

I'm out in California right now meeting a bunch of founders that listen to the podcast and I had lunch with two of them a few days ago.

Both of these founders have houses, they have multiple houses, and in every single house they have, they have an eight-sleep mattress.

One of the guys has four eight-sleep mattresses.

Do you know how good a product has to be for you to buy four of them?

And they both made the same point that once you start sleeping on an eight-sleep mattress, it's hard to sleep anywhere else.

I'm staying in a house, there's no eight-sleep mattress in my house.

It's unbelievably hot compared to my bed back at home.

Before I had an eight-sleep mattress, I never had the ability to change the temperature of my bed before and I had no idea before I used it how much that actually affects the quality of your sleep.

So now I keep my eight-sleep ice cold and I make sure that it's cold before I get into bed.

I find it helps me fall sleep faster and wake up less during the night.

In my opinion, that feature alone is worth 10 times the price.

There are very few no-brainer investments in life and eight-sleep is one of them.

Eight-sleep is offering founders, listeners, \$150 off.

You can get yours by going to 8sleep.com forward slash founders.

And just two more things I want to tell you about before we jump into the intense mind of Christopher Nolan.

I've made something that is exclusively for the enthusiasts of founders, for people that completely understand this kind of strange and intense studying of great people and the great work that came before us and how valuable that is to apply to whatever it is that you're working on.

If that is you, I recommend that you sign up for the Private Founders AMA Feed.

I've been making these short episodes every week based on questions that I get from members.

If you become a member, you'll be able to ask me questions directly.

There's actually a private email address that you get access to in the welcome and the confirmation email.

I read every single one of these emails myself.

I don't have an assistant go to them.

I read every single one.

The questions I get from these emails, I then turn into these short AMA episodes so that allows members to learn from the questions of other members.

You can also add your name and a link to your website with your question so that other members can check out what you're working on.

That feature alone is worth the investment.

So far, I've made 30 of these episodes.

I plan on making several episodes every week.

If you consider yourself an enthusiast of Founders Podcast, I highly recommend that you become a member and you can join by using the link that's in the show notes in your podcast player and I also have the link at FoundersPodcast.com.

And finally, for the last two or three weeks, I have not shut up about how good I thought this podcast was.

My friend, Jeremy, went on Invest Like the Best.

It is Invest Like the Best number 336.

Several situations in private markets.

I'll leave the link down below, but it's just easier if you search whatever podcast player you're listening to this on.

Just look for Invest Like the Best.

Make sure you follow the show.

I'm telling you, listen to episode 336.

It is 90 minutes straight of just insight, unique insight after unique insight.

You will not be disappointed.

It's one of the best podcasts I've heard this year.

Christopher Nolan's second film, Memento, had a long anxious year spent trying to secure distribution.

Nolan had been turned down by every distributor in town with some variation of, this is great, we love it, we really want to work with you, and this is not for us.

The film was personal to him.

Memento was born into the world on the back of obsession.

Failure to find expression would have been almost inconceivable to him.

Nolan made it because he had to.

What happens when you make a film is you burrow into it.

You dig in.

So you kind of can't see it anymore.

You're immersed in it.

The only thing you can do is trust your initial instincts.

You just have to say, this is what I'm making.

This is what I'm doing.

It's going to work.

Just trust it.

Two years to the day after that disastrous screening for distributors, Memento earned two Oscar nominations.

Nolan's ascent since has been near vertical.

In the space of two decades, he has gone from eking out micro budget three minute short films to making billion dollar blockbusters.

His films have earned over \$5 billion.

To the studios, he is as close to a sure thing as the director gets.

One of the few filmmakers who can walk into a studio with an original script idea, one that is not part of a preexisting franchise, intellectual property or sequel, and exit with the 200 million necessary to make it.

Like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas before him, he has become a franchise unto himself.

And unusual for a director working in his level, he has either written or had a hand in writing all 11 of his movies to date, granting him entry to a very exclusive club of directors, the only other two being Peter Jackson and James Cameron.

He has large ideas.

He invented the post heroic superhero.

He came up with an idea for a science fiction heist inside the moving contours of a dreaming mind and he had the boldness and audacity to have the singular vision to make it happen.

Among his collaborators, he is known for his punctuality, discipline and secrecy.

Of the more than 600 people who worked on Dunkirk, only 20 were allowed to read the script.

Copies of the script were watermarked with the actor's names so that any missing copies could be traced back to their negligent owners.

Nolan is notorious for coming to an actor's house with a copy of a script, insisting on staying with the actor until he had finished reading the script and then taking it away with him.

He is very secretive.

On set, you wouldn't know he's the director.

He's very quiet, very confident and very calm.

He's a classicist.

He doesn't look through monitors.

He wants to see what the camera sees, the old fashioned way.

He refuses to use his second unit, preferring to shoot every frame himself.

Mines don't wander on a Chris Nolan set, said Matthew McConaughey.

Nolan is known by his crews for shooting fast, starting at 7 a.m. and finishing at 7 p.m. with a single break for lunch.

He has the kind of passionate following one associates with a cult director.

Critics have received death threats when they give his films a bad review.

That is an excerpt from the book that I'm going to talk to you about today, which is the Nolan variations, the movies, mysteries and marvels of Christopher Nolan, and it was written by Tom Shown.

Christopher Nolan worked hand in hand with Tom Shown.

The vast majority of the book is actually large chunks of Christopher Nolan speaking directly to you because Tom had been interviewing him over multiple years.

I want to jump right into a conversation that they're having.

It's going to reference something that was stated about the movie Memento and is really, I think, one of the most important things to understanding Christopher Nolan.

He's an obsessive.

It said, you know, that movie was born into the world on the back of obsession.

In fact, that's a word that he's going to use over and over again.

In addition to reading this book, there is this fantastic article in the Financial Times that I'll link down below as well where Christopher Nolan gives you an insight into his mind. At the very end of the article, the interviewer is asking, okay, after Oppenheimer, like, what's your next film?

And he says, I've never been any good at that.

The only way I know how to work is to sort of burrow in on one project very obsessively.

And so the word obsessed is in this book over and over again.

I think the main idea, the reason I want to read this to you though, is because the idea behind what Christopher Nolan's about to tell us is like, if you're obsessed with what

you're making, you can make other people obsessed with it too.
And I love what he says here.
He says, people will say to me that there are people online who are obsessed with inception or obsessed with Memento.
They're asking me to comment on that is if I thought it was weird or something.
And I'm like, well, I was obsessed with it for years, genuinely obsessed with it.
So it doesn't strike me as weird.
We put a lot into these films.
Every film, this is so good.
Every film I do, I have to believe that I'm making the best film that's ever been made.
Films are really hard to make.
They are all consuming.
So it had never occurred to me that there were people making films who weren't trying to make the best film that ever was.
Why would you otherwise?
That's a perfect insight into Nolan's mindset.
Even if it's not going to be the best film that's ever been made, you have to believe that it could be.
You just pour yourself into it.
And when it affects someone that way, that is a huge thrill for me.
It is a huge thrill.
I feel like I've managed to wrap them up in it the way I try to wrap myself up in it.
I absolutely love that.
So I already mentioned James Cameron one time since him, Peter Jackson and Nolan are really the only group of directors operating at that level that are also writing the movies that they're making.
Because I just spent so much time studying Cameron for episode 311, he was on my mind a lot while I was reading this book.
And what is fascinating about both Christopher Nolan and James Cameron is that they got to the top of their profession.
They have a lot of similarities in their obsessive work habits, but they're also very different.
And so as I go through Nolan's perspective on his own work, I'll try to compare and contrast the way he looks at it with the way James Cameron's work looks at it.
And I would start with the biggest difference is that Nolan doesn't like to use CGI.
And Cameron is literally inventing the new technology for other filmmakers.
And so you see this in, I watch a bunch of interviews with Nolan and I watch a bunch of interviews with people that worked with him.
And one of the most remarkable things about Christopher Nolan is, or most surprising things to me rather, would be the fact that he wants to live and work in an analog world.
That is going to be a recurring theme that you and I will revisit today.
It's what I mean by that.
Actors will talk about how hard it is to communicate with them, like why is it hard?
Because Christopher Nolan does not have an email account and he doesn't use a cell phone.
You are usually scheduling things to his assistant and then he'll either call you or he'll just

show up.

We're going to meet in a physical location at this time and date.

And so he's something he talks about with not only his kids, but younger generations is the fact that they're overstimulated by technology.

And as a result, they're not giving their imagination room to actually work.

And I actually think that Nolan's desire to live and work in an analog world is his version of mute the world and then build your own.

We're only in the first chapter of this book and I've already used the word obsessive and focused and have singular mind multiple times.

And this I think is why.

He puts a lot of time and effort into what he's doing.

I find filming very difficult.

I find it totally engaging, but it's an arduous process.

There's a lot of strain on family, on personal relationships.

It takes a lot of physical strength.

So it's got to be great.

It's got to be something that I love.

And that last line, something that I love, that is his North Star.

His North Star that you'll see him use throughout his career is like, do I love what I made?

And this idea of his that if you love what you made, one, it's easier to go out and sell it to other people and two, it's easier to withstand the inevitable criticism that anything that you create and put onto the world is going to receive.

And so this idea of being in love with what you're making and then being obsessive about what you're making, Chris, he says in the book, he's like, listen, I don't feel people describe him as an artist.

He's like, I don't feel like I'm an artist.

I feel like I'm a craftsman.

Like five years ago, I read this incredible biography of George Lucas.

It's called George Lucas.

I think the life or a life it's by written by Brian J. Jones.

And what's fascinating is when I heard Nolan say that, you know, I'm a craftsman, I don't feel like I'm an artist.

I'm like, wait a minute.

That's almost exactly to the T what George Lucas said in that book.

And this is a quote from George Lucas.

He says, I don't think of myself as an artist.

I'm a craftsman.

I don't make a work of art.

I make a movie.

And for Nolan, the first part of the craft, he just loves screenplays.

And so he insists on writing all or part of every single screenplay that he's going to turn into a movie.

And he says, the best screenplays are completely stripped down.

They're very, very simple documents.

The more you constrict them down, the better.

And that's something he has come in with some of the greatest leaders in history.

If you go back and look at some of how the greatest leaders in history communicated inside of their organization, they write short memos, they're really to the point, there's no wasted words.

Churchill may be the best example of this because he even has this great quote I love.

He says, it's slothful not to compress your thoughts.

But I love the story that I found in one of David Ogilvy's books because Ogilvy's boss was a partial inspiration for Ian Fleming when he was writing James Bond.

And what was fascinating and something that Ogilvy tried to copy when he was building his own organization is that when you would send a memo to Ogilvy's boss, it'd be returned to you with one of three responses.

Yes, no, or speak.

And speak meant come see me.

So where did this obsession for the craft come from?

Nolan has memories of loving cinema and loving movies for as long as he's had memories.

And so one of the funny things is his younger brother writes a ton of the screenplays.

They write a ton of screenplays together.

And Nolan has a British accent and his brother has an American accent.

So Nolan's dad was a British ad executive.

His mom was a flight attendant and then later a teacher.

And the family couldn't decide where they wanted to live permanently.

So depending on when you were born in the family, you either grow up most of your time in England or most of your time in America.

And this actually becomes really important later on because the movies would come out in America first.

So if he happened to be living in America at the time, he would see movies like Star Wars, for example.

And then six months later, he might be in England when Star Wars is released.

And so he'd go watch it again and again and again.

And so to this day, Christopher Nolan can tell you stories about being six years old and going to see movies with his dad.

In fact, his parents actually, there was a, there's a connection to James Cameron here.

His parents, after they realized their young son was interested in movies, they actually took him to do like a tour and a visit of Pinewood Studios.

Pinewood Studios was that studio in London that James Cameron hated.

Cameron said the crew that worked at Pinewood were actually lazy, insolent and arrogant.

And he does this hilarious, he was like obsessed with what he's working on.

He said they were like lifers.

They were just like kind of punching the clock.

They weren't really into it.

And so when he finally wraps on the last day, he couldn't wait to get out of there.

He actually gets in front of the entire crew and Cameron has a hilarious like parting shot at them.

He says, this has been a long and difficult shoot, fraught by many problems. But the one thing that kept me going through it all was a certain knowledge that one day I would drive out of the gate of Pinewood and never come back and that you sorry bastards would still be here.

And Cameron never did return.

So that's the exact same studio that Christopher Nolan's touring when he's might be, you know, six, seven, maybe 10 years old.

And so one of the most influential movies that Nolan ever saw when he was a kid was Star Wars, which came out in 1977.

And his response to seeing Star Wars is not the normal response that you would see with a seven year old.

I think that true interest is revealed early.

Like I had watched movies when I was a kid.

I was like, oh, that's a great movie.

Christopher Nolan watches movies, right?

And then he becomes obsessed with knowing how the movies that he loves are made.

And so he would watch Star Wars over and over and over again.

And then he'd find out he'd find trade magazines.

He's a little kid for God's sake.

This is something he does for his whole life.

Like if he's interested in something, he reads about it obsessively.

So he winds up finding like trade magazines that go into detail about how Lucas's company, Industrial Light Magic, were able to make like the special effects and how the shots and everything else.

That is not normal behavior from like an elementary school cut age kid.

And then once his dad sees how obsessed he is with movies, his dad does something really smart.

He takes him to a, like another showing, a re-release of a movie that came out, you know, half a decade earlier.

And this was actually Kubrick's 2001, A Space Odyssey.

What is fascinating is that movie is the same movie Cameron saw where he's like, Oh,

I don't want to just be interested in watching films.

I want to be able to make them.

And a young Christopher Nolan had the same response.

He said, he credits that movie with realizing, Oh, movies can be anything and I can make my own.

And when I was reading about Christopher Nolan's childhood, it reminded me very much.

I read a biography of Steven Spielberg all the way back on episode 209.

And it's the same thing.

He starts making movies when he was like seven, eight, nine years old.

I think they were making movies on the same kind of camera that's like super eight cameras that would let you record for maybe like two and a half or three minutes long.

Both Spielberg and Nolan would figure out how to make crude movie sets out of whatever is around their house.

It could be like egg boxes or cardboard.

They would use like the, the fellow kids in the neighborhood.

And so from the age of eight to 13, Nolan's watching movies.

He's trying to make little movies, but it's not so he realizes what a director is.

He's like, Oh, wait, that's the job that I want.

So he would go back through and watch a bunch of his favorite movies and some, two of his favorite movies were Blade Runner and then alien.

And then one day he realizes, wait a minute, that's the same director.

What is the director doing?

And he realized the director was the connection between everything else.

Like both movies had, there was completely different stories, completely different people that wrote the screenplay different, they had different actors.

It was different.

Everything, the only thing that was the same, the only thing that tied all those together was Ridley Scott.

And so at 13, he says, I can remember saying, Oh my God, I want that job.

One of the most interesting parts of Christopher Nolan's early life is the fact that his parents sent him to boarding school outside of London and they were 3,000, 4,000 miles away, living outside of Chicago.

And so we see this obsession with movies has grown to the point where they have this is a very strict boarding school.

The schedule is very regimented.

Everybody goes to bed at the same time.

They wake up at the same time.

They have breakfast at the same time.

They have class at the same time.

So what Nolan would do is after lights out, he would lie in bed, in the dark with his eyes closed, listening to the soundtrack and the scores of like Star Wars and this other movie called Chariots of Fire on his Walkman.

He's listening to movie soundtracks in the dark.

And so this is when he brings up the fact that his kids nowadays, right?

If they're fascinated, they're interested in something, they can just go and Google it or they can follow like what they're interested in very fast, they can get the information right away.

Well, when I was a kid, that just wasn't the case.

You actually have to work for it.

And he thought this was something that was valuable, the fact that your imagination has to fill in the blanks for you.

And so that's why he'd want to listen to like the scores of other movies because they leave space for your imagination.

It gives you room to actually sit and think.

And so he talks about while he's doing this as eyes are closed, he's listening to the film scores.

This is where he's coming up.

He's starting to use imagination.

He's starting to get ideas for films.

He's starting to get ideas for certain themes in a story.

And he said this act was very important for the development, the future development that comes down the line of him starting to make movies.

And so there's a lot of detail in the book at his time at this boarding school.

But one thing I thought was fascinating because I think it gives you insight into just the level of discipline that Nolan has that is constantly described by the people that work with him.

And the boarding school is trying to drill into these young adults, the importance of discipline, of punctuality, of a certain tolerance of pain.

It is described as a Darwinian environment.

And some of the kids can't take it.

They wind up churning out.

I think they use the term they either sink or swim.

And it's very obvious that Chris swam.

And so many years later, some of the actors that have worked for Chris talk about the fact that he's unbelievably punctual.

His sets are very calm, but they're run in a disciplined, almost machine-like manner.

And that Nolan seems indifferent to both fatigue and cold or extreme temperatures.

And I think a lot of that was created in these formative years at this extreme boarding school.

And so something he's doing during these years that he's going to do also when he goes to college and really for the rest of his career.

This reminded me very much when you read early, like read biographies of Kobe Bryant, how Kobe is 13, 14, 15, 16, and he's watching game tape of Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson relentlessly.

Throughout Christopher Nolan's entire career, his version of watching game tape is he's constantly influenced and inspired by past filmmakers.

And so he'll find a film that maybe came out 50 years ago that gives him an idea for like inception as an example, that he's making in the early 2000s.

And then he'll watch it and then he'll make sure everybody on his team watches the same material as well.

So they have this shared base of knowledge.

And so in many cases, he's not going to use these ideas for multiple decades.

This idea that ideas can ruminate for decades is just the same thing that you and I went over with James Cameron.

So this movie comes out in 1982.

It's almost like inception before inception.

And so he's watching it while he's at boarding school.

Check this out.

It was during one of his storytelling sessions after lights out.

So this is when he's in the darkest thinking, right?

That the idea for inception first took place.

The idea of sharing a dream, that was the jumping off point and the use of music or playing music outside someone dreaming.
And the idea that if you played music to somebody who was asleep, that it would translate in some interesting way.
I really did come up with a couple ideas that went into inception when I was about 16.
That film was a very long time in coming.
It was just something I was thinking about for a very long time.
So when Christopher Nolan and James Cameron are around college age, they both want to go to film school, right?
They want to learn.
They already know what they want to do.
So Christopher Nolan grew up like upper middle class.
So he went to university college London.
James Cameron didn't have any money.
One of my favorite stories ever of like what a high agency person is is the fact that Cameron wanted to go to film school, didn't have any money, goes and photocopies all the graduate level theses of all the film students and then teaches himself, especially gives himself a film school education without ever meeting a professor.
Now, Christopher Nolan does something similar inside of the actual university.
So he winds up becoming the president of the film and TV society.
It is not at all clear to me how much time he spent actually attending like his normal curriculum.
He created, just like James Cameron, he winds up creating his own curriculum.
So they talk about the fact that he had keys to, since he was the president, he had keys to the film and TV society.
It's like this basement underground.
He's going to spend almost all of his time there.
They said it was like his office.
And so the separate curriculum that he set up for himself is essentially learning how to operate cameras, how to edit, how to cut film by hand, how to sync sound.
So the way I think about this is the fact that he just spent his college time practicing and learning the job that he already knew he wanted.
Because when he was 13, he's like, no, I know I'm going to be a director.
And so he's a great quote about this time in his life.
He says, I learned a huge amount about the craft of putting films together.
It was a great education.
Another fascinating thing, right?
Because you've already seen insight into Nolan's, the way he approaches work.
He says, listen, when I, when I'm on a film, I burrow into it.
I do it obsessively.
There's a lot of stress on my personal life.
There's just a lot of stress on my physical mental fatigue.
I'll get to this later too.
Like the only solution I have for, for, for people like this that want both a relationship

and have this like deep desire and love for what they're, they're working on is to make it a family business.

This is what Christopher Nolan did.

On the very first day of college, he winds up meeting his future wife.

Her name is Emma.

And this is what he says about her.

I remember seeing her on the very first evening of my first day.

Emma has such a profound impact on my life, my work and how I go about things.

We've collaborated on everything I've done.

We spent three years in college making short films, running the film society, and then raising money to make more films.

And it was during his time in the film society that he learned how to make movies with minimal resources.

This is going to be a main theme of Christopher Nolan's career.

He's constantly, he's relentless resourceful and he's doing that because he wants to spend as little money as possible so he can maintain as much control over the project as possible.

So to this day, his wife is his partner.

She works on all of his films and she's going to help him make his very first movie.

This movie is going to be called following.

Now the crazy thing is he actually tries to apply to a bunch of other film schools after graduating from his undergrad and he winds up getting turned down.

So he gets a job.

His first job outside of college is he's making videos for large corporations like training videos and such.

And he only does that to get money to make a movie.

He makes his, this is incredible.

This is like one of the things that hit me up the most is the fact that this guy's one of the greatest filmmakers I've ever lived and he makes his first movie on the weekends while he's working a full-time job.

They decided simply to use the bonus from his cameraman job and shoot the film only on weekends for almost a year, rehearsing each scene carefully.

This goes back to this relentless resourcefulness that he has.

And I've read, what is this?

Like the fifth biography of filmmaker.

I've read Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, James Cameron.

There is not one, not one.

The reason there's some of my favorite biographies to reach for entrepreneurs because they're all relentlessly resourceful, this is an example of that.

So they're shooting the film only on weekends for almost a year.

They rehearse each scene carefully, almost like a play.

So they could shoot it in one or two takes, working out that they could afford to shoot and process between 10 and 15 minutes of footage a week.

Every weekend, everyone would squeeze into the back of a taxi and head to whatever location they had been able to scrounge up.

They shot without permits, Nolan operating the camera himself.

And so that's another thing that Nolan has in common with Cameron, this idea that they want to write, produce, shot and edit the movies themselves.

Now, Cameron's or his movies are way too complex to do this now, but he definitely has that same approach.

He wants to be able to do every single job on the set.

And so Christopher Nolan is going to get this first movie, this following movie, finished in 1997.

He is 27.

I want to bring this to your attention.

This is what Christopher Nolan was doing at 27.

He's got this film, it's created on like the shoestring budget.

He's about to edit and release it.

At the same time though, he does something smart.

Like this is another example of doing the best you can with the job in front of you.

And by doing so, like you can open up opportunities that you can't possibly predict.

He had already known, he's like, okay, when this is done, if this is well received, I need to have another project because he doesn't want to work.

He wants to work out, be a filmmaker full time, right?

So it's like, let's say this comes out.

I think it's good.

I can convince other people it's good.

Then what's going to happen is once it's good and it starts spread, like being coming critically acclaimed, maybe making a little bit of money, distributors and other movie series are like, hey, do you have anything next?

He already had the idea for Memento.

This is his second film.

This is the thing that causes his career to go vertical.

Listen to this description of what he was doing at 27 years old, rather than him being discouraged by his rejection from film school.

He was hot on a new idea for a movie, the story of a guy who loses his short term memory and tries to solve the murder of his wife by tattooing clues on his body, like little Mementos.

It sounded complicated.

Chris also wanted to tell the story backward.

That was very important.

He said, I couldn't quite see it, but when you're around someone who does, you start to believe it.

And so they finish the following.

It is extremely well received, gets written about in all the major papers in San Francisco and New York.

And so then people would ask him, okay, what do you want to do next?

Do you have another idea?

And then he was able to hand them the completed script for Memento.

He had his next job already lined up that was extremely smart.

So if you remember how the book starts, Memento is the movie that was critically acclaimed, but for over a year, they couldn't find a distributor.

They eventually find distribution, but I do want to point out, I want to bring to your attention the fact that he feels that the screening of Memento was the turning point in his life.

He is 30 years old when this is taking place.

Memento is being screened at the Venice Film Festival.

There's gonna be 1,500 people in the venue.

It was impossible to predict the audience's reaction at that scale because before he was just doing like these small, like personal screenings of like 20 other, like 20 people.

And so he talks about the fact that when the film finishes, he was completely terrified because for a few seconds, everybody was completely silent.

And so in that few second window, he's like, oh my God, they hate it.

And then all at once, there was this enormous standing ovation.

And he says everything from that moment in his life changed.

That was the turning point of his life.

So at this point, he's already made two films, they're very small, maybe, you know, considered really independent.

I think Memento's budget was something like five, somewhere between like five and nine million total.

He's making like 40 million, getting like two, I think two nominations for Oscars.

The first time he works for a big studio though, is the next movie.

It's Insomnia.

Insomnia actually stars Al Pacino.

And something that I learned about Nolan's career, it's very similar.

We talked about this last week with Mark Twain.

It's this fact that through our journey along the way, there's always gonna be these people.

Usually there's multiple examples of somebody else trying to help you.

They have inside knowledge or relationships that you lack.

They like what you're doing.

And so they push it forward.

And so Nolan is trying to pitch this idea to Warner Brothers.

Now he's gonna wind up having a 20 year career with Warner Brothers after this, right?

But at this point, they won't even take a meeting.

And so this other filmmaker named Steven Soderbergh is the reason, according to Christopher Nolan,

is the reason that Insomnia gets made.

And so Steven was a fan of Nolan's previous film.

And he flipped his wick when he found out that Warner Brothers wouldn't even take a meeting with him.

And so this is what he does, upon hearing of Nolan's difficulties getting a meeting with the executives of Warner Brothers, Steven marched across the lot to the head of production and told him, you're insane if you don't meet with this guy, offering to executive produce Insomnia himself in a way to guarantee the work of the then 31 year old director,

which is Christopher Nolan.

And so without that push by Steven Soderbergh, it's not at all clear what Christopher Nolan's career would have wound up.

And it was another turning point in his life.

He says, it was very vivid.

This is Christopher Nolan speaking.

It was a very vivid time in my life.

It was my first studio film.

It was the first time I'd worked with huge movie stars.

And that idea about learning to work within the system is incredibly important.

Later on, Nolan forms this like long partnership with Hans Zimmer.

And the way he describes why he likes working with Hans Zimmer is really a description of Nolan himself.

He says that Hans is a minimalist with maximalist production value.

After reading this entire book, it's very clear that Nolan is the same way.

And I think this is a great way to understand what he learned from his first interaction with like a big studio.

This is going to help you understand like what is important to Christopher Nolan and then how he gets it.

And these are themes that he uses throughout his entire life.

The fact that he loves constraints.

He feels constraints breed resourcefulness, but it also decreases the budget, which gives him more control.

He's all about maintaining control.

By the end of the production, he had learned an important lesson about working for the studios.

The efficiency of filmmaking is, for me, a way of keeping control, the pressure of time, the pressure of money, even though they feel like restrictions at the time and you chafe against them, they're helping you.

They really are.

If I know that the deadline is there, then my creative process ramps up exponentially.

Creative power in filmmaking is very important to me.

I am very protective of it.

I get my power from spending less and moving faster, not giving anybody a reason to come visit me or to interfere or to complain.

I made that decision very early in my career.

If I can work a little bit faster than people expect, if I can work a little bit cheaper than people expect, then they'll have other problems to deal with and they'll let me do my thing.

Something fascinating.

I mentioned earlier how he puts a lot of his life into what he's doing, and yet he wants to be a good father and a good husband.

He's got a very interesting setup.

He's got a home in LA, and then there's a house that's next door that is almost like

the mirror image of his house.

He buys that house and then turns it into a production studio and an office.

His commute is just walking from his backyard to the backyard of the other house.

When Warner Bros. gives him the job to direct Batman Begins, he starts working on it immediately without telling them.

Nolan and his team are working on both the script and the actual set designs at the same time.

He did this because he says he wanted to be able to hand it over to Warner Bros.

It's like a fata complete.

Like, hey, this is me maintaining creative control and communicating to them what the film was supposed to be.

The reason behind doing all this I thought was fascinating.

He talks about the fact that big studios have a way of working that just encourages waste and doesn't give him the control and the involvement that he desires.

He says, you are encouraged in a big movie to very rapidly hire an enormous amount of people.

Then you have to feed the beast.

You're in a situation where you go, I need a robot for this science fiction film.

Figure me out a robot.

Then you go away a while and they do whatever they feel like, and then they come back with a robot, which didn't suit my way of working at all.

The way he's operating, he's like, well, it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

He says, once they were finished, Nolan invited the executives of Warner Bros. to his home to view their work.

They were not happy about it, but Warner Bros. had a lot of trouble with scripts leaking.

This idea that he wants to constantly maintain control, that he's working, he finds ways to work within the studio, like the large movie studio system without somehow giving into the demands is something that pops up over and over again.

This is a movie that he does back in 2006, so the movie after Batman Begins is called The Prestige.

And I want to bring this to your attention because, like I said at the beginning, this is a guy that wants to live and work in an analog world.

You could tell that because he doesn't use email, he doesn't carry a cell phone, right?

And so he says, The Prestige was the first film where we were expected by the studio to digitize the negative and edit electronically.

We had a lot of arguments with the post-production team at Disney, but we carried on.

From The Prestige on, to this day, we have never converted to the other workflow used by most of the industry.

We continued to shoot on film, edit electronically, then take the frame numbers and cut the film by hand, and that is what goes out.

The Prestige was very much the point at which we separated from the rest of the industry, or rather, they separated from us.

And I love that section for many reasons.

One is because you see that he has very strong points of view as how he wants to work, and

he's adamant about not relenting and let anybody else convince him that he should be doing otherwise.

The second part, I think, is a lot of people want to know, like, oh, what tools do you use?

What's your setup?

What software are you using?

And I think this example of him deviating from the rest of his industry is another example that it's not the tools that matter.

It's the person.

And my favorite example of this is one of my favorite fiction authors, unfortunately, just passed away recently, Cormac McCarthy.

Cormac created novels that will likely still be right 100 years from now, and he did it on a \$50 typewriter.

He paid \$50 for his typewriter and used it for 50 years to write over 5 million words.

It's not the tools, it's the person.

And what I love about the fact is on his very next movie, he proves that he can still keep his workflow and still have massive commercial success.

So he does The Dark Knight.

The Dark Knight is his first billion-dollar blockbuster.

And the way to think about this is that the money that's made on this film, this is going to buy him the last word, the money is going to allow him to do what he always wanted to do.

That'll make more sense in a minute.

The film's eventual box office take was \$1 billion.

I cannot get my head around it, Nolan said.

Nolan's ascent up to this point had been gradual.

Even something of a zigzag, following a pattern of advance and regroup, advance and regroup, always pressing ahead, but always against resistance.

Suddenly, his position at Warner Brothers went from solid to unassailable.

And this is what he said about that experience.

It changed a lot of things, but the immediate thing that it did that was extraordinary was it allowed me to do whatever I wanted as the next film.

Everything up until that moment had been a fight or a struggle one way or another.

And suddenly I'm realizing, oh, I'm going to get the last word.

Every filmmaker would give their teeth for that.

So finally, you've got it.

What are you going to do with it?

For the first time, I was able to step back and say, okay, what do I want to do now?

And I've always wanted to do inception.

So what does he mean?

What do you mean?

You always want to do inception.

Remember, he's 16 years old.

He's laying them in the dark.

He's got this idea, the kernel of idea for inception.

I skipped over this part of the book, but five years previous, he had sat down and started writing inception.

He thought he was going to do inception after he did Insomnia.

And he gets like three quarters of the way through the script and he's like, I can't nail the ending.

I think it was like 80 pages into the script and he had to abandon it.

He's like, I can't figure out how to do it.

And I love the fact that he asked himself like, what do I want to do most right now?

What am I willing to obsess about over the next few years?

I think it's a great idea to like pause and ask yourself that question.

And so this is yet another thing that James Cameron and Christopher Nolan have a comment.

The importance of dreams in their work.

James Cameron talked about dreaming up Avatar 20 years or 30 years before he made it.

Same thing with the ending for the movie Aliens way before he actually did it.

And we see Christopher Nolan saying the exact same things.

I've had dreams that have informed narrative choices.

I first dreamed the end of the Dark Knight trilogy film.

This is fascinating.

The one thing about Christopher Nolan, he's a very deep and soulful person.

If you do decide to buy the book, which I highly recommend, I would take your time reading through it.

You would be fascinated by how much his favorite novels or literature or past films or even pieces of art influence his work and they pop up in the work.

It was very fascinating to read this book.

Film has a relationship to our own dreams that's difficult to articulate, but there's an extrapolation of your experience working things out through your dreams.

You're hoping to make connections and find things that are hidden from you while you're living your life or being in the world.

I think that's what films do for us.

They're very dreamlike experiences.

And one of the influences that Christopher Nolan brings up over and over again in the book is the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges.

Christopher Nolan has lost count on how many of Jorge's books that he bought and gave out its gifts.

But he makes this really important point, why he speaks so much about his influences.

It's the fact that stories can add to your own thinking, but you need your own foundation to add them to first.

And so some of Jorge's work is influencing inception, but he makes the point that as you're reading these short stories, you have to have something rattling inside of you that already connects with what you're reading or what you're watching.

But if you're not already predisposed to that, it just comes to as a story and it doesn't necessarily spark anything.

I think that's true with books.

Obviously, it's also true with podcasts.

The stories can add to your own thinking, but you need your own foundation to add them to first.

And so my favorite Christopher Nolan film is Dunkirk.

I've watched it like four or five times.

It annoys my wife all the time.

She's like, let's watch something.

I was like, how do we watch Dunkirk?

She's like, you've seen it five times.

After Dunkirk, I think my favorite Christopher Nolan film is Inception, and this was incredible.

What a paragraph.

Inception was thus the work of half a lifetime.

An idea first conceived by Nolan when he was 16, nursed at university, elaborated upon when he came to Hollywood, and finally executed in the wake of the Dark Knight's success.

Inception took input from its maker at every major point of his life.

The schoolboy, the university student, the Hollywood neophyte, the success story, and the father.

And so by the time he's doing Inception, I think all of his four kids are already born.

And this is what I meant about running, he tries to run his career as a family business.

His wife is his partner and his kids are on set.

He has a great line on this.

She says, I know it's more fun when we're all together and we can do the thing together.

That's why we keep it as a family business.

And then let's go back to this idea of just wanting to live and work in an analog world.

The book is fantastic because you can see all the drawings.

He writes out so many things by hand, like pen and paper, pencil and paper.

But this is a fascinating idea.

And it's very similar to when I read about the founding engineering genius of Royce.

And it's this idea of like, first you flip it.

So when Christopher Nolan first has an idea, his first instinct is to flip the idea backwards, right?

And then he'll write it out or he'll draw it out and essentially he's like turning an idea into like a three-dimensional object that he can actually hold in his hands.

This is very similar to Henry Royce.

Henry Royce would have an idea for some kind of thing he wants to prove on the cars that he's manufacturing.

And so he would describe the idea and then he'd have a wooden model of like the part made.

He wanted to hold it in his hands to touch it, to be able to turn that idea into this three-dimensional object.

And so you see these drawings and you see these diagrams that Christopher Nolan has throughout the book.

And the way he talks about this is really a unique idea where he's like, well, that's the way storytelling, you take storytelling, right?

And you turn it into a three-dimensional exercise like a sculpture.

And so he's doing that with films and Henry Royce did that with parts that eventually went into Rolls Royce cars.

It's the same idea in two different domains.

I thought it was fascinating.

And so as the author and Christopher Nolan are going through, so they work his way, they talk about it like his other life, then they go through every single movie he's ever made and he talks about the influences they had, why he made that decision, which I thought was fascinating.

But this idea of, hey, I want to live in the real world and I don't want to be dependent upon all these technologies was something that comes up over and over again.

There's a great metaphor.

He talks about it.

It's a metaphor for his filmmaking, but I think it's a metaphor for anybody building a business.

And he says, there's a danger when we start to rely on particular technologies or on corporations that manage our information and track our movements.

They're encouraging dependency, meaning the people making these companies making these technologies.

And so this is the metaphor it goes into, which I think it has to do with the same thing with making films and also building businesses.

One of the things I try to teach my kids is that when we go to a new city, I like to wander around and get lost and then explain to them how I've managed to find my way without a phone and without a map.

I just embrace it.

I say, look, we're going to get lost, but we will find our way, but we will find our way.

It's something that applies to filmmaking very, very directly because you look at the plan or the set that you're building.

So in this case, like the screenplay or the actual physical set that he's building.

And you're always reconciling two dimensional imagery.

So the idea in your mind with three dimensional space.

And that's something that he repeats over and over again.

He likes these stripped down screenplays, but he's like, as you can have the best screenplay in the world, and it's still only going to have a loose association with the finished product.

Just like if you make a business plan before you do anything, it's going to have a loose association with the product you build or the performance of the business.

I think I love that metaphor and especially that attitude of, listen, we're going to get lost, but we will find our way.

And so one way he finds his ways over time, he's learned how to trust his instinct.

After a decade or two of practice, he realized that the job of director and a lot of what he has to do comes from his either unconscious or his instinct.

And this word instinct was used so many times in the book, I had an idea while I was going through this and I went to my Readwise app and I was like, okay, how many other founders

that you and I have covered had ideas or said similar things about the importance of being able to trust your instinct.

And so this is the list that I came up with.

Steve Jobs, Edwin Land, Danny Meyer, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Jordan, Sidney Harmon, Rick Rubin, Andy Beale, Harry Snyder, James Cameron, Felix Dennis, Claude Shannon and Mark Twain.

And now we add Christopher Nolan to that list as well.

So there's two things that surprised me about the making of Interstellar.

One, did you know Interstellar was originally supposed to be made by Steven Spielberg?

I didn't know that.

That surprised me.

The second thing is that I had no idea that Christopher Nolan's approach to work was very similar to Jeff Bezos when he was at Amazon before he starts working on a movie, right?

Nolan will pull out his typewriter.

Yes, typewriter.

Remember, this guy is all analog, right?

So he will pull out a typewriter and then he will type up a one-page summary of his vision of the film.

One, he likes to know where he's going, but two, he makes the point.

He says, I'll bang out a page or a paragraph of what I think the film needs, like the bigger picture, what it is, the thing that I'm trying to do.

And then I put that away and I come back to it every now and again, just to remind myself because you get lost in movies as these things start, right?

So he's like, essentially, he has this idea where he wants to know what the heart...

He uses the term that you want to know what the heart of the movie is and you want to do that first, right?

If you have an idea for a business or a product you want to create, you want to do that first because as you get into it, you'll get distracted.

He says, because nothing is exactly the way you want it to be.

It never is.

Budget, location, set, all that.

So you start making all these decisions and I won't say they're compromises because they're not necessarily, but it is very difficult once you're fully engaged.

It can be very hard to remember what it is you were trying to do in the first place.

Let me read this excerpt from the Everything Store, which is the biography of Jeff Bezos.

Every time...

This is exactly what Amazon does, right?

It's like, they start every new product, they start at the end and then they work backwards and their ending is the press release.

Every time a new feature or a product was proposed, Jeff Bezos decreed that the narrative should take the shape of a mock press release.

The goal was to get employees to distill a pitch into its purest essence.

What is the heart of this product, right?

He just said it's the heart of the film.

It is the heart of this product.

To start from something the customer might see, the public announcement and then work backwards.

Bezos did not believe anyone could make a decision about a feature or product without knowing precisely how it would be communicated to the world.

I love that.

And one way that Nolan figures out and adheres to what the heart of the movie is, I always say the best description of a founder I've ever heard is that the founder is the guardian of the company's soul.

The guardian of the company's soul, the director is the same thing for the film.

And so he puts himself into his movies.

And so as his kids are aging, he's realizing his time with them is limited.

So the original script for Interstellar, Matthew McConaughey's character, if you've seen the movie, it's his relationship with his daughter.

Eventually, at the beginning, it was supposed to be his son.

But Christopher Nolan's daughter was the same age at the time he's making Interstellar that the character is an interstellar.

So he changed it from a boy to a girl.

And this is why he talks about this.

I very much related to the dilemma of somebody who's having to go off and do this thing, leaving his kids whom he dearly wants to be with, but he really wants to go and do this thing.

My job is something that I absolutely love.

I consider myself unbelievably lucky to do it, but there's a lot of guilt involved in doing that, a lot of guilt.

I have a daughter who's the same age as the character.

He's talking about the comparison between his own life and then obviously what Matthew McConaughey is doing in that movie.

And then they're having a discussion because he's got this close friendship and creative partnership with Hans Zimmer and Hans said something is excellent.

And Hans kids, I think are like 15 or 16 at the time he says this, he says, once your children are born, you can never look at yourself through your own eyes anymore.

You always look at yourself through their eyes.

And I love that looking at yourself through your kids eyes.

I think the large part what drives me is I want my kids, I want to do something that I can point to and I want them to be proud of me that like pushes me forward that keeps me working harder, keeps me trying to improve, keeps me trying to make something completely focused on making something that makes somebody else's life better because I want to see my life through their eyes.

That's an incredible, incredible quote from Hans Zimmer.

Once your children are born, you can never look at yourself through your own eyes anymore.

You always look at yourself through their eyes.

And I think we would all make better decisions if we analyze the decision we're about to make as if our children see the result of that decision that we're making.

And there's another story about the making of Interstellar that I think compares in contrast.

Christopher Nolan and James Cameron, they'll both grow to great lengths to accomplish what they want to do.

Cameron will do 405 different takes of like one CGI or one scene using CGI.

Nolan will go to great lengths not to have to use CGI.

So if you've seen the beginning of Interstellar where they like drive through that cornfield, Nolan was so adamant about not using CGI for that shot that they actually planted, he had planted 500 acres of corn just to be able to get to that shot.

And the funny thing was that the crop grew so well that they actually sold the corn for a profit.

So previously Nolan said, Hey, I have my first instinct when I have an idea is to flip it. Then I try to make something and like I turn it from a two dimensional idea to a three dimensional like something I can actually hold in my hand, I can walk around, I can actually think more deeply about it that way.

Another thing that he does is like trying to do, trying to take his approach to like a genre, a specific genre of a movie is to do like to make a problem, a product defined by all the things it lacks.

And if you've seen Dunkirk, I think Dunkirk is the movie that describes this the best. Like just look at it.

If you haven't seen it, think right now it's available.

You can watch it on Netflix.

Just watch the first five minutes and you'll understand exactly what he means by that. He's like, how many World War Two movies have there been?

There's a ton, right?

And usually they have a very similar structure.

And so he talks about, I was like, well, how do I make a fascinating and compelling movie about war that doesn't have all the stuff that you normally think that wars have?

And so he's describing Dunkirk and he was actually influenced by two movies, Gravity and then Mad Max Fury Road.

And so he says, it is pure present tense.

It's pure climax.

There would be no shots of generals pushing boats across the map, no Churchill, no politics. From its very first sequence, we are given the film's starkly moral calculus, survive or die.

What I did was strip away the backstory for Dunkirk.

And before I go on, what's even crazier about that is like the entire set.

If you watch the movie, it's like, everything happens within like a two mile stretch of beach.

So he says, I wanted to go in more minimalist directions to the point where we made a war film in which we don't use any of the visually chaotic devices, lots of quick cuts, lots of activity, lots of smoke, lots of fire, bombs flying everywhere, you know, exactly like when he describes this, like how many war they're all, they are very similar.

And so his point is Dunkirk is entirely about the absence of those things.

And because Nolan has this insistence that he wants to film as much as possible out in the real world, he constantly has to deal with the unpredictability of weather. Now this was a fascinating paragraph because it talks, when you read in the book and you also hear people that work with him describe them, they talk about like his intolerance to fatigue.

He seems completely indifferent to like extreme temperatures, whether it's cold or heat. And this is what he says about that, I'm known in the film business for having good luck with the weather.

That's inaccurate.

I often have terrible luck with the weather, but my philosophy is to just shoot no matter what the weather is.

I'm always shooting no matter what the weather is.

Just keep going.

Letting everybody on the crew and cast know that we're really serious about doing that.

No matter what the conditions are.

So they're not looking out the window first thing and going, oh, well, we won't, we will or we will not shoot today.

This doesn't just apply to weather, but I think it's a great metaphor for his entire approach to getting the film made.

I am going to keep going no matter what, and I make sure that my team knows it.

And then I think the starting and ending point where Christopher Nolan is the same.

It all comes back to his original obsession of cinema itself.

The way he talks about movies is very similar to me, the way, like, I described the way Enzo Ferrari would describe his products is the way you would describe your lover.

Christopher Nolan has a bit of that.

And this is an example.

Directing is a job where you have to know a bit of everything, jack of all trades and master of none.

I know that I've never had the dedication or the talent to be a musician, but I'm musically inclined and I know how to use that in my work.

I could write a screenplay, but I don't think I could write a novel.

I can draw a picture, but not well enough to be a storyboard artist.

I'm a passionate fan of other filmmakers and a great believer in the job of directing.

I think it's a great job.

The thing that makes films completely unique is the combination of subjectivity, the visceral experience with shared experience and empathy with the rest of the audience.

It's a borderline, mystical experience.

Movies have this very, very unique mixture of this objective and immersive, but it is also shared.

It doesn't happen with any other medium, which is why it's fabulous and forever.

And that is where I'll leave it for the full story.

I highly recommend getting the book.

And then if you do buy the book, take your time with it.

It is giant.

I have the hardcover.

It's not quite a coffee table book, but it is really, really detailed and beautiful.

So I would definitely take your time going through it.

If you buy the book using the link that's in the show notes of your podcast player, you'll be supporting the podcast at the same time.

That is 313 books down 1,000 to go, and I'll talk to you again soon.