

**A Conversation with Michael Jr.,
Comedian and Author of *Funny How Life Works***

Q. Congratulations on *Funny How Life Works*! It is such a great read. Had you always thought you'd sit down and write a book?

A. It really came from a shift in mindset that I had. When I first started doing comedy, I was all about getting laughs from people. On some level, any comedian will probably recognize that the reason you get on stage is really for acceptance. Like, "Hey, you laughed. You must like me."

When I was already a pretty established comedian, I was outside of this club, and right before I got on stage, I experienced this change. I felt like instead of getting laughs from people, I was supposed to give them an opportunity to laugh. I started shifting to asking a different question before I got on stage, and the shift transformed life for me. The question I'd ask myself before hitting the stage was, "how can I give them an opportunity to laugh?" Then, in my life, I started asking myself, "What can I give to this audience?" And by audience, it could be a group in front of me when I was on stage or whoever I'm talking to across the dinner table.

I didn't feel worthy enough to write a book. Then, I had a revelation of, "Snap! There's so much I could give if I write these stories down and connect the way I can." So writing this book actually came out of a desire to give—because I know some people, unlike myself, actually like to open up a book, curl up by a fire, and read. Those people always say stuff like, "The book was so much better." There is no way the book is better. The movie is always better.

Q. An author has never told me there's no way the book was better. This is a first.

A. Yeah. I'm still waiting on the movie to come out on calculus. The book was horrible. I read it in high school.

Q. Your book has so many great stories in it—some from high school, actually. You include stories from your childhood, hilarious stories, behind-the-scenes stories from the comedy world—all kinds of stories. Was there a story that was especially fun for you to relive as you wrote it?

A. When I'd tell a story before, I was most interested in what would make them laugh. Now that I've shifted to asking myself what I can give them instead of take or earn, I start with the punchline in mind and ask myself how I can get them to the punchline—the point. How can I make them feel the meaning behind why this is funny?

I can add the funny later. So in writing this book, I thought about what stories would have the most impact, knowing that the funny would just follow. It's almost like I'm now working in reverse, compared to what I used to do.

One that sticks out for me is the story called "Coming Out of the Pit." It's set in the oil change place where I worked, and my dad was the manager. I was down in the pit, working, and another guy who was working didn't realize my dad was the manager. This other guy was racist and making comments. My dad came to my defense and literally lifted this dude up off of his feet. That's what I could see from down below, where I was.

It's an amazing story about a father protecting his son, even when he's in a low place. There's so many parallels there it brings tears to my eyes: That's exactly what The Father does for his children—"The" with a capital T. At some point, we're all in a pit, whether we recognize it or not. We all also have a Father who wants to give us permission to come up out of the pit. He'll snatch us out if he needs to, but we have to lift our hand up towards him. He's not just going to grab us to grab us. You have to know he's there, first of all—otherwise, why are you lifting your hand up?

Today, this pandemic, civil unrest, and even the 2020 election have all put a lot of people in the pit.

Q. You write a lot about your dad in this book. What did he say or show you that you think about the most today?

A. I think the biggest thing my dad has shown me is probably how to talk to people. He's naturally funny. Everybody just gravitates to him. Growing up, we always had a lot of people in our house. At first, I thought it was drugs. [Laughter] I'm joking. I realized it's because he has such charisma. My wife says my mother is "literally the sweetest person in the world." My parents are both amazing.

When I first got the job at the oil change place, I'd talk to people like, "Yo, like, here's what's up with your oil, dawg." My dad explained to me that you have to meet people where they are. You can't force them to come where you are until they know you enough or you build rapport.

I literally took that on stage. When I got up on stage as a comedian, I knew if I did certain things—if I gave first—people would be attracted to that and would want to come closer to where I am, so we could at least meet halfway and move together to someplace better.

Every story in *Funny How Life Works* does that, too. I'm extending my hand so you can meet me halfway. Together, we'll get to someplace better.

Q. It does seem like this year, the country has started having a more widespread, deeper dialogue about race. This is something you've been talking about in form or another for a long time. Does this year feel different? If so, how?

A. I think people are more aware now. I had a meeting with some guys—I think there were about 12 people in the room, almost all white, many with their own jets. I'm the brother in the room. I liked all these people a lot. We were close. I told them they could ask me questions, and they did. We started talking about some of these issues. I'd talked about them before, but I'd always used comedy around it because I believe the more we can laugh at our differences, the less important they become.

So, I came up with a question for those guys. I said, "If God came up to you right now and said, 'Hey, I've been thinking. What if you could choose the race you want to be for the rest of your lives? Just tell me which one you choose, and then I'm going to make it happen.'"

Then I said, "So which race would you choose?"

They all sat around for a second before one guy said immediately, "I would stay white."

I said, "Why would you do that?"

He said, "Well, because I like how I have it."

This guy and I are close friends. I said to him, "I just want to point out how you never even considered another race or nationality." He paused—stayed quiet.

Then another guy said, "Well, I wouldn't want to be Muslim."

I said, "Well, why not?" And he started thinking. I could see how disappointed he grew in himself. He began to see how much bias he held against them.

Then, a Filipino girl said, "Well, I don't think I'd want to be white. It seems like you're always dealing with some sort of sickness."

Another guy said, "I don't think I'd want to be black. Black people have it pretty hard."

There is no right answer. There is no wrong answer. Once you pull out the fact that you didn't choose your race, the game changes significantly. The whole room was in awe. It got really quiet and awkward. I think everyone should ponder the question themselves. It wakes you up in a significant way.

Q. How do you feel about the various movements bringing attention to these issues right now?

A. As far as Black Lives Matter, look. I have some friends there and other friends who are all upset with them. Here's what people are missing: Black Lives Matter is an organization. It's also a statement. You can disagree with the organization, but you can't go around saying, "Oh, I can't stand this whole Black Lives Matter thing."

You don't think Black lives matter? Hold on. Just think about the statement. How you feel about the statement, and the organization can be two separate things.

Q. You share the real story behind one of your most famous jokes about you and a white woman running. The gist: She's running from you, and you start running too, looking over your shoulder, trying to figure out what you're both trying to escape. You share the pain behind it all—behind, realizing she was running from you. Why did you feel compelled to tell the true story behind the joke?

A. Some people might read this story and think that lady was racist. I don't really think she was. I think the stuff she'd seen on TV and other stuff she'd become aware of made her react that way. I mean, I don't know her personally. We didn't get a chance to talk.

I wanted to write that story to show people how even when things are hurting, and it looks super bad, your circumstances can absolutely be used to help people. The fact that I was able to take that scenario and turn it into comedy to make millions of people laugh: That's how I wanted to pivot. I feel like that is the punchline of the story.

I want people to look at their own stories and say, "Wait a minute. How can I use this story to help someone else? How do I need to look at this story differently?" If I would have continued to look at it as me as a victim, discriminated against, and just ugly, I would still be sitting there sulking. Instead, I was able to take this seasoning I call comedy and put it on top of this thing, then serve it as a meal to a lot of people.

Great things can happen when you start asking questions about what you can give others based on what's happened to you.

Q. You also write about an experience you had with the police. One of the most moving parts of the book is where you share what you did after that terrifying exchange with the police—what you did for your neighbor and her kids in a moment when everyone would have understood if you'd just locked your door and ignored everyone around you. Can you tell us that story again and then explain why you decided to share it?

A. I was 19-years-old, and working hard at this oil change place. I'd decided I wanted to buy my own oil change place, so I was working super hard, 70 hours a week. I pulled into the parking lot at my apartment complex one night and noticed a gas company truck parked there. Well, we didn't have gas at those apartments. Everything was electric. I knew something wasn't right—that the place was getting staked out.

We make you known.

Anyway, I came home one night, and sure enough, the police are raiding the place. I saw the police scatter as I pulled up, but they didn't think I saw them. They had on dark clothes—like street clothes. I pulled up and slowly opened the door to my car. I was breathing kind of hard. I was kind of scared because I knew this could get ugly, super fast. I rolled my window down, turned my car off. I put my hands outside the window and said, "Officers, I have nothing to do with why you're here. I'm just coming home from work. Please, I don't have anything to do with this." I hear nothing. It's completely silent. The fact that they didn't even acknowledge they were there—it was a pretty scary moment.

I said it again. I still heard nothing. Then I started saying what I was doing out loud: "I'm about to open the door slowly. I'm going to leave one hand outside the window so I can open it." I opened my door, both my hands in the air. Then 17 or 18 police officers came running out of nowhere, guns drawn. They had police dogs, too. I didn't have my ID on me. I was scared.

They thought something was up because I didn't have my ID. I said, "Listen, I have the key to my apartment. As soon as I get inside, that should prove I have nothing to do with this—that I live here." A guy says, "Fine."

They all followed me up the stairs. One guy was also in front of me, another beside me. We walked up the stairs like it's a cartoon or something—a pile of people, all moving at the same time. When we got to my apartment, I pulled my key. I twisted the key and the door unlocked. I exhaled like, "Yes, this thing is over."

Then, these guys burst into my apartment and said, "Get your ID." I explained to them that it was on top of the cabinet above the stove. One officer didn't like me. I don't know why. He said to me, "You go get it."

You don't understand how scary that is. There is no reason for me to reach for my own driver's license over a cabinet. But I walked over, and I reached—slowly, slowly. I talked through the whole thing. As I was reaching, that same officer put his gun to my head and pulled the hammer back on the gun. I felt the vibration on my head. I had tears rolling down my face. I didn't know what to do. I don't remember what I said or if I was able to speak at all. I handed my ID to another guy. I guess he made eye contact with the guy who had his gun to my head. That guy lowered the gun and immediately left the apartment. The other officers stuck around to see if I was okay. Like, what was I going to do? Report him or something? Who am I going to talk to?

They left, and I sat on the floor and felt like I didn't matter at all. That could have been the end of my life, and there was no way anyone would have ever known what really took place except for my parents, who knew my character. But who was going to listen to them? I remember sitting on the floor of my apartment, crying. Angry, upset, fearful tears were coming down the side of my face.

We make you known.

Thirty minutes later, there was a knock at the door. The knock was so hard the door blew open. It was a lady, crying and hysterical. In broken English—she spoke Spanish—she says, "They took everything." She had two kids with her. I realized she was either the girlfriend or the wife of the guy who was selling the drugs—the guy they just took to jail. The kids were crying. She was broke. They had nothing.

I reached into my pocket and pulled the money out of my wallet—the same wallet that the police officer was going to use as a reason to end my life. I handed her all the money I had. She gave me a hug. Then she just took her kids and left. When she left, I started to feel a little better. I know it was because what those officers—especially that one officer—took from me made me feel like I didn't matter. But she came to me and said, "I'm hurt. I need help. Please help me."

She needed me. It was an amazing, powerful moment. I'm sure it's what helped me heal and to forgive that officer. I don't know what that officer had been through or how he'd been hurt. He had to have been hurt to be willing to hurt me like that.

It's like the jogger story. Now I have this story, too, that is 100% true that people can identify with. It can deliver something to them that could help them deliver something to somebody else. That's what is amazing about that.

Q. You also share a story about reaching out to comedian Michael Richards after he had that public outburst. Why did you feel it was important to include the fact that you did that in this book?

A. It was funny. People knew that me and Michael were cool. Right after all of that stuff happened, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal reached out to me—somehow, they knew that we had been in touch, and they wanted to share our story. But I didn't want to share it because I didn't want to infringe on our friendship when he was still going through what he was going through.

As I was writing this book and thinking about what the world is dealing with right now, I thought about this story. I thought to myself, "How can this help people? How could they apply it to their life?" I prayed about it a lot. And I felt at peace about adding it to the book because I feel like it's really going to help some people.

I don't think I've ever shared it publicly before. I'm super excited to see how people respond to it. To this day, Michael is a great dude. Period. He's a really nice guy. Period. My wife has a degree in culinary arts. She burned some cookies one time. We were out in the backyard, laughing and playing, and the cookies burned. Well, she still knows how to cook. Just because she burned those cookies doesn't mean she's a cookie burner.

Q. You say a goal is like a punchline—can you explain that a bit?

A. Yeah—it's really that a purpose is the punchline. In comedy, the way it works is there is a setup, and there's a punchline. If you see a guy walking down the street and he trips and falls, you'll laugh. Well, actually, chances are if you're a woman, you're not going to laugh. You'll say, "Oh, are you okay?" Dudes, though, we're going to crack up laughing. The reason people laugh at that is because there is a formula that took place: The setup is the fact that you've seen thousands of people walk down the street before. You've done it. You know it's pretty easy. The punchline is the fact that dude couldn't do it. That's what caused you to laugh.

In the setup, the comedian will use talent and resources to ensure they and the audience are moving in the same direction. The punchline occurs when the comedian changes that direction in a way you're not expecting. When you catch on to the change—you perceive the punchline—and the results are a revelation, fulfillment, and joy, expressed through laughter.

Life is the same way. Your setup is what you've received: You may be married. You've got a car. You were able to afford buying my book. You have a degree. Whatever it is for you, your setup is what you receive. Your punchline is your purpose.

After I explain this to people, a lot of them can't tell me what their purpose is. Your punchline is what you were called to deliver—and we were all put here to deliver something. There are problems on this planet, and people are actually the solution—but when you don't know your punchline, you'll feel a void. You'll feel like something is missing. You'll think to fill that void, you need more setup: "If I could just get married." "If I could just buy a house." "If I could just get this business."

I have a friend who makes a ridiculous amount of money. He's amazingly successful. One time, he said, "Man, when you make this much money, and you don't know God, the only thing left to do when you get to the top is jump." In other words, you have to understand that you have a purpose—a punchline.

Whatever setbacks you've been through in life are part of your setup. Everything from me struggling to read to the jogger to the police putting a gun to my head—those setbacks are part of my setup so that I can deliver what I've been called to deliver.

In *Funny How Life Works*, we are using stories to help people stir up what's inside of them already. We use laughter to do it. It's important to understand that the brain is always trying to avoid pain and seeking pleasure: those two things. This book gives you both. When you laugh, you retain more information. The beautiful thing about that is after you close this book, your brain will continue to want more information on how you can do better. Why? Because the brain can't separate comedy and laughter from the application in the book showing you how to live a better life. It's all strategic.

So as you go out to seek more information and find your punchline, think about what you always notice: What problems in the world always grab your attention when you

We make you known.

hear about them in the news? What makes you think, "Somebody's got to do something!" Maybe that somebody is you.

About Michael Jr.

One of today's most gifted comedians, Michael Jr. brings laughter and understanding to audiences all over the world. He has spent years making laughter common in uncommon places such as homeless shelters and prisons and works not just to entertain his audiences but to empower them. In addition to headlining tours throughout the country and acclaimed appearances on The Tonight Show, The Late-Late Show, Jimmy Kimmel Live, BET's ComicView, and so much more, Michael Jr.'s résumé includes an appearance in the feature film War Room, as well as starring roles in Selfie Dad and More Than Funny. Michael Jr.'s first book, Funny How Life Works, is due March 2, 2021. www.FunnyHowLifeWorks.com

We make you known.

231 public square | suite 300 | pmb #45 franklin, tn 37064 | choicepublicity.com