Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024 / Mysterious Melania

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Hot Plate! BMC>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Maybe a lot of people in our audience have not yet read this book, but maybe they've seen promotion for this book because it's kind of been all over social media and it's been kind of in keeping with Melania's general vibe. It's been kind of weird.

MARTIN PENGELLY (FREELANCE, THE GUARDIAN): Yes, very weird. A series of short black and white videos, someone said shot in the style of a sort of 30s expressionist horror movie.  
  
SEAN: <cackles>

*<CLIP> Melania Trump: Writing This memoir has been a deeply personal and reflective journey for me as a private person who has often been the subject of public scrutiny.*

SFX: fastforward

*<CLIP> Melania Trump: Why do I stand proudly behind my nude modeling work? The more pressing question is why has the media chosen to scrutinize my celebration of the human form in a fashion photoshoot?*

SFX: fastforward

*<CLIP> Melania Trump: I never imagined my privacy would be invaded by the government here in America.*

SFX: fastforward

SEAN: Melania’s memoir .. it’s called *MELANIA* … on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

SEAN: So Melania's book, Martin, came out yesterday. When did you read it?

MARTIN: I read it last week. Middle of last week. Wednesday.

SEAN: How did you get it earlier than the rest of us?

MARTIN: I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you.

*<CLIP> TOP GUN*

*MAVERICK: That's classified.*

*Charlotte "Charlie" Blackwood: It’s what?*

SEAN: Oh my God! That's so exciting. I love it. You've got a *MELANIA* mole.

MARTIN: [chuckles]

SEAN: Martin Pengelly is a freelance reporter in Washington, D.C., who works with the *Guardian*. And it was for the *Guardian* that he read and reviewed *MELANIA*. We here at *Today, Explained* asked him if it’s a good read.

MARTIN: No, but it's a quick read.   
  
SEAN: <laughs> Awwohh.

MARTIN: Well, you know, literary critic and reporter, it's a good read in the sense that you can steam through it. I mean, I read quickly and I read it in under two hours because it's so short.

SEAN: Oh wow.

MARTIN: It's a very, very bland, carefully picked out, self-justifying memoir. It's not rigorous. I don't think the Ghostwriter’s first version has been that rigorously fact checked or checked for grammatical or style errors. It tells a very bland story of her life in Slovenia growing up.

*<CLIP> Michelle Obama: I come here as a daughter, raised on the south side of Chicago…*

SEAN: Sorry, sorry. Wrong clip.

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_0575\_02601\_Slovenia\_APM-06>

*<CLIP>: Melania Trump Republican National Convention: A small, beautiful and then communist country in Central Europe. My parents impressed on me the values that you work hard for what you want in life.*

MARTIN: How she got into modeling, how she came to New York.

*<CLIP> Melania Trump Republican National Convention: After living and working in Milan and Paris. I arrived in New York City 20 years ago and I saw both the joys and hardships of daily life.*

MARTIN: It skates over controversial things that have proved controversial, like how she got the visa, the Einstein visa, or whatever it was.

*<CLIP> CNN, Melania Trump: I came here on Visa. I flew to Slovenia every few months to stamp it and came back. I applied for Green Card and then, after a few years for, citizenship.*

*REPORTER: If that's accurate, it would mean she had a type of visa, possibly a tourist visa that needs to be updated periodically. But that type of visa does not allow working in the United States.*

MARTIN: She leaves out a lot of stuff about Donald that impinges on her. So there's no Stormy Daniels, there's no E. Jean Carroll, there's no Karen McDougal, there's no anyone else.  
  
SEAN: Hm.

MARTIN: She regularly praises Donald as someone who works incredibly hard for the country, a hero and so forth. Also at the same time giving a lot of space to how she doesn't like people who lie. So irony isn't her strong suit.

SEAN: Okay. <laughs>

MARTIN: And there's a 64 page photo insert in the middle, 64 pages of photos.

SEAN: Wow!

MARTIN: Yeah. It’s a short book. Yes, a small book. It's a…it's not a big coffee table book, but it has the coffee table feel. There's all these photos of her modeling career. And at the end, she's the and the last photos in the photo section are her hawking her NFTs…

SEAN: <laughs>  
  
MARTIN: she sells on her website. So it's it's it feels very Trumpy in that sense. It's… you could almost say vanity project?

SCORING OUT

SEAN: It definitely felt that way from the promotion of it. She doesn't get into the tough stuff with her husband. She doesn't get into how she got her visa. (I have no idea how she got her visa.) But what does she get into?

MARTIN: A good illustrative story she tells about the plagiarism scandal in 2016 at the Republican convention when she was found to have repeated sections from Michelle Obama's speech in 2008.

*<CLIP>: Michelle Obama and Melania on top of each other: You work hard for what you want in life, that your word is your and that's what you say you're going to do. And you do what you say and keep your promise.*

MARTIN: She does tell a story about that, and it's indicative of the whole Trump world thing. She describes how it came about that Michelle's words got into her speech by saying that she read them over the phone to a ghostwriter who then included them in the speech and the speech.

SEAN: Huh.

MARTIN: She was very insistent. The speech wasn't vetted, the speech wasn't checked. And this plagiarism scandal happened. But she also says in this relatively for the rest of the book, detailed account that she read the speech repeatedly practicing it and even went through it on the teleprompter a number of times to make sure she could really deliver it.   
  
SEAN: Huh.

MARTIN: So words that she admits she caused to be in the speech, she says she practiced a number of times and then says she was shocked to be told she plagiarized Ma–Michelle Obama. So, again, it's probably conspiracy, not cock up, because people are never clever enough to really do this. But it's like that shows in the copy you're reading and thinking, ‘You're just admitting that you knew about this.’

SEAN: <laughs> It's inconsistent.

MARTIN:Yeah, it's inconsistent. It's kind of nuts. And it's it's one of the more detailed pieces about her, her time in politics. And it's a self-own.  
  
SEAN: Huh.   
  
MARTIN: She also deals with the famous trip to the border:

*<CLIP> ABC News: The first lady on her way to visit those detained children. On the back of her $39 Zara jacket, the words “I really don’t care. Do you?”*

MARTIN: … and was accused of carelessness.

*<CLIP> CBC News: it was called toned deaf. That conversation is still going on. Her’s part of it: this man asking, ‘how many times can a person claim ignorance” referencing her times when she wore heels to go to a disaster zone. When she had a speech that had some suspiciously similar words to Michelle Obama*

MARTIN: She says that was meant as a message to the media. She didn't mean it … anything to do with the migrant children she was going to see. That's her way out of it. And she blames her then press secretary for mishandling the whole thing. That press secretary, Stephanie Grisham, got a book out where she detailed that event and said that when they got back to the White House, they were told off by Donald Trump, who said, you better just tell people that you were aiming that at the media.

SEAN: <laughs> Oh no.

MARTIN: I mean, the terribly sad thing is that I know that because I've read all these books.

SEAN: I’m sorry. <laughs>

MARTIN: I know. But it doesn't indicate that's wrong. I suppose, you know, because Stephanie Grisham might not be right. She might have had her own reasons for saying it. But again, it just jars – it's an attempt. It blunders into this very Trumpian world of controversy through the jacket and through the versions of why the jacket was worn and so forth that don't match each other. So just the circle of, of Trumpy stuff.

SEAN: What does she have to say about the former president? And maybe future president?! My word!

MARTIN: She repeatedly says she loves him very much.   
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
MARTIN: She doesn't discuss the old reports that on election night 2016, she was in floods of tears because she didn't want to go to him to be president. That's nowhere to be seen.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
MARTIN: She says he's hard working. She says he's truth telling. She says he's a great father. To Barron. She doesn't really discuss any of his other children. Ivanka gets one mention.   
  
SEAN: Hm.

MARTIN: It's basically a glowing portrait of him that leads to a very anemic backing to his election for January the 6th. Stuff. She doesn't say it was right to attack the Capitol, anything, but she just deals in about one paragraph saying people had concerns. And I did, too.

SEAN: Huh.

MARTIN: But there shouldn't have been violence. It's very loyal.

SEAN: But she does disagree with him on abortion.

MARTIN: Yes. That's why that stood out. In the accounts of having a completely different view to the official Trumpian Republican Party line, she says she believes in abortion rights. She doesn't mention politics.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
MARTIN: She doesn't mention what Republicans have done. Doesn't mention the Supreme Court. The thing you'd say as an amateur psychologist slash person who reads all these books slash reporter, is that might be agreeing with Trump, because most people think Trump was always pro-choice and has just adapted, obviously somewhat uncomfortably now, to the prevailing wishes of the hard right, the evangelical right. When I was writing the story, I don't think I mentioned it in the end because it didn't fit, but there was a very one thing that stuck in my head from about 2015, when he was running for the White House, Trump did an interview with Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*. He was in trouble for having said some harsh things about abortion and she asked him, ‘Have …’, ‘In all your years as a man about town and man with many wives, have you ever paid for a partner to have an abortion?’ And Trump's response, which is imprinted on my brain, was “Such an interesting question. What's the next question?”

SEAN: [laughter] And I think that's a yes.

MARTIN: Yes. I mean, it sounds like it, but, you know, maybe it's not.

SEAN: Hm. Martin It sounds like you read a lot of these types of books, the types of books other people might be inclined to ignore or just read, you know, a quick review of to, to, to get the gist of. What was the point of this one in particular you think?

MARTIN: To make money from Trump fans.

SEAN: Ha!

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPMS\_0059\_01101\_One\_Life\_\_b\_\_APM-09>

MARTIN: That's got to be it. It's no, it's I mean, it's self-justifying, but it's not weighty enough to really have any effect on the record. I noticed on social media, because I always look at what people are responding to your story on. the responses were split between liberals arguing about what she meant with her abortion comments and conservatives sending me abuse about ‘How dare you write… how dare you be rude about our beautiful first lady? She's wonderful!’ Etc. Etc. So apart from curiosity value, there'd be no reason for the regular reader to read it.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: You can read Martin’s review of *MELANIA* at *The Guardian* dot com.

How *MELANIA* fits into the larger Trump Grifty Universe, when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

Melania: It's very well

Andi: Today

Melania: Explained in the chapter

SEAN: Our friend Martin is gone, but Margaret Hartmann is here. She's a senior editor at *Intelligencer* at *New York* magazine. Margaret, Martin says this Melania book is just yet another in a long line of Trump grifts. Would you agree?

MARGARET HARTMANN (SENIOR EDITOR, THE INTELLIGENCER): I definitely agree with that. Trump has been putting out a lot of weird merchandise recently, and Melania has been doing the same.

SCORING IN <MTA\_MTA\_0002\_04501\_Prance\_\_a\_\_APM>

MARGARET: Donald Trump has just released three coffee table books in the past year.

*<CLIP> Tonight Show, Jimmy Fallon: Trump’s the only person who writes books and gets booked in the same year.*

MARGARET: Everyone thought they would be actual presidential memoirs, but this is definitely not Obama's *A Promised Land*. These are glossy books. They're just filled with pictures of Trump and rude captions, some of which he wrote himself in Sharpie.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>

MARGARET: He's dropped gold watches …

*<CLIP> NEWSNATION, Anchor: There's only 147 of them available. Each come in three different colors and 122 diamonds in them.*

MARGARET: … gold high tops …

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP @ SNEAKERCON: Speaker 3: That's the real deal.*

MARGARET: … silver coins …

*<CLIP> TRUMP COIN AD: I've seen a lot of coins out there using my very beautiful face. I'm … very beautiful guy.*

MARGARET: … a Trump endorsed Bible,  
  
 <CLIP> Trump Bible Ad: We must make America pray again.  
  
MARGARET: … multiple sets of NFT trading cards, some of which come with cut out pieces of his mugshot suit or the suit he wore to debate Joe Biden. So he really has really anything you can think of. Trump is trying to slap his name on these days.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: I'm going to ask you this because I feel like if anyone has it be you. Has anyone tried to figure out whether these are real pieces of various suits or could it just be like a tablecloth?

MARGARET: Well, Trump claimed that he had the mugshot suit examined by an outside company, and it's the most historically significant artifact in United States history.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> TRUMP Trading Card Ad: It is an authentic piece of the suit I wore when I took that now famous mug shot. And it was a great suit, believe me. A really good suit.*

MARGARET: I don't know if anyone has actually verified that claim.   
  
SEAN: <laughs some more>  
  
MARGARET: So who knows? Maybe he's just going to the fabric store and cutting up little bits and gluing them on cards. Who knows?

SEAN: Wow. Would love to see that, if, if true. The watches I've heard a lot about because they're like $100,000!??!?!

MARGARET: Yes. One version of the watches costs $100,000. Those are limited. Special edition, top of the line watches.

*<CLIP> NewsNation, Anchored: Now each one of them is numbered. That way you know exactly which one you're getting. Of the 147. Trump says he owns the very first one of them.*

SEAN: What could possibly make it cost $100,000? Remind us.

MARGARET: Well, it has Trump's name on it. So you know it's the best.

SEAN: Ah-ha!

MARGARET: You have to pay for that kind of quality.

SEAN: Okay. These are the latest grifts. But of course, having Trump's name on a product is nothing new. Can you remind us of a bit of the history here?

SCORING IN <KPM\_KPM\_2193\_02201\_Work\_Ya\_Back\_\_b\_\_APM>

MARGARET: Sure. We've had, of course, there's so many, so much real estate. He's put his name on. There was the Trump Winery,

*<CLIP> Trump talks Trump Wine: It's the largest winery on the East Coast. I own it 100%. No mortgage. No debt.*

MARGARET: Trump Steaks.

*<CLIP> Trump Steaks: When it comes to great steaks, I’ve just raised the steaks!*

MARGARET: One time I was surprised during a trip into Trump Tower in the early 2000s by Trump Ice, which is his little known personally branded water,   
  
SEAN: <laughs>

MARGARET: which he said was the finest spring water in the world. And of course, that's not true. It's just regular spring water. There's Trump vodka.

*<CLIP>Trump on Trump Vodka: It's a great tasting vodka. And I'm very proud of the fact, actually, that I don't drink, but it's a vodka that people really like. And as you know, it's taken off like crazy.*

MARGARET: I believe there's a Trump board game.

*<CLIP> Trump Game: Trump that game where you deal for everything you've ever wanted to own because it's not what you will win or lose. It's whether you win.*

MARGARET: There was, you know, Trump Media that owns Truth Social trust. Anything you can think of. Trump has put his name on.

SCORING OUT  
  
SEAN: Who is buying all of the junk? Especially the latest junk?

MARGARET: I assume that it's Trump supporters that he's marketing to. They already believe in the Trump brand and they want more. And they think that they want they want to show their support for him. They believe that he is putting out high quality merchandise. So that's my assumption. But I've honestly never seen any Trump merch in the wild.

SEAN: Aha. And is it high quality? Because we know that like, you know, Trump University, for example, wasn't of the highest quality.

MARGARET: I mean, that's subjective.

*<CLIP> Trump University Ad from Last Week Tonight, Donald Trump: At Trump University, we teach success. That's what it's all about, success.*

MARGARET: The books that I have read were not of the highest quality. Most times that these products are assessed, they don't… like the watches. Aren't particularly high quality. It doesn't seem… Sneaker experts did not think that they were worth the extremely high price tag. But, you know, there's a … it's hard to say how much does having Trump's name on something inflate the value.

SEAN: Mm. And how does this stuff differentiate from, say, like all of the MAGA branded stuff you can buy? Is there some throughline there?

MARGARET: That’s separate. like the red MAGA hats? Those are campaign merch. The stuff that he promotes on his infomercial style videos he posts on social media is supposedly just benefiting Trump personally.

SEAN: Huh.

MARGARET: He actually will have a disclaimer on the bottom of most of these websites. The website will say something like God bless the USA Bible, and then it says “God bless the USA. Bible.com uses Donald Trump's name, likeness and image under a paid license from CIC Ventures LLC.”

SEAN: Hm.

MARGARET: “This is not political and has nothing to do with any political campaign.”

SEAN: Aha. Whereas if you buy like a Make America Great Again hat or Keep America Great or America Great Again Keep or whatever the newest iteration is, that's going directly to the campaign, to the PACs, whatever.

MARGARET: Yes.

SEAN: Is this more of a Trump thing than any other former president? Was there like a Grover Cleveland Bible or like a Herbert Hoover vodka?

MARGARET: No, there was not. Certainly, presidents have to make money. And we've seen presidents raise money through memoirs or speakers fees or the like. The Clintons have paired up with famous novelists like James Patterson to co-write books. But, you know, we don't have like Clinton steaks or Clinton NFT trading cards. Trump really takes it to a new level.

SEAN: And why is that? Is it just like a degree of shamelessness, or does he need the money? Is he poor?

MARGARET: Yes, Trump is having some pretty significant legal trouble, which is it's kind of hard to wrap your head around because he is a billionaire. I think the latest estimate from Forbes was that he's worth 3.7 billion. But the problem is he doesn't have enough liquid assets to cover his legal troubles.  
  
SEAN: Mmm.  
  
MARGARET: So Forbes estimated that he had about $410 million in liquid assets. But when you tally up all the recent legal judgments against him, that came to 560 million. So there's a significant gap there. And he's fighting all these legal judgments against him. And this is just the judgments against him. This isn't even taking into account the legal fees and other problems he's having with his real estate business. So he certainly could use the money. And his latest financial disclosures show that he is earning money from all these ventures. It's in the last one that he'd earned more than $12 million through licensing and royalty deals through the two LLCs that he owns.

SEAN: But this is where I get confused because it sounds like what you're saying is that, you know, all of this junk that he's hawking is to help him pay for his legal woes. Some of those legal woes are explicitly political. Some of them are totally personal. But like where those lines are drawn is sort of confusing. And where they blur is sort of, yeah, like who is keeping track of where all this money's going and whether it's all above board since this guy is running for president and could very well be our next president?!

MARGARET: Yeah, it's, it's not really clear. He doesn't release his tax returns like other presidential candidates have historically done. So we know a little bit of the picture from the required financial disclosures from from the campaign stuff. But we don't know exactly what's going on with his finances. It's all a little murky,

SEAN: Huh. And if there is something untoward going on, it may not be discovered until what, he might be president again, in which case nothing will happen?

MARGARET: Right. There's just so much with him. It's like this might have been a big story if Obama was selling the pieces of his tan suit. But with Trump, you know, this is like the 50th most interesting sort of scandal of the week, so …

SEAN: And now he's roping in his wife. Is that new or does that fit into the, like, larger history here?

MARGARET: Since Trump left office, she has been promoting a few items:

*<CLIP> Melania Trump on Fox News: So after I left the White House in 2021, I established my two platforms, Web two and Web three. That I create an art and collectibles and all it's available on those two platforms. Melania trump.com and usamemorabilia.com.*

MARGARET: So she's, she's a little more selective in what she promotes. She has mainly and various NFT collections. Some of those are physical Christmas ornaments and some of those are NFT Christmas ornaments. I don't quite understand what that is exactly, but you know, if you're decorating your NFT Christmas tree, Melania is there for you.

SEAN: <laughs>

MARGARET: She has actual physical jewelry. So she has, like, a Mother's Day necklace she released. There was a four leaf or I think it was a three leaf clover, and that was $245. She just released a $600 necklace that she described as celebrating Lady Liberty. But it does not have a picture of the Statue of Liberty on it. So it's just a generic lady.

SEAN: <laughs>

MARGARET: Now she has her memoir that comes in various price points. You can get the basic one for $40 up to a special edition, signed $250 version with extra photos and whatnot.

SEAN: Oh! Extra photos.

MARGARET: Yes. It's similar to what Trump did with his coffee table books. The basic coffee table book usually would cost around $75. And he put out at one point a supposedly leather bound $999 coffee table book.

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING IN <The Greatest Gift>

SEAN: I guess like we can't knock them because people are buying this stuff?   
  
MARGARET: Yeah.   
  
SEAN: So in theory, like there is an audience for this. Someone wants it. So …

MARGARET: Right.

SEAN: This is America. I guess you can have it?

MARGARET: Yeah. Like they on the one hand, is he selling his supporters low quality junk? That's my view. But on the other hand, this is who he's always been. He's always been slapping his name on possibly not the highest quality products. So why not do it when you're even more famous after being president?

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Margaret Hartmann. *Intelligencer*. You can read and subscribe to *New York* magazine at NYmag dot com.

Hady Mawajdeh made our show today. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard kept it facty. Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir were on the 1s and 2s. And I also participated. My name is Sean Rameswaram. The program is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]