**Writing Books for Readers Beyond Academe - Angela von der Lippe**

ANGELA VON DER LIPPE: Thank you, Amy. A preliminary disclosure, I work for the last of the independent publishers, WW Norton, whose name I think you'd agree is synonymous with interests of the university, but it wasn't always so. As I discovered last week when my husband handed me an article from the January 28th, 1924 edition of the Harvard Crimson. With the headline, "Lecture halls may become the laboratories for lecture publishers." With the alarmist subheadings, "A cultural correspondence school, " and, "Aristocracy of brains threatened," Sound familiar with all the talk about cognitive elites?

It was a piece from the founding of the People's Publishing institute based on a series of public lectures at Cooper Union and the new school, sponsored by one, William Warder Norton, an upstart publisher making it his business to make the university's business available to the public through books no less. I had no idea I worked for such a subversive publisher. In any case I think that the lab experiment, for the most part, worked out in everyone's favor. So let me turn to the challenges we face today.

When I sat down to write this talk, the first thing that came to mind was, well, I'll have to tell them it's a crap shoot. And then came the backpedaling, no, I can't tell them that, that's not what they need to hear. Still whatever else I tell you today, keep in mind the one certainty about trade publishing-- it is a crap shoot.

That same afternoon I was in my car listening to NPR and I tuned into a conversation with the biographer, Bob Richardson, about his latest collection of essays. And he was talking about the cash value of an idea. And the term was jarring, and I winced as I realized that it was none other than William James who coined the term, his low lectures on pragmatism, public ones for which he got a pretty penny and probably had kids in school.

But as dissonant is the phrase, cash value of an idea, seemed to me, it wasn't just the commodifying part of it felt a little vulgar. It was maybe that the question, what is the cash value of an idea, struck a little too close to home. To something we people in publishing, and all gradations of publishing, but especially the trade grapple with every day. And however much I tell myself that the cash value of an idea isn't its intrinsic value, or its whole value, isn't what I do, I'm stuck in an industry like so many, that looks to the market to determine value, and indeed, will make their publishing choices based, in part and sometimes in large part, on a cold calculation. So I'm not infrequently torn between two publishing responsibilities-- the one captured in the German word for publisher [GERMAN], transferring goods and money, and the other in its Latin root, [LATIN]. Getting the word out-- much more suited to my impractical nature.

My job is to be a first reader, to help authors craft their words and arguments in a way that captures the public imagination for their subject, reaches out to readers, delivers the goods. But I'm also a bookmaker, dealing in ideas. And that's what anyone publishing serious nonfiction these days is doing. I'm collecting and making bets on idea books. And this is what I want to briefly address today. How we all can approach writing for the trade with an eye toward beating the odds of the market. Let's face it, it's an industry in tremendous flux with a few years ago, some 50,000 books published each year in the US alone. And that's before you factor in the exponential increases in titles through electronic sales, and all the other noise in the marketplace.

As a publisher, it's a formidable challenge to get the attention of the marketplace out there for your idea book, your serious nonfiction, or for that matter, your book of literary fiction when it has to compete against a sea of other books, celebrity books, sports books, comic books, murder and mayhem, redemption, rumor, conspiracy, especially today when it is often delivered on the same device that streams music, film, and endless games.

Case in point, 30 years ago Cosmos, the book, and Cosmos, the TV series occupied different galaxies. Today's new Cosmos will be available in dual formats and mixed media instantaneously on the same device. So you can bet when it comes to a choice to be seen interactively, or read singularly which format will prevail. The book may have to work harder today to be read.

One of my authors, the cosmologist, Sir Martin Rees, has written an eloquent little book entitled, From Here To Infinity. It's based on his Reith lectures he delivered last year. And in this book, he passionately enlist scientists of every stripe, pure and applied, to come out of the lab and in from the field to assert themselves as global citizens. "Scientists have a civic responsibility," he says, 'to inform the public of what they do, their process, their discoveries, their methods. Why? Because never have the stakes been as high, the misinformation been as saturated, and the power and fate of the many been as concentrated in the hands of a disinterested few, valuing political expediency over scientific truth."

I was reminded of Rees' appeal to scientists when I read the opening pages of Marketplace of Ideas about the role of the university in today's global world. And what resonated with me from that book was a basic appeal to the university and its members also, to get out of themselves, out of business as usual, and think of novel ways of doing its core business, generating ideas that shape the culture and are the binding elements of our social fabric, our memory, and our vision. And what better vehicle for clarifying those ideas and forging that critical connection with the world than the book, even in the turbulent world of technological innovation. And that's just to say, with so much out there to distract that public from critical thinking, what we do in publishing serious nonfiction, in what you do in writing it expressly for the trade, may have more of a critical function today than ever.

So what do we do to get their attention? When we editors consider projects that proposal stage, and for that matter later, promoting it to critics in the greater world, we're frequently asked what the take away of a book is, what readers will draw from the argument. It's an eye-opening exercise. It can be ridiculously reductive, but it's also useful. And you may be listening to these remarks saying, what's the takeaway? I have to confess, I rarely publish a prescriptive book, hate being told what to do, and I'm the last person to give you seven simple keys for the academic, writing of a successful trade book. But I can't give you a few pointers.

A few things to consider in framing your projects for the trade. I think I know where you're coming from, as I came from academic publishing, right down the street at Harvard University Press, and before that I'm from academia, and easily 2/3 of my authors come from academia. And while I can't deny that academic writing is often code for deadly, dispassionate, obfuscating prose because it can be just that, it's also true that academic writing can convey something very special. And that's authority, nuance, and originality. It's avoiding the former and capitalizing on the latter that will make the difference in writing a trade book.

Ideally, you want to capture the public imagination for your subject by delivering a fresh perspective, a new argument, a scientific horizon, or a story never heard before in prose that enlightens and doesn't speak down to people. Tall order. Journalists, for the most part, rise to this challenge with ease because they are constantly distilling complex ideas in brief compass and pitching their work to the media. But academics have a difficult time calibrating what they know, and the requirements of scholarship, against the needs of a good persuasive story.

Here are just a few things to consider in thinking about writing for the trade. , One synthesis. One of the reasons that people like Carl Zimmer and Malcolm Gladwell and Fareed Zakaria as such successful trade writers is that they are natural synthesizers. Academics who are naturally invested in a specific corner of research find it painful to take a wide angle approach to writing for the trade. When Brian Greene's proposal for a trade book on string theory came to trade publishers with the title, Hidden Dimensions, and the promise of an immediate dive into a mire of multiple dimensions, the book was rejected by the trade, except for yours truly. And that was probably because I was fresh from Harvard University Press. And it was on its way to be published by Princeton. There are worse fates.

In the end, the approach was altered to a historical unfolding of space time through relativity and quantum physics, culminating in multi-dimensional space of strings, with the title, The Elegant Universe. It caught on. It wasn't driven by his research, he wasn't the central figure in the string worl-- Ed Witten would have been. And given its subject matter, it certainly wasn't an easy book, but it was one that readers could scale by virtue of the angle of approach that Greene had so deftly provided.

Synthesis drives some of the most successful trade books by academics, as I'm sure you know. Steve Pinker's first trade book, The Language Instinct, drawing on Chomsky, and Dan Goldman's, Emotional Intelligence, on the work on social intelligence, and Howard Gardner's, Multiple Intelligences, approaching their subjects with a wide angle vision.

There is often a lag of many years between the emergence of the research in the academy and its distillation in the trade. It's not that there's nothing new under the trade sun, but that trade books take a while to percolate, and are perhaps a better measure of how ideas and research resonate in the culture.

The second point is passion. Writing for the trade also gives you a unique opportunity to express your passion for your subject in ways that. academic writing may frown upon. So it's a chance to write outside the box. And it's amazing how a consistent dose of personal feeling can hold the attention of readers. How you accomplish this, which narrative devices you employ, will depend on your story.

Astronomer Chris Impey, in a book yet to be published, How It Began, may invent a time machine to take us through lookback time to the first three seconds. Eric Kandel in his book, In Search of Memory, intersperses personal biography with the grand story of the revolution in our understanding of memory from the theory of psychoanalysis, the talking cure, to cells talking to each other in neuroscience. It worked for Kandel actually, because Kandel once aspired to finding the id, the ego, and the superego in the brain. He wanted to be a psychoanalyst, he started that way.

That melding of biography with narrative will not work for everyone. And Nietzsche was right when he warned, authors need to shut up when the work begins to speak. But you have to find your own way of bringing your passion to your narrative. All part of what Ursula Le Guin notes about writing as, ultimately a connection with the reader. That you write a story and the reader completes it. Well truly, if that happens, that is passion in action.

The third point is people. One way to infuse your narrative with passion is to pepper it with people, historical or real life doesn't matter. I'm amazed at how many really very interesting proposals I receive from academics that are really heavy on interpretive analysis, and can be curiously devoid of people. They have names, but no people. Ideas need to be embodied. Arguments need to be dramatized. And discoveries need to be felt, as well as explained and defended.

With Brian Greene, for instance, there was no way a trade book would sustain the math necessary to convey the work of string theory. So, as we talked about it, he told stories at that point in the narrative. What was it like to make a collective discovery or breakthrough in string theory. It wasn't graveyard duty at the Smithsonian, so what was it? He told his story. It was very effective. There's no more compelling way to present an argument than to embody it in people and context.

The fourth and last point is audience. Who are you writing for? I should have begun with this because if you get that right, other things will start falling into place. If you're writing expressly for your colleagues, then it truly is not at all in your interest to push a book out into the trade. It will be lost or ignored and won't give the book its due. Journals are there for the short form and university presses are far better equipped to get the word out in book form to professionals. To reach the trade reader, you have to think of your audience as intelligent, lay readers for whom you are opening up a subject for discussion requiring no assumed knowledge-- so, your colleague in other departments.

Finally, I want to say a few words to the state of trade publishing-- the trade publishing industry which has been on death's door for 30 years now. There are tremendous changes that are taking place, and we don't know what will shake out for publishers. I heard somewhere publishers today described as scribes before Gutenberg. And I said, because I don't want to believe that, no, no. Gutenberg changed literacy, created a symbolic world, this isn't that.

Last October I was in Germany, but didn't go to the Frankfurt Book Fair. I went on a personal vigil instead, to Gottingen to visit the literary archive for the first time, of a woman I'd written two books on-- a novel, and a work of nonfiction on Lou Andreas Salome. And when I arrived, I actually sat in a small room with her books by Rilke, Nietzsche, and Freud, and they were crumbling in my hands. And on the way back to Frankfurt, I was left thinking about the afterlife of words held in the palms of a book for so many centuries. And later that evening, I asked my husband, returning from the fair, if there were any books there. And happily there were still.

A couple of years ago the NBA award winner, Patti Smith, and one of Betsy's clients, made a moving appeal to not completely abandon the physical book. And what I drew from this was that raw, sensual connection to ideas that only books afford. And I found it heartening that this year the NBA award for nonfiction was awarded to a book about rescuing a manuscript from 1,000 years of oblivion. A book of dangerous ideas, Lucretius, On The Nature Of Things. If you have not read this, read it it's quite and extraordinary book. Copying and translating it, and changing the course of civilization. The book about the book was, of course, Stephen Greenblatt's, The Swerve. I take that as an altogether good sign for books, and especially for books of ideas, the ones you need to write and we need to publish. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]