**Writing Books for Readers Beyond Academe - Betsy Lerner**

BETSY LERNER: Hi, I'm Betsy Lerner, I'm the agent. I was an editor for 16 years, and when I became an agent a lot of the agents said to me, welcome to the side of angels. And I was astonished because I thought that I was crossing over to the dark side.

And anyway, I want to tell you a little bit about when I came into publishing. I think I was a little older than the usual editorial assistant. It was 1987 and there was a book-- it was Simon and Schuster, and there was a book that was being published by a little known academic at the time. And there was a daily New York Times review that came out unexpectedly, and it referred to the book as "essential reading, unparalleled reflection, and genuinely profound."

That book, which had been modestly acquired, and by modestly of course, I mean for very little money, by one of the few politically conservative editors in trade publishing. After that New York Times review, the book took off and it eventually became a number one bestseller. And that was Alan Bloom's, The Closing Of The American Mind. And for a person just starting out in publishing and not being altogether aware of his politics, it was sort of astonishing that this book that had started out with something like a 5000 copy first print run would then go on to such mega success.

And over the years, as an editor, I watched other books, also from academia, become huge bestsellers, and was always fascinated by their path to glory and heartened by their success on the bestseller lists, which obviously were filled with garbage. Some of them include, in '89, James MacPherson's, Battle Cry Of Freedom, in 1990, Jonathan Spence's, In Search Of Modern China.

In 1991 I was promoted to Ballantine and I was an assistant editor, and I was covering university presses looking for gems that we could put into a trade paperback. The first book that I targeted came from Yale University Press, the cover was a split image of Emily Dickinson, one of my favorite poets, and Nefertiti. And of course, that was Camille Paglia's Sexual Personae. I'm sure you know about her career henceforth.

In '93 two books that I loved were, How We Die by Sherwin Nuland, and Listening To Prozac by Peter Kramer. Obviously caught an incredible wave, and timing is a huge part of a book getting lift off in this world. A lot of luck and great timing.

Now, I'm a full editor at Houghton Mifflin, and I get a proposal, and it's by somebody who wrote a little book called The Anxiety Of Influence. And it was Harold Bloom's Shakespeare, The Invention Of The Human. My boss at the time would not allow me to bid on the book. He said, quote, "You don't want to be a virgin on a book like this." To this day I'm trying to figure out exactly what he meant.

[LAUGHTER]

And more recently, some books from academia that I've really admired are Annette Gordon-Reed's, The Hemingses of Monticello, The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, of course, Jared Diamond's, Guns, Germs, and Steel, Will in the World, and now, Swerve, which I can't wait to read. And probably my favorite runaway best seller from academia, can anybody guess? On Bullshit by Harry Frankfurt, of course.

As Angela said, what all these books have in common is the desire and ability to communicate their ideas to a wider public, and to synthesize them in a popular way. They tend to be character driven, as well as theory driven. And I think at some point you have to make a choice whether you're going to write to your discipline with the emphasis on your scholarship, or whether you really are interested in educating the public.

I work with a number of academics who popularized their ideas. The one I share with Angela is Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist. And just today, in the Washington Post, his new book called The Space Chronicles got this little notice, "possessing both a keen scientific curiosity, as well as an appreciation of pop culture, deGrasse shows that he can titillate the public's imagination when it comes to the stars." So, do you want to titillate the public's imagination? Maybe you don't, and I wouldn't blame you given the public, but it could also--

[LAUGHTER]

It can be thrilling, I work with the legal scholar, Kenji Yoshino, and religion scholar and now New York Times columnist, Mark Oppenheimer, with a number of psychologists, including Annie Rogers, whose book, The Shining Affliction is extraordinary case study.

Anyway, what is the one essential ingredient that made me take any of these writers on? It's just one thing-- the writing. I can be interested in any subject that any of you are working in. It's the writing. And I cannot teach you how to write for the trade, but I can tell you that developing your voice is essential. And incorporating story and people, as Angela said, were appropriate. Shedding some of the vocabulary and the lexicon of your discipline, replacing it with voice driven prose.

And of course, not being afraid to share your passion for what first drew you to your work in the first place. I always love finding out from an academic why did you go into molecular biology, you know? I didn't even know about that as a kid or teenager. What, if you can tell me what brought you to the subject, you can bring me there. And I think that's quite critical now.

I think I'm just mostly here to give you guys nuts and bolts, if you want, is that right? So, I'm just going to tell you that, if you want an agent who does do very well with academic clients, I'm going to read the names of a few for you. The best way to find an agent is a referral-- a referral. So ask any of your colleagues, May I ask who's your agent, and may I use your name? And that will always get an agent's attention. That is the best way to make that foray. If you don't have that, then you want to do your research and get a good list together.

So just some that I'll rattle off, begin with me, Betsy at-- I'm going to tell you DCLagency.com. And I will be highly insulted if you do not include me on the list of agents you query. Andrew Wiley is a name some of you may know, he's known as the jackal. And he's known for getting the highest advances in the land. And I know you're not interested in money, but maybe someone in the room is. Glenn Hartley, military history, conservative books. Sam Stoloff, the humanities. I think he comes from Cornell Press. Susan Rabiner, former editor of Basic Books. And she's also written a very good book, a complement to my own I would say, called, How to Think Like an Editor. John Brockman in the sciences. Jerry Toma, history, humanities.

Those are the ones I'll mention. Those are all my competition, which I very generously have now shared with you. Beyond that, you have to do your own research. There is a website called publishersmarketplace.com. You can probably get it at the library, otherwise you have to pay for it, but it's really worth the investment. You can search that site for subjects, for agents, for authors, and find out who people's agents are, or who are the agents in your category, or subject. And from there, you should look at-- almost every agent has a website now, so you can see who they represent, and would you like to be in that company. That's also really important. And you can also find out what their submission policies are, and they all differ just a little bit.

Does anybody care about the query letter? Yes, a few? OK.

Basically, in my opinion, shorter the better. You have three points of entry-- my book in one sentence and the title. And a great title goes a really long way. So many authors say to me, well, I know they're going to change it anyway. And if you give me a great title, it's easier for me to sell it to the publisher. And then a brief description of your work. And then your credentials. And if you do work in an eminent Ivy League school, that helps your credentials quite a lot. It really opens doors. I always say, lead with your-- put your best foot forward. So if the best thing you have is your credentials, your body of work, the best thing you have is your idea, the best thing you have is your title, sort of start there. And anybody who writes a query letter and would like some feedback, you can email me the letter and I'll give you a quick word about it, if I think it's effective.

The next thing, marketing yourself. Platform-- everybody talks about that. How do you get a profile in today's world? Lot easier than it used to be, you can write a fantastic blog, you can publish articles. If you can't get into the New Yorker, you can definitely get on Slate, Salon, Huffington Post, Daily Beast. You can write up eds that stir debate, sort of bringing your life as a public intellectual forward. If you're great at lecturing, you can go around the country and lecture as academics and build an audience that way. Possibly even get a lecture agent. All these are great ways to raise your profile.

And then-- oh, and your proposal itself. An introduction slash overview that's about 10 to 15 meaty pages. An annotated table of contents that shows the arc of your argument or story. And your bio credentials and a sample chapter. That's for nonfiction. You don't really need to send in your full book to an agent, even if it's written. It's so much easier to sell books on a proposal. That's what the New York editors want, they want to be able to read it in a night, read it on their kindle, and then project their fantasies and dreams for the book onto your work, and hopefully pay you a lot of money.

And then the last thing I'll say is, if you cannot write for the trade, but you have an idea that you know world will be interested in, that you want to try to get out there, hook up with a journalist. That worked really well for a guy called Steven Levitt. He hooked up with a guy called Stephen Dubner and 4 million copies, 35 translations, Freakonomics, which whether you think it's a good book or not, has had a lot of reach, and has influenced so many book proposals that we now see. That's the other thing, too, it's all the copycat, copycat. It's so boring to me. Bringing original work to people, if you can keep their attention, is just genius really.

So, I will stop there. But I'm always happy to take questions. You can e-mail me or anything.

[CLAPPING]