "That's cost me \$1 million over the next year."

Yes. But I think they know. After 30 years, they understand what it's about with Empire, and I think they trust us to be speaking from a place of truth, from a place of real belief. They know that there's no agenda in it for us apart from what we genuinely think. We have amazing relationships with the studios, because the issue that is out on stands at the moment, we have the world exclusive reveal of the new Joker film with Joaquin Phoenix.

With Joaquin Phoenix, yes. He's amazing.

And there's been one image released by Todd Phillips, the director, on Instagram like nine months ago or something. There has been nothing seen since apart from the trailer, and we were the first people in the world to speak to both of them, to get brand new, never before seen pictures, which went all over the internet and almost caused me to have a heart attack that people weren't going to buy the magazine! But there is a relationship because there is value on both sides. They know if they come to us with a world exclusive like that, we have our print circulation in the UK, but then we have our social reach. Our social platforms have a combined reach of 1.6 million. Our website, our podcast, which is huge, which we just got our highest -figures for a Spoiler Special, which was almost a half a million downloads. Our weekly episodes get on average 70,000 downloads. But the entire ecosystem of Empire is a huge, powerful beast. So they know, if they give us amazing content, we won't have decided if the film's good yet, but we are going to really dig into what makes this film exciting – because we only put films on the cover we think are exciting. What makes this film unique? What is the filmmaker trying to do? What is the actor trying to do? What is so singular and special? What is going to make me part with my money? But they also know that when it comes time to review The Joker, the fact we've had the world exclusive has no bearing on what review they get. As you say, that doesn't mean they're going to be happy with it, but they understand that that's the nature of the relationship. And the only way this relationship works is for that mutual respect and trust to be on both sides.

What did you feel when you were appointed editor? Did you feel a sense of excitement, but also if you're going to take risks and do anything meaningful in any job, there's the chance you might balls it up?

Yes. I mean, I was at Time Out New York when I got this approach from Empire. And at first I wasn't sure, and I was quite happy in New York.

New York is awesome.

Yes. I was happy in my job. The city is like, full of psychopaths, but the job was amazing. It was a really big job, we'd taken Time Out New York free. It was a massive challenge. We'd made it from a paid-for-print mag into a full multi-platform brand. We shifted everyone from working on print only to working across digital too, so it'd been this huge job. And I didn't think I was quite done with it, but Mark Dinning edited Empire I think for eight years. And I knew that this might be my only chance to edit Empire, and that's why I couldn't get it out of my head. I was like, "If I say no to this now because I want to spend another year in New York or whatever, then this opportunity may go to somebody else who also stays in that job for eight years, and

then it may be done, and then I may never get the chance to edit Empire.” So I kind of grabbed it. And then the fear really started when I landed back in London. So I landed on the Thursday, and I was starting work on the Monday, and the team had had quite a difficult time. There’d been an editor just before me who’d stayed I think a year, and so there’d been quite a lot of change. And before that it’d been a very stable team with a very long-serving editor. So there was a challenge immediately. And also I had a very specific view of how I wanted Empire to change, which I personally felt that it could be more diverse, that it could be more representative of everybody who loves film. My ambition is that Empire is a place for anyone who loves film regardless of gender. So there is a long-standing tradition in UK magazines of specialist magazines – i.e. film magazines, music magazines, car magazines – there is a unifying factor in the audience, like there is a unifying factor in the team. And that unifying factor is, everybody who engages with Empire, whether they buy the magazine, whether they go on social, whether they listen to a podcast, come to a live event, they are passionate about film.

There’s a warmth. They’re upbeat about movies.

Yes. And that should be the only defining factor. So we’ve worked really hard as a team to bring in more female writers; we’ve increased them by several times – there was only a handful, half a handful maybe, when I joined – to cover films that Empire would never have covered. So films that were considered for a female audience, films that were by female filmmakers, films that just probably wouldn’t have got the attention that we’re prepared to give them now. And I felt that was a really significant shift. But the risk of that obviously is that your current audience feels like you’re no longer speaking to them. So I thought it was really important to keep the kind of basic DNA of Empire, which is our commitment to amazing film across the blockbuster and indie spectrum, to tell you the best, most compelling, true story about how this film was made and what makes it fucking brilliant, and why you should see it – and that our commitment to that doesn’t change, but we have become much more of an open church in terms of what films are good in the Empire universe, which filmmakers are good in the Empire universe, which writers should be in the Empire universe. So broadening that out has been a challenge, and I feel like it’s something we’ve only really kind of done properly in the last year, but I think it’s been really important in terms of making Empire feel like a modern film brand.

Do you ever get political with the journalism at Empire? For example, the #MeToo movement has given women in the movie industry a much greater voice. Do you think the bad old days of the casting couch are over? Is that something that Empire should cover? Because I actually genuinely don’t know as a reader whether I want Empire to cover it. I mean, in a sense of course I do, it is an important topic, but then part of me doesn’t want that, because it’s quite an awful topic really, and I’m not going to get any joy from reading it. I might as well be miserable reading about that in The New York Times, for example. I don’t know. And that’s a genuine question.

Something we really struggled with when #MeToo happened, and Time’s Up happened, and I made the decision that actually Empire never covers any kind of personal details of actors and filmmakers. So in any of our interviews, we never

mention is somebody married, have they got kids, if they haven't got kids, do they want kids? How do they juggle their kids and their career – *obviously* that's a question we only ask women – and all of our stories are about the films. Our job is to celebrate films. We talked about doing what would a feature on #MeToo the movement, look like. And instead what we decided to do, because it wouldn't fit with Empire as it is currently, is we discussed it on the podcast. So when it happened, me and Chris Hewitt spoke about it, Helen O'Hara, who's our editor-at-large and appears on the podcast, we all felt very strongly that the podcast is about conversation, and that was the place for us to discuss what was happening. If it was relevant in stories in terms of the way a film was made or why it was made, we tackled it within that. And then when it came to the Empire Awards that year, I felt that we should do something as a show of Empire's commitment to being part of that change. So our partner that year was Time's Up, the UK arm of Time's Up, who were trying to on a very grassroots level make things better for all women in all different industries. And we had a representative of Time's Up there on the night. They gave a speech from the stage. We had several people actually who were Time's Up ambassadors. And I felt that was a really important thing for us to do. To visibly have those women in that room, saying those things, was absolutely vital – and you really felt that make an impact in the room. You really, really did. And a lot of the male filmmakers wore Time's Up pins, and people were incredibly supportive. As to whether anything's really changed, I think some of the horrific elements of it, I don't think you could get away with any more.

No, and literally the prolific offenders like Weinstein aren't active any more.

Yes, and there's nowhere to run and there's nowhere to hide. There is more of a willingness to allow women to discuss those experiences. What I think is still a challenge is getting more female filmmakers. Part of the reason that women were put in those positions is because all of the people in positions of power were men. So it goes without saying that if more women are running sets, if more women are deciding which films get green lit, and who works on them, and how it's financed, then those positions where women can be abused and can be manipulated, it's hard for that to happen in the dark any more. But what we haven't seen is a sudden uptick in loads of female directors getting their films made. I think that's a much longer kind of problem that's going to take a lot longer to sort out, because that fundamentally is about the way that women's stories are viewed, the way that people assume certain stories won't sell. So that old thing about, "Well, films by women about women, men won't want to see them. Only certain types of women will see them. You already limit your box office." The commercial arguments that have held back people of colour, and women, and queer filmmakers for generations.

And transgender people.

Yes. I think it is still an issue. And I think until there is true representation in terms of the studios, and in terms of crews, and in terms of people being elevated to positions of power, we won't see fundamental, lasting change. I think you see somebody like Ava DuVernay, who is one of the most inspiring directors working today, and has just set up a company, an organisation, to help platform filmmakers of colour. You see people like that, and that is real change, and that's where it's going to come from, is

people saying, “Enough.” You look at somebody like Brie Larson, who famously on Captain Marvel demanded kind of female heads of department. She wanted female journalists to interview her. She got so much shit on the internet about that from very angry men who said, “Oh, it’s reverse sexism,” not understanding it isn’t sexism because they’re not oppressed.

Just google equality for goodness’ sake. I hate it when white men that are middle aged with money, even try to think what they know what it’s like to be discriminated against, because they haven’t been discriminated against.

Well, you’re not an oppressed, marginalised group. So by very nature you can’t be, and I think...

I’m only marginalised because I lack any form of discernible talent.

And you’re northern. I mean, that doesn’t help.

Yes, exactly, yes.

But I think people like Brie Larson and people like Ava DuVernay making very practical things happen, which is Brie Larson saying, “I will do your massive billion-dollar Marvel movie if you hire female heads of department, if there is parity across this set.” That is how change happens, by asking for very real world changes. And I think the more of those people who can – it shouldn’t be their responsibility, let’s be frank – but who can, and feel able to, really propel that agenda forward, that’s how change will start to happen.

How do you handle it when you have to revise movies and your criticism of certain TV shows in context? On a lighter note, I think The Godfather III, I re-watched it recently, and yes, it’s not as good as I and II because they’re superlative, but it’s not actually terrible. It’s only terrible because people were so shocked that it wasn’t as good as I and II. But then you actually look at more serious things like Ace Ventura Pet Detective – absolutely love that film, Jim Carrey’s insane – but there is an incredible amount of transphobia in it. The bottom line is that Lois Einhorn is actually Ray Finkle, and that the transgenderism is actually part of her evil. Look at Chandler in Friends. His mother was transgendered, and they were making the most ridiculous jokes, offensive, saying, “You’re only going to trick a man by revealing your penis.” As if anyone would do that. I mean, I wince now that I even found that funny back in the 90s.

Well, you can’t cancel whole generations of culture because times have changed. But what I do think it’s essential you do, as a brand with responsibility, is to frame it in context if you’re going to discuss it now. So to acknowledge that actually that was problematic. We did something on The Crying Game last year.

Yes, they actually played The Crying Game music in Ace Ventura, when he discovers that she’s a man.

If you're going to reassess things now, which we often do, you have to frame it within the context of where we live now. We're in a more civilised, more human society.

Well, less horrendous, I would actually say.

If we continue just to talk about the films of Roman Polanski and don't kind of talk about the fact that he drugged and raped a teenage girl, then I think we're being horrendously, horrifically irresponsible. I do not believe we should be giving *any* platform, in *any* way to somebody like that. I think it is fundamentally against everything Empire stands for.

But this is the odd thing, and I don't think there's a right answer, because you're always going to alienate people with whatever decision you make. So the problem you have with someone like, say, Woody Allen for example, is there are actors working today that defend him, and those that say, "I don't want anything to do with him." So he's obviously quite a divisive character.

I think there is a difference between people who've been accused of things, and people who have been found guilty, like Polanski, or are standing trial.

Well, he's a fugitive from justice.

He is a fugitive from justice.

He still is.

Yes, there's a reason he won't go back to the United States. And I think it becomes a moral and ethical conversation, when you run a brand like Empire, which is: if we continue to platform men who have done this, what does that say to the women who pick up Empire? What does that say to the men who pick up Empire? What does it say about what our priorities are? Of course we're about selling magazines, but fundamentally we are a brand of integrity, of passion, of heart, and of real kind of... we do have a sense of ethics and *good* at the core of us. And when it comes to Polanski, for example, that isn't a matter of opinion. That is a matter of what's right and wrong.

You're very active on Twitter. Do you get abuse as a female editor?

Yes! It's been quite a shock, actually.

It's a sewer isn't it?

I didn't really have it before Empire, I have to be honest. And I think there is something in a woman being part of a brand that is traditionally male...

"Bloody women, how dare they edit a magazine?"

Somebody sent me a very angry tweet because I have the word 'feminist' in my Twitter bio, and they said, "What the fuck is a feminist doing editing Empire?"

Block or mute? What's your choice?

I used to try and respond to everybody, and try and reason with them.

No, you can't. You can't reason someone out of a position they've not reasoned themselves into, which is what Richard Dawkins taught me.

That's good. So I mute, or if it's really bad I block. But last week is a prime example. So I was out for drinks with an old friend of mine from New York, a film critic from Time Out, and I hadn't looked at Twitter for an hour. I picked up my phone and there were all these tweets saying, "You awful misogynist, don't be so horrible, you're a twat, you're blocked." And I was like, "What did I miss?" And I still don't know what this guy said, because the people involved don't want to tell me, but we'd put a video up. We were discussing summer blockbusters, it was me, Chris Hewitt and James Dyer from Empire, and this guy...

Both great writers.

Yes, they are fantastic. And a guy had come on and said something, which apparently was really disgusting and misogynistic, about me, to me. And then they'd kind of retaliated to him and defended me. And he'd ended up blocking me then, which was, I was like...

He pre-blocked you?

He pre-blocked me! But, here's the reality. As a woman on social media, especially a woman involved in something like film, which is a male space, you get a lot of comments about how you look.

You look great! I thought I should say that. Well, both of us are lookers, actually.

You got a lot of comments about presuming you're stupid, or you don't know as much. You get a lot of people, as I say, upset that you claim you're a feminist.

Upset that you exist.

There is that, but also the thing that gives me hope and joy is that actually the majority of people who I speak to on there, including a huge number of lovely Empire readers who are male, are really lovely, just want to talk about film, just want to ask me what they should watch, just want to like shoot the shit with me, and they are really warm and really brilliant people. And there is just this awful minority. And it does make me nervous every time we put a video up. Every time there's something where my picture is up, I'm always conscious that somebody is going to say I look fat, or I look ugly. Not because those things bother me, but because I know, as a

woman, that my body and how I look is the easiest thing to attack. And it's a thing as a society that women have been told is the most hurtful thing that can ever be said to you.

It is. My wife's a novelist, and I braced myself when her last novel came out, because I knew there'd be horrible comments, and one that was particularly hurtful – because I told her not to look – there was a picture of her and someone put, "Who is this man?" And I think they thought they were being funny. I mean, to be honest both of us laugh at it now, but at the time it was deeply hurtful. And it's interesting how you can rationalise it as well, because I can read reviews of other people's books and know that it's going to be divisive. You're going to get some haters and some lovers. But when it's my own book or my wife's book, we're utterly crushed.

Yes, and it's just, you know, me and Helen O'Hara were doing a kind of tweet-along. We were talking to people on a Saturday night about what they should watch that night, and a guy came on and said, "Will you two shut the fuck up? You both look like dogs' dinners anyway." One guy tweeted something really horrible to me, and I just said, "Can you not do that, it's really upsetting." And he was like, "Sorry, I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it." And I think at that moment I became a human being to him, not just a woman on the internet that he could say something horrible to.

Isn't that absolutely amazing, that people would think like that? Going back to you being an editor though, what's the balance between instinct and passion, and your gut making a decision? And all the data and analytics that you'll have at your disposal? We get tons of analytics and stats on this podcast, and to be honest you can disappear up your own arse, because you think, "Well, what is the median average point when people stop listening on podcast 32?" "Oh, more people are listening in the US in that particular..." And then I think, "I know so much about it." And then I think, "Actually it's given me no insight at all."

I think you can be driven mad by data, but I think it's been a really valuable addition to an editor's toolkit. So when I started out, nobody *really* cared about data. I mean, sales figures or whatever, you're trying to spot a bit of a trend, but fundamentally it wasn't about that. It was about what you and your team thought, and how you executed that. The rise of digital and social and pod means that you can track everything that's happening all the time. I went through a phase when I was at Time Out New York where we had very aggressive KPIs for digital growth, and I was obsessed with analytics. I was tracking traffic all day. I had daily targets, weekly targets, and I became so focused on those KPIs and those metrics that I shelved my instincts, and I shelved the bit of me that is a storyteller.

You became a human algorithm.

I did. And I passed that down to my team, and I think it was actually one of my biggest failures in that job.

We all make mistakes. Well, apart from me. But I'm told others make mistakes.

But my bosses loved it because the traffic went through the roof. And I was probably working my team too hard, I was probably pushing them too hard. I wasn't really allowing them to do work that they felt was important, because the only definition of important that I was going by was: how much traffic is it going to bring in? So it was a real regret of mine. And I think what I forgot is editors are editors because of who they are, how they react, how they think, how they feel and how they know their audience. That is something that is deep down, buried inside your guts. And the best editor is harnessing that and shaping it with data. So for example, I thought there was an opportunity in our recent redesign to have more...

Great redesign by the way.

Thank you. To have more conversation about films on release. At the moment Empire goes, "We're going to talk about this film just before it comes out." Then we review it, then we don't talk about it again until home ent. However, there were all these amazing conversations going on on the podcast right around release, and these Spoiler Specials we were doing were getting regularly over 100,000 downloads, each episode. It was nuts, and every single one was knocking it out of the park. And there's clearly a massive appetite for that. So one of the challenges I set the team was how can we create that conversation point in print? And I think it's the first time at Empire we've ever taken something that's successful on another platform and used it to inspire the magazine. It's usually the other way round. And we used that data and looked at the stuff they love the most, the executions they love the most, the timings they loved the most. And we used that to develop a print strategy. However, we then went into a room and designed some beautiful print pages with a particular pace, and a particular rhythm, and a particular kind of granular analysis about them, and a specific navigation between the points, and all of that was making it fit for print.

Do you think that movies are having to change as a result of online? A lot of artists are saying that Spotify itself means that the song has got to get to the catchy bit within 40 seconds otherwise people have gone, that it's actually changing the nature of songwriting itself. We've talked about the changes in terms of multi-platforming and the rise of streaming and so on, but do you think that the actual art of storytelling has always been the same, or is that having to change?

I don't think it's having to change, but I think it's had to remember what and why it is. So for me, print does something very, very, very singular as a storytelling tool. So print has a specific song that it sings in a specific way. We set the pace, we set the rhythm very, very, very deliberately. It's the place for incredible illustration. It's the place for luxurious use of photography. It is the place for long-read features, a real deep dive, granular piece of storytelling on something that may take you an hour and a half to read. And these are things that can only be done in print. And it's about remembering that's what print is for, and then working out how your other platforms complement it. I think there is a real rush, and I worked on a magazine that did this. I worked on Maxim in 2007. I was deputy editor, and we tried to make Maxim more like the internet. So we said, "Let's make it fast, and dip in and out, and we're going

to make it just like the internet because the internet is super popular!" Nobody fucking wants an internet printed on some pages! They want a magazine that operates as a magazine, and they want the internet operating as the internet.

I don't go on Empire's website because, although I'm sure it's great, I don't want a sandbox experience. I want a curated journey from page one to page 32.

Yes. And we are a £4.99 magazine. We have to justify every single penny of that cover price when there is so much free media out there. I think we absolutely do, but that's always at the forefront of my mind. We fight so hard for exclusive images, for exclusive access, for real depth in terms of how long we spend with somebody.

To literally earn your money, as you said.

Yes and we will spend a year on a story. We will spend 18 months on a story, because if I'm asking the reader to give me a fiver, I had better make sure that they are getting plenty in return. But any great brand... in my dream, Empire is the one-stop shop for all film fans. So you should be able to get your bits of casting news, and see the latest trailers on the website, probably on your way to work. You should be looking at the social feed, probably when you wake up, to work out what happened overnight in Los Angeles, because there's always something going down. And then the magazine should be a treat that you save, and we know that people keep them. We know that they spend pretty much all month with them. The biggest complaint we ever hear is they don't get time to finish it before the next one comes, and then they're behind, and then they're panicked.

Well, that's the unidirectional nature of space time, unfortunately, so you can't be blamed for that if you're a monthly magazine.

Unidirectional space time?

It's all to do with the law of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, but we've... I'm a physics nerd as well as a movie nerd, so we'll go into that in a...

What an intersection!

Yes, indeed. What do you do? I mean, what is a typical week? What is a typical month? What does the editor of Empire actually do? Do you get up super early, and are you in the office by nine? Or are you not one of these office types? What do you do?

I'm at my desk a lot. So this week we're on press for our big birthday issue. So I was at my desk at 8:15 this morning. I get up very early. I usually write in the morning, because I'm a writer as well. But this week I've been at my desk instead, and then I'm there all day unless I have a screening. So yesterday, I had a screening that I had to go off to for a few hours, and then I came back. It's essentially sitting in the office working, working on pages. So I approve every layout, I work with the creative director on that. I see raw copy for one of the sections, the news section at the front,

the other three sections I read on galley at least once. So I see every page in the magazine usually twice, but always once. And so that takes up a lot of my time, obviously.

Actual editing?

Actual editing. It's a favourite bit of my job, actually sitting down with a bundle of proofs and my highlighter pens, and my little special pens, it's like... it's like my porn. It's fucking beautiful. And that's why I do this job, is because they do not call it 'pagecraft' for nothing. It is an art. It is a skill. It's something that I've dedicated the last 19 years of my career to. I've learnt at the feet of some of the best people in this business. And it's everything to me, creating a beautiful page that makes people feel, and makes people feel like they are in the best gang in the world that understands them better than anyone else. That is what an editor really wants to do.

And did you always want to be an editor? Because we've had a few editors sitting in that very chair that have said, "Look, I was a writer. I loved being a section lead. I thought I'd enjoy being editor, because of course I was always ambitious, and when I got into the chair, a lot of it was HR and hiring and firing, and dealing with people, rather than editing." What are the bits of the job that aren't so glamorous, then?

Well, I didn't always want to be an editor. So my first job was as a PA to Phil Hilton, who is now the editorial director of Stylist. He's been my mentor for my entire career. My first job was as his secretary, and I think I said to him at some point in the interview, "Oh, I'm going to be an editor, by the way, before I'm 30." Which is a very ambitious thing to say as a secretary from a council estate.

I've seen Ally McBeal. It worked in the '90s.

"What is it about your life on the council estate that made you think you could be an editor?" And so it was that I had a very singular path, but I also was not willing to give up writing. I love writing. It's a really important part of who I am and what I do. I also think it makes you a better editor. The thought that there are editors who do not write, how can you even begin to edit somebody else's work? It's fucking nuts. So those are the best kind of bits of the job. Of course there are bits... not the people stuff, because I think part of leading a team is creating a family, and with that family comes responsibility. Which is, people can be overworked, people can feel unappreciated, they can feel like they're giving everything and getting nothing back. And part of my job, a very important part of my job, is to make sure that everybody feels supported, and that their work is important, and that it's recognised. So, that thing I think is really important. I do enjoy that, even when it's difficult. I suppose the bits I don't enjoy... I'm trying to think of something I don't enjoy. Working in Camden? I don't enjoy that.

Yes. Last question then. You were ambitious, you started as a secretary. We have a lot of people listening to this podcast that are journalism students, they are aspiring people who are wanting to get into the media. There might be a

young woman, or even a young man, listening to this that thinks, “I want to be the editor of Empire magazine 20 years from now.” What advice would you give them?

Do you know what? I’ve often thought about this because I think... and I don’t want to say this and put anybody off going into magazines, but I think it’s never been harder than it is today. I think, did I love starting out as a secretary? No, but there were secretary jobs to be had that enabled a girl like me to get into magazines. Because I wasn’t getting a writer’s job like the middle-class boys that were coming down from the north were getting, and so there were routes into the industry that made it possible for there to be better representation. I think the media industry has a massive problem with representation. I actually think it’s getting worse.

Getting worse?

I think it’s getting worse.

Wow!

I think there are lots of *visible* kind of efforts at diversity, but what we don’t speak of enough is, how are people getting entry-level jobs? What entry level of jobs exist?

The first rung on the ladder’s the most important rung.

Yes, and if your people are still trading in free work experience, the only people who can afford to do unpaid work experience are kids whose parents are prepared to pay for them and support them.

It’s why I pay all my interns, and always have done since day one, because otherwise it’s not fair. You’re perpetuating the exclusion of young people from poorer families.

Yes. And I think those kinds of things, and the way the industry is structured, still makes it incredibly hard for people who are not from positions of privilege to get into it. And I think it’s a real problem our industry has. I think there are things being done, so the Edinburgh International Magazine Festival there are looking at building a remote mentoring thing which basically enables anybody anywhere in the country to have mentoring from editors, and from people who work in magazines. My advice really would be to really just use everything at your disposal to get in touch with people directly. So people will often email me directly, they’ll tweet me directly. I think you kind of have to not worry about all of those things in the way that say you shouldn’t just go to an editor directly, you shouldn’t just do that, you should apply for the job when it comes up. Those traditional routes are so rare these days, that I think it’s about using your ingenuity, it’s about using your determination. Email somebody if you want to work for them, tell them you want to work for them, tell them *why* you want to work for them. Tell them why their magazine is amazing, tell them what it could do better. Really let your passion show. The thing that has got me through my career, I think, is my passion and my genuine love and enthusiasm for magazines. That is the thing that got me into the industry, and it is the reason that I’m still here.

So use any routes open to you, and don't be worried about hierarchy, don't be worried about like putting a foot wrong. And if somebody's rude to you then fuck them, because who are they anyway? There'll be somebody else out there who'll be nice to you. But just write. So anybody can blog. Anybody can post to social, post to Medium, post to your own Squarespace blog. Like, just write. Because I genuinely still, and maybe I'm naïve and idealistic, but I fundamentally in my heart believe that if you are talented and passionate and fierce about it, and you can write, if you put that on the internet, somebody will see it, and you will get an opportunity.

We're running out of metaphorical tape, Terri. So I think all I have to say is that I think you're not only the greatest editor in the world, but potentially the greatest human being in the world.

Aww!

Empire's an amazing magazine.

Thank you.

It couldn't have been made better, and yet you have made it better. So that's testament to your skill. It's been inspirational. Thank you.

Thank you.