

EPISODE 1358

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FT: So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1358, what I thought of WeCrashed, the Apple+ TV series. Warning, there are spoilers.

***KS:** It is fascinating that he has the hutzpah to continue on. He's got the money in the bank. This has happened in such a public way, and that he hasn't checked himself. I find that really interesting."*

[INTRO]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. It is Wednesday, May 18th, and we're going to do something a little different today on the show. We're going to discuss the very popular Apple TV+ miniseries, WeCrashed, because this is what I've been spending too much time doing in my off time. I figured, how can I make the most of this? Let's turn all the energy and questions that I have around this series into a podcast episode.

Now, before we bring on our guest, because I do actually have some guests, two friends, two journalists who've volunteered graciously to join me. They have also watched WeCrashed, and we're going to get into it. But for those of you who are not familiar with WeCrashed, here's the synopsis. It is the dramatization of the very real rise and fall of WeWork and its Messianic, I'm putting air quotes, Co-founder and CEO, Adam Neumann, played by Jared Leto. The series also stars Anne Hathaway as his wife, Rebekah Paltrow-Neumann. And, yes, Paltrow, as in first cousins with Gwyneth Paltrow.

I went down a bit of a rabbit hole after watching this, and then I went to Hulu and watched the documentary. I went to all the blogs. Then I finally said, "I need to pour this into my real day job." So I want to talk about this with other smart women who have watched, so we can just give this an old fashion review. Who better to join me than – We have to Kates on the show today. Kate

Dailey, longtime friend and journalist, now Deputy Managing Editor for Features at the Philadelphia Inquirer. I hear you have some hot gossip about Adam Neumann.

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KD: We'll get to that, absolutely.

[00:02:35]

FT: All right. Hang tight. Also joining us is Kate Sullivan, who has been on the show previously. She is herself also a journalist, a podcast host, a TV host. She's a friend. Her show is called To Dine For. It's a podcast that is ongoing and a show on PBS that is in production for season five.

Kate, I was looking on your site the other day. You've interviewed everyone from Sara Blakely, Howard Schultz, Jon Bon Jovi, David Copperfield. Who's on season five? Can you give us a hint?

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KS: That's a good question. We're right in the middle. But I will tell you that someone who is in the roster is Simon Sinek.

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FT: I love Simon Sinek. What a get.

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KS: Me too.

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FT: I love that. Oh, my gosh. So serendipitous that you volunteered to join me on this particular weird episode because you have experience interviewing CEOs and visionary. So really curious

to get both of your takes on this show, I guess. What do you call it, a miniseries, a show? It's an eight-episodic event. You can watch it in a weekend.

Quick reactions from watching the series. I'll go first, and then I'll ask each of you what stood out to you like, just quick thoughts. So for me, it was, one, how much privilege Adam Neumann assumed and had, frankly, throughout the experience of starting WeWork, raising money for WeWork. We should know that earlier to WeWork, he had started a child like clothing company, where he was – It was actually pretty – I mean, I would have probably bought a couple of these pants, where if you've got a crawler, and they had extra padding on the knees.

It didn't do well. So he always was this ambitious entrepreneur. But let's also remember, he's tall, he's white, he's charismatic, he's male, and seeking venture capital. The movie almost made it seem like it was not easy, but it was a lot easier for him, even though he went around barefoot. Can you imagine going around barefoot in your office at work and being taken seriously? So that was one thing that I thought was just – I don't think was a dramatization. Kate Dailey, what did you think was kind of interesting as you're watching it?

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KD: Well, I thought the privilege he pointed out was so interesting, especially because I watched WeWork at the same time I was watching – Or WeCrashed at the same time I watched The Dropout, which was the Elizabeth Holmes.

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FT: I'm watching that right now.

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KD: Event on Hulu, the Theranos one. They're both these sort of almost like operatic or Shakespearian stories of like exes and hubris and deception and a big crash. But you definitely saw some differences in how Elizabeth Holmes, who was a female creator, was treated versus Adam Neumann.

In The Dropout, Elizabeth Holmes gets a lecture about how her being a scammer is going to make it difficult for women going through. Then at the end, they say it's still really difficult for women. I don't think Elizabeth Holmes was great for women. Don't get me wrong, but I don't think that it's her fault. **[inaudible 00:05:29]** for having trouble.

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FT: I agree. I was actually just watching episode one of that. Rebecca Jarvis, the genius behind that, the podcast creator of The Dropout, which became the Hulu series, you remember when she first pitched an idea to a professor, a female professor, and the female professor said to her, "Just some advice. When you're a woman trying to break through, especially in biomedics, you just have a good idea. You have to have like an exceptional world breaking idea. You have to work 10 times as hard. And then when you fail, they can't wait to point out your failures. So I don't want to partner with you." Like that's – For her, it was like too risky.

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KD: Nobody is saying like, "Oh, well. Since Adam Neumann failed, like the Messianic CEO type is out," right? I do wonder. I'm so curious from your perspectives because you see this more about what's going on in the world. But if it does feel like the tables are turning against like the better to be smart than crazy or crazy to be smart, which is another theme of the show. I wonder if there is a slight backlash or if these really larger than life guys are still getting their companies funded and still being seen as sort of brilliant geniuses.

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FT: Kate Sullivan, what do you think? I mean, also, given your experience interviewing some of these mavericks and entrepreneurs, do you think Adam Neumann was an outlier or he is sort of part of the culture?

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KS: There's so much. First of all, thank you for this opportunity because I watched it by myself and then talked about it with no one, but I had so many thoughts. I am like chomping at the bit to talk about this, so thank you for this opportunity.

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FT: You're welcome.

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KS: First of all, let's start with the positive. I mean, he really I think was a visionary. He really had a phenomenal idea. WeWork is a good idea. Let's start with reality. I mean, if you've ever been into a WeWork, have you been into a WeWork, Farnoosh?

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FT: I rented. I gave WeWork money for a number of years and I –

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KS: Good idea. I mean, it really is. It was a fun venture. I mean, really, it started out as a phenomenal business idea. So you have to, in a way, give him his do. What is so fascinating when you watch the series WeCrashed is really how there's a fine line between having a vision, having belief, having the emotion behind it and delusion, right?

I find that founders, based on the interviews that I do, have to walk that line between believing – You have to believe what hasn't occurred yet. So you have to believe. You have to have faith, right? You have to believe something and bring it into being. There's a fine line between having that – Being fastidious with your vision and then also being delusional. I think you saw it so clearly played out in this show, and that was what's so fascinating to watch.

To your point about gender, my gosh, we could go on and on about this. I think it spoke especially with your audience of So Money. It really spoke to how, when female founders walk

into a room, they want to get everything right, and they want to deliver accurate information, and they want to double-check everything.

I guess, again, I am really generalizing here, but I think you're going to understand what I'm putting down. When male founders, they sell the idea that hasn't existed, and there's like – Ironically, they come from a place of emotion. They come from a place of magic. That is what sells it. Women, ironically, come from a place of facts and come from a place of this is what's going to happen. So they're not as like – This is part of it and this is oversimplifying, but this is part of why they don't always get the funding that the men do. Do you know what I mean?

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FT: I know exactly what you mean. I mean, there was a scene in the series. At one point, he's in the back of a cab with Masa, who is the Founder of SoftBank, which ended up being the largest investor in WeWork. He gave him \$4.4 billion. Basically, a back of the napkin pitch, right? I mean, he had his deck, but he was like, “Put the deck away. I don't invest in ideas. I invest in people.”

I don't see that scene playing out as it did with a woman and a man, like a man investor and a woman entrepreneur. I can see that with a woman investor and a woman entrepreneur getting together. I did this. I had coffee with a female entrepreneur. She spent an hour telling me about her business. But what I gleaned from that was more her just incredible ambition and fortitude and all of the qualities you want to see in a founder that she wasn't directly like telling me about. But I could see it through her articulation and her passion and her delivery.

I was like, “I don't know so much about what you're trying to start. I mean, I think it's valid, and I think it's needed. But I also equally love you.” That's why I ended up giving her some money. But I want what Adam Neumann got to be what women can also get. But at the same time, there has to be a responsibility with that money.

I mean, if you could interview Adam Neumann, what would you want to ask him right now? By the way, he walked away with about a billion dollars in his exit package. So he's doing fine. But what would you want to ask him? He's already said something in the aftermath, along the lines

of like, “I got in over my head. My head got too big.” But I want to ask him, “What makes you think anyone should give you any money ever again?”

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KD: Well, Adam Neumann is back. I mean, and that's one of the things that I was mentioning to you before. I know that he's talking with people in Philly about bringing his original concept, which was, well, after the baby kneepads. But in the show, you see that he initially pitched WeWork as communal living. Not just a communal office space but a communal living.

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KS: WeLive, yes.

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KD: Yeah, WeLive. That idea is making a comeback, and you're seeing that. I don't know if he was ahead of his time. I don't know if a broken clock is right twice a day. But this idea of communal living or of living in a building with a lot of amenities that build in this community, that build in – You have working space. You have your living space. You have a gym, which is not new. But he's back. He's taking meetings. He's having calls.

That's another thing I think we can talk about is that he gets a second chance. He's not in jail. The question about who goes to jail for what when founders defraud their investors I think is an interesting one and one kind of above my pay grade. But he's back, baby. I mean, you might have a chance to interview him soon enough.

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KS: Well, I actually did have requested to him. So this was, I think, maybe either the first season To Dine For or the second. I had a request, and I had two dear friends who worked at WeWork pretty high up. They have both since left and gone on to other things. I originally reached out to WeWork to sponsor the show because the program is about visionaries and dreamers who

have created something out of nothing, just like so many people who spend time in WeWork are trying to do. So I thought it would be a nice partnership.

I had a meeting with WeWork. At the time, the person said, "You should interview Adam as part of your show." I thought, "Okay, that sounds great," and it was right prior to any of this happening. So it was really on the upswing. As many of my interview requests, they somehow either die on the vine, or I have to sort of rescind them because things have happened. It's always with male founders that I had. We could do a whole podcast on people that I have put out a request and then, oops, there's been a sexual harassment claim or some things happen that I've had to say, "Okay, this isn't right for the show." This obviously falls into that category.

I mean, he really does check all the boxes of a visionary and a creator, someone with a great idea. It is fascinating that he has the hutzpah to continue on. He's got the money in the bank, this has happened in such a public way, and that he hasn't checked himself. I find that really interesting.

[00:13:36]

FT: Yeah. Where is the humility? I don't know. How do we feel about Rebekah Paltrow-Neumann? The series depicted her as sort of lost, right? She – I don't know how to explain it. We know who she is. We see her a lot in New York City. She's at the Goop conferences. They have a lot of money. They live in the lap of luxury, but they don't really have a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging.

So to that extent, I did feel a little bad for her because you don't want that. That's not fair for anybody to feel that way. But also, she was quite cruel. She turned that emptiness and that loneliness that she was experiencing into almost like a weapon against everybody, and that's not cool. So it was a big hypocrisy that she was selling. We want to elevate the role's conscious. It has been almost, "I'm also going to fire you if I don't like your energy."

How do we think that – First of all, that may or may not be true. I don't know her, but it was interesting how the directors chose to portray her.

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KD: I loved Anne Hathaway's performance in that. I thought she was so funny, and I thought it was – I don't want to say the performance was exaggerated because I felt like the performance was actually very spot on, and perhaps the character was so exaggerated. But like when she kept sending her Green Juice back when they were having an important talk with the lawyers or like when she –

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FT: In a moment of crisis.

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KD: Oh, my god.

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FT: In a moment of such crisis. She's –

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KD: I thought Anne Hathaway was so funny in that role, and I really liked the scenes with her. It was interesting from like a directorial standpoint. I was trying to figure out what they were doing with her because I don't necessarily think we were supposed to feel sorry for her. I think she was a pathetic character, and so there's that sense of pathos. But they talked a lot about how she couldn't find her place, how she was really searching for things and will kind of latch on to other people as a result.

She had been through this terrible tragedy with the death of her brother. But then you see her when she's trying to become an actor, and they say, "Tap into your terrible tragedy," and she said, "Oh, well. My best friend stole my boyfriend." You could kind of see her. It was like she was making up the tragedy as it went along and refusing to tap into the deeper sadness around her brother's death.

I didn't quite know where they were going with that, and I don't think that that justifies what she was – The way that she behaved. But I think she really was someone who was like a little drunk on her own energy and was so convinced that she was doing a good thing. Not because she was doing anything, but it was this sort of tautology where she's like, “Well, I'm a good person, and I want good things in the world to happen. Therefore, anything I do must be good for the world's consciousness.” I just thought it was such an interesting character study and really fun to watch.

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KS: It was an interesting character study. That's a great way to put it, Kate. I mean, personally, I didn't look at her as pathetic, ironically. I looked at her as a certain type of person who came from immense privilege, who really the rest of the world has probably never met. Maybe in New York, you've met someone like her. The rest of the world has not met someone who is coming from really the same sort of delusion that Adam was coming, right? He really sees the world from a very specific point of view.

I thought she really added to him, right? She was almost like the rocket fuel to his concept. So in a way, even though she tried many different career paths, and they never quite panned out, I actually thought two things. I thought, “You know what? Good for her. She's trying different things.” You can tell I'm an eternal optimist

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FT: Putting yourself out there.

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KS: Yes. I'm an optimist. She was trying lots of different things. She was trying to follow her heart and her bliss, which was yoga and then, obviously, the school that she was trying to create. I kind of gave her credit for that. But I think it comes from a very specific philosophy when you don't have to worry about money. Really, everything is open to you, and all possibilities are open that you and money isn't a factor. Who would you be?

I think she represents that person in just one slice of what somebody could be. When money isn't – You don't have to worry about hard work or where does the money come from. I mean, that's what was so – That's why I say most people will not know Rebekah Neumann in their life, unless you are in certain circles. I thought she was a fascinating character.

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KD: I think that's so interesting too. Because I think if you ask most people and said, "If you didn't have to worry about money, who would you be," you think, "Well, I'd be a better person. I would focus on my family. I would focus on my hobbies. I would find a way to change the world." You see how she does kind of do and say all of those things. But it is just sort of rotten at the core for it is so kind of self-delusional, in a way.

So, yeah, she is saying like, "We're going to elevate the world's consciousness." She tears up at the thought of animal cruelty or whatever. But just saying that those things are important or being aware of those things is not the same as doing things about it. I think the money in part kind of dulled her to the actual action that had to happen because –

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KS: Yes. There was no action. She never thought like truly hard work. When you have the absence of money, you have to think totally differently than if it's never a thought and never a concern. She really was privileged.

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FT: Adam pointed that out to her, which I thought was the only scene in the whole series where I thought he gave her some good advice or some good feedback, where they were about to lose. They thought they're about to lose everything. He was stepping down as CEO. The IPO wasn't happening. They were together in an intimate scene in their apartment, and she said, "You know, the money doesn't matter." Or, "Money doesn't matter." He said, "The only people who say that are those who grew up with money," and he did not grow up with money. I think his father was a doctor but split marriage. He was living on a kibbutz, moved multiple dozen times.

So I don't think he had this mentality that the world is abundant, and money is abundant, and she did. Perhaps that's why they even made a good team because she could bring to it sort of the spirituality and like manifest it and while he was just really all about chasing the success.

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KD: I thought it was so interesting in that scene with him and his business partner, Miguel, who Adam grew up in a kibbutz in Israel. Miguel grew up in some other kind of communal like matriarchal family setting in the US. So you might think, well, his wife grew up with a lot of privilege, he grew up with nothing, and they might approach things differently. But instead of saying to him, and this was when they were talking about whether or not they should go public or whether they should keep the company, instead of saying, "Look, we grew up on communes. We understand the power of community or the power of society," which is what he was saying in public.

In private, he said, "We never had anything that was our own, and this is our chance to have something that's just for us," which I thought was really interesting private – Again, this is a fictionalized story. I don't know what they pulled from interviews and what. But just this idea that he was in public saying, "I grew up on a kibbutz. I understand the power of we." Then when he was alone with his co-founder, he said, "I grew up on a kibbutz. It's time I have something that's just mine."

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FT: Yeah. Well, you know, Kate Dailey, actions speak louder than words. While we have not heard from Adam Neumann, and we don't know how much truth to extract from this fictionalized series, the reality is he's a billionaire now. He has not reached out to his former employees. He's not, I mean, extended at least a little bit to them. I've heard through the Grapevine that on his last day, his last message to his employees was over the phone. It was essentially a royal FU like, "I'm going. You're screwed." We saw how those employees that were there from day one who stuck for 10 years because they wanted to elevate the world's consciousness, and they got paid nothing. But they got shares. They got the promise of stock options, were left with nothing.

That speaks volume about your character as a person, as a leader to not go back for those people in some way. I mean, we'll see, maybe, and would they even want him to be around at that point.

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KD: From what I understand, and I've been listening to The Companion Podcast to WeCrashed. So WeCrashed was a podcast. Then it was a TV show. Now, it's a podcast about the TV show that Scott Galloway –

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FT: And now we're doing an episode –

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KD: We're deep in the rabbit hole, and I'm paraphrasing Scott Galloway here. But first of all, I think the employees who were there early at WeWork when their shares were very low, are coming out okay. Adam and Miguel actually, when the IPO launched, had a little private get together with some of those early WeWork employees. The people who really lost out were the people who came in during the WeWork hype when this was supposed to be the next big thing, and took rock bottom salaries, and got nothing.

I thought the show did a great job of – Because, again, Adam and Rebekah are such entertaining characters.

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KS: They are.

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KD: Build a show. You want to build it around them. But I thought the series found a great way to work the workers, who were doing all the work, who ended up losing this money that they thought they had, depicting how they fit in and how they missed out.

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KS: Wasn't the accent of Jared Leto, that Israeli accent? It stuck with me. In fact, I had to get on YouTube to see how Adam Neumann actually speaks, and it is dead on. I mean, he had nailed that accent.

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FT: It is. There were moments, though, Kate Sullivan, that I thought he sounded very like Dracula. I was like, "Is he talking? Am I watching Hotel Transylvania? Or is this –"

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KD: They're making another one. You know how there's never just one, for whatever reason in the zeitgeist. Weren't there like two Mildred Pierce and two Truman Capotes? You can never just have one in the culture. There's going to be another WeWork movie, and Nicholas Braun from Succession is going to play.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. Well –

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KD: It was a much different energy, but he is like 6'7", right? That's a big part I think of Adam Neumann's thing is that he walked into a room, and he was like literally larger than life.

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KS: The physicality of him really gave him power.

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FT: We have a couple of minutes left, and I want to end on a another scene from the WeCrashed series, where they bring in a brand expert, a brand imaging expert for Rebekah because she's this sort of lost person. He asks her, "Rebekah, are you a magician, a maverick, or a muse?" Because apparently, this was going to then identify the path that they were going to take for her imaging and her style and her branding and she – You'll have to see what she said.

But for us, us three, who are we? Are we the maverick? Are we the muse? I think I'm a magician because I tend to just like fly by the seat of my pants sometimes and make things happen. I'm a hustler. I just kind of like see an idea, and I go for it. I have this sort of impulsiveness, especially during times of need and crisis. Recession, I started a business. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I had to do something and keep moving. I don't think any one of us here are muses. I feel like that's like a very passive role. Well, I'll let you answer. Kate Sullivan, do you want to take it first?

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KS: First of all, I think Rebekah was definitely a muse. I mean, she was clearly in the muse category. She was her husband's muse, and she created the muse behind, excuse me, WeWork. I definitely think I fall into the magician category, in the sense that I really love stories of people who have created something out of nothing. There is some magic to that, and that's what To Dine For is too.

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KD: Yeah. I think I am also. If I had to pick, I guess I would pick magician. I think you're right, Farnoosh, that I think a maverick is sort of not aggressive. But a maverick kind of –

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FT: Risky.

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KS: Yes.

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KD: I think a magician is a really reactive role. A magician sees what's happening and takes what they're given or takes what the circumstances are and makes things out of it. Whereas a maverick kind of doesn't maybe pay as much attention to the social cues or doesn't pay attention and just is kind of very tunnel vision. In my work and at home, a lot of it is taking what people give me and figuring out different ways to make it work.

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KS: Three magicians. Here we are.

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FT: I love it. Three magicians making magic, changing up my show. Hey, you know what? Maybe this is the pilot for a new kind of episode on So Money, where I just get to watch a lot more TV and talk about it.

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KD: We've got to do The Dropout next.

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FT: Got to do The Dropout. Kate Dailey, Kate Sullivan, I'm going to get Rebecca Jarvis to join us, who was the podcastarian of that and sold that series to Hulu. So we'll make that happen next. Everyone can watch WeCrashged on Apple+, and we'll be back here on Friday, answering your money questions. Thanks, ladies.

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KS: Thank you, Farnoosh. Have a great day.

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KD: So fun to be here. Thank you so much.

[END]