



## Mock Interview with Author Dan Grajek

We have here live in our studio, our guest Dan Grajek, the author of *The Last Hobo: A Clueless Detroit Kid Hitchhikes Across America the Summer the Seventies Ran Out of Gas*.

*Welcome to our show, Dan! So this is your first book. What inspired you to write it?*

I've always enjoyed telling stories. I entered adulthood with a treasure trove of them. By age twenty, I'd hitchhiked from Detroit to New York once and California twice. All my life, people had encouraged me to write a book about my adventures. Now in my fifties, I finally got a chance to do just that.

*Is it nonfiction?*

Not exactly. It's strictly based on entries in my travel journal, but I fudged and rearranged things a little for the sake of the reader. As what Huck Finn said about his creator: "There are things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."

You might say *The Last Hobo* is part travel memoir, part coming-of-age drama, and part slapstick comedy.

*Your cover illustrations suggest it's some fantastic American folk tale. It reminds me of some storybook I read as a kid.*

Well, you can't judge a book by its cover. My book is actually very real. In fact, it celebrates cold, hard reality.

*How did you come up with the title *The Last Hobo*?*

The adjective "Last" has a melancholy ring to it. It sets the tone of the entire book. It implies a way of life that's sadly disappearing, sort of like *The Last of the Mohicans*.

The figure of The Hobo was the original inspiration of my hitchhiking trips. When I was a teen-ager, I fantasied about being a hobo after seeing the movie *Bound for Glory*. Then, at age 17, circumstances prompted me to act out the fantasy. My book's last chapter explains how this happened.

*Why is it at the end and not the beginning?*

It's presented as a flashback during the climax when Ted, my alter-ego, successfully boards a moving freight train for a hundred mile ride from Sidney, Nebraska to Cheyenne, Wyoming. This tricky maneuver—known as "hopping a train"—is what hobos are best known for. By the way, I don't recommend anyone doing this.

*Can you briefly tell us your origin story?*

Sure. My boyhood friends and I used to hang out at the nearby railroad tracks, a place we knew was off-limits. The tracks were to us what Cardiff Hill was to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. It was

our place to escape to and explore. We got into all kinds of mischief there, putting stuff on the tracks, smoking cigarettes, and climbing buildings.

On one hot afternoon in July of '77, my friend Joe and I ran out of things to do. To make matters worse, Joe was lovesick. All he talked about was a girl he'd met in Florida. But there was only one problem: she lived in New York, 650 miles away. "If I could only see Gail right now," Joe kept repeating as we walked along the tracks.

Fortunately for me, a sound like thunder drowned out Randal's incessant talk about Gail.

A train was coming, so we quickly moved out of the way.

After the train went by, one of us said to the other, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Simultaneously, we both came up with the same crazy idea: "Hey, let's hop a train to New York just like hobos."

*Did you actually pull it off?*

Well, yes and no, we thought about it and decided train-hopping is too risky. We opted to hitchhike to New York instead because we thought it was much safer.

*Hitchhiking safe? That's a joke!*

Exactly. But, being young and stupid, we thought we were invincible. Thumbing for rides allowed us to have our cake and eat too. We could be hobos without messing with trains.

*But you did get to hop that train in Nebraska. Was that the first time?*

Yes, it was weird. It was like going through the last initiation rite of becoming a real hobo, similar to the sacrament of confirmation.

*What is it about hobos that you found so compelling?*

Their freedom and independence. They come and go as they please. They don't answer to anybody but themselves. All they do is wander. According to the fantasy at least, their lives are packed with adventure.

*Most people imagine a hobo as a sad, homeless person panhandling on the street.*

But that's a bum not a hobo. Most people consider the two synonymous. But they're not the same thing. Hobos travel and get jobs; bums stay in one place and don't work. A hobo is another name for a "migrant worker." He chooses to do temporary jobs so he can roam to his heart's content. He lives cheaply in order to not be attached to anything.

*What's the central message in your novel?*

It's about freedom. It's mainly aimed at young people and the young-at-heart. What do young people want? They want to be free. They yearn to "do their own thing." My story shows what happens when you take this notion to the extreme. What are the consequences, good or bad?

*I think everyone can relate to that. Most young people find a certain joy and exhilaration of being out on their own. But, along with that, they painfully discover their own limitations. Does your book address that?*

Yeah, absolutely. Like I said, my book is ultimately about reality, which has a nasty habit of intruding on one's fantasies. Sure, the real world makes you realize your limitations. Probably the biggest limitation of all is having to be "tied down" by other people. The hobo life can get awfully lonely.

*Let's get into some of the specifics of your book. It takes place in the summer of 1979 when you and your buddy hitchhike from Detroit to California, but it only covers nine consecutive days of the trip. Why is that?*

I thought that particular segment – from Madison, Wisconsin to Cheyenne, Wyoming – was a pretty good representation of the entire trip. It captures the essence of our social encounters, our ups and downs, and so forth.

In addition, that juncture in time was quite extraordinary. It was a Fourth-of-July *week*. Since the Fourth fell on a Wednesday in 1979, people started celebrating it the previous weekend, the following weekend, and of course, the five days in-between.

Why is that important? The idea of America was front-and-center on people's minds for those nine days. This gave me plenty of yarn to reflect on this socio-political entity we call the United States of America.

*You had noted that July of '79 was an important month in U.S. history. Tell us about that.*

Well, 1979 was a transitional year as a whole. There was high drama going on. President Jimmy Carter's approval rating hit rock bottom. Anti-government fervor was breaking out everywhere. A new presidential candidate came into the limelight – Ronald Reagan, a man no important person thought could to win. He became this phenomenon much like Donald Trump today.

*Wow! Your book sounds very timely. In many ways, 2016 is a lot like 1979 when the American people's anger at politicians is at a fever pitch. Now, instead of the Reagan era, we face the prospect of an age of Trump.*

In '79, people were anxious about the future of this country. They were edgy because of the high gas prices. The Iranian revolution made us worry about radical Islam for the first time. America's ornery mood was even given a name: *malaise*, a word forever associated with President Carter.

*How did these events affect you?*

I was just as scared as everyone else. I was thinking, "Head for the hills; it's the end of the world!"

*Your book also tells about the sudden rise of the anti-nuclear movement.*

Folks were really freaking out about the environment. In April of that year, a major accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania. Dangerous levels of radiation seeped into the atmosphere. A new anti-nuke movement burst forth practically overnight. Protest rallies were held all over the country.

*In your book, you attend one of those rallies in South Dakota. What stood out in your mind about that experience?*

I saw a disconnect between older and younger participants. The older ones – those around age thirty – desperately wanted to revive the sixties. The younger set seemed to be more interested in the party.

*A major theme in your book is the end of an era – the seventies, yet many of your characters are associated with the sixties, particularly the activists and hippies.*

There were quite a few of those people left in the late-seventies. You might call them die-hard idealists. They refused to surrender to the apathy and cynicism of the seventies. But you could tell it was wearing on them. They seemed dislocated, alienated, and even lost. Their way of thinking was rapidly going out-of-style. Time had passed them by.

The book could have easily been called *The Last Hippy* because Ted gets fully immersed in the culture of the hippies, just when it was getting increasingly unpopular.

*You're talking about when Ted and Pete stumble on "another Woodstock" in rural Wisconsin, the place called Poverty Gulch?*

Yeah, it was the biggest bash we've ever seen. Obviously it was nowhere near the scale of real Woodstock – but that was the going fantasy.

*Your book gives a lengthy account of Poverty Gulch. Clearly, it made a lasting impression on you. Sum up what you experienced there.*

Well, it was like a religious experience. There we were in a hippy community near a town barely on the map. A married couple had built a log cabin in woods and grew their own food like 19<sup>th</sup> century homesteaders. They even dressed like pioneers

Just hours after we arrived, the valley was invaded by hundreds of like-minded people from all over the country.

It was like heaven touched earth. I was suddenly surrounded by a multitude of folks who appreciated the concept of The Hobo. They lived the code of "the individual" to the hilt, yet they were a tight-knit community. Drugs were used to reach the higher consciousness.

I imagined myself living in a place like this – far, far away from the burning cities.

*But you also had serious misgivings about Poverty Gulch.*

Oh yeah, I was thinking it was utopia and paradise and everything, but the place seriously challenged the way he was raised. Everyone was indulging in "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." Part of me wanted to dive in headlong, but another part was holding back. It was a struggle. I kept wondering: Is mother right or these people?

*In your book, People are not only defined by time – the sixties, the seventies, or whenever – but by place. Ted is clearly a product of his hometown Detroit.*

Yes, the book has a lot of references to the Motor City. As a writer, my place of origin is the gift that keeps on giving. Detroit has so many great stories. It's the greatest success story and the greatest failure story rolled into one.

*Like Detroit, your book has tremendous range – it goes from the heights of joy to the depths of despair.*

My biggest influence was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. The author tended to interpret the ordinary things in life in terms some higher mystical plane. In *The Last Hobo*, I tried to emulate Kerouac's wide-eyed wonder.

At the same time, *On the Road* is profoundly sad. *The Last Hobo* tries to capture that too. Kerouac's alter-ego is like Moses. He can clearly see the Promised Land, but, he's never allowed to enter in. Being a fellow Catholic, I think I understand him pretty well. To us, sorrow is not necessarily a bad thing. We have in our belief system what they call "redemptive suffering."

*In your book, you often refer to and quote your favorite rock stars Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and John Lennon.*

You have to understand, at that time in my life, rock & roll had replaced the religion of my youth, Dylan, Springsteen, and Lennon were the enlightened rock stars. Those guys were my role models. Their words were like sacred scripture. *Rolling Stone* magazine was like the magisterium of the Catholic Church, the divinely-sanctioned interpreters of rock & roll scripture.

*I must say The Last Hobo has a compelling pace, strong climax, and moments of suspense. I can't wait to see how your characters develop in the rest of the trilogy. Can you give me a sneak peak of what you have planned for the sequels?*

The second book *The Last Hobo's Quest* will continue where this one left off. From Colorado to San Francisco, Ted checks out different religions. The book's flashbacks and flash-forwards will focus on my present-day turf – Dearborn, Michigan. Dearborn is, of course, in the news a lot because it has America's largest Muslim population. I think readers would be very interested in an inside look.

My third book, *The Last Hobo Finds Paradise*, takes place in California where Ted joins the Moonies, a religious cult. I'll just leave it at that.

Wow, it sounds like you have your plate full! I can't wait to read your other two books. We'll have to have you back on the show when the next installment of the series comes out.