**Writing Books for Readers Beyond Academe - Dan Gilbert**

DAN GILBERT: Well, I have to say, I feel like the odd man out here, because on my left I have two people who have dedicated their lives to the publishing industry. On my right, I have one of America's most distinguished writers. And I'm a scientist. I mean, I wrote one book. I got really lucky. It became a bestseller. And I write better than most scientists do, which means it's like being the tallest jockey.

[LAUGHTER]

So I won the lottery, and everybody thinks I'm an expert on finance. But it turns out that rich people get to talk about how you should invest your money, even if they inherited theirs. So take this with a grain of salt. I ask myself, what are the things that I have learned as a result of the process of writing my book, that I wish I had known when I started? And I thought of three of them.

So the first one is going to be quite-- I'm going to be a little contrary. My observation is that some people really want to get married, and so they go out and find somebody. And then there are other people who find somebody, and it makes them want to get married. I think the latter is a better model for marriage, and I think it's the right model for writing a book.

If you're asking yourself, what should I write a book about, the answer is nothing. In other words, you should be inspired to write a book. In fact, you should think, if I don't write this book, I'm going to continue to bore everyone I know by telling them this thing that I can't stop thinking and talking about. A book should be welling up inside you to get out. If you're starting with, I'd like to be a writer, that's the wrong place to start.

Harlan Ellison, a science fiction writer, once said, "Anybody who wants to be an aspiring writer should ask themselves, if I couldn't do that, what would I do?" And if they can answer that question, they should do the other thing. I think, actually, the world would be better off if fewer of us wrote and more of us read. There are just a lot of crummy books out there. You shouldn't write one.

So if you're thinking, wouldn't it be nice to have my book on a shelf, and my picture in the New York Times? Yeah, that is nice. But that's not a reason to write a book. Passion comes first. I am constantly reminded of this because I wrote a bestseller, which means my agent and my editor-- at least for a couple of years-- called every few months and said, so, what's your next book going to be about? To which I replied, I spent 15 years studying one thing, and I wrote a book about it. 15 years from now, maybe I'll write another one. Maybe I'll know something and be interested in something, and I'll want to open my mouth again.

They're stunned by this answer. Wait a minute, you have an audience. Shouldn't you just keep talking? The answer's no. They said, well, you could write that book again. You could just say it a little differently. I said, why do I want to do that? So I don't know.

OK. So point number one is, probably, you shouldn't write a book. Now, assuming that you are not going to listen to point number one, because you came all the way over here pretty convinced that you do want to write a book, I would say two things I've learned about it that I would like to share with you. The first is that the main way in which trade writing, as far as I can see, differs from academic writing is that with academic writing, or reader naturally shares our interest, because we're writing for people who do what we do.

So when I sit down to write an article, I know that the reader already thinks that the role of the ventral medial prefrontal cortex and temporal discounting is an earth-shattering topic. What I have to do is convince him or her that what I'm going to say about it is original and correct. When a trade reader picks up a book, first of all, they don't care if it's original, as long as it's original to them.

I have a friend who is a writer for New York Magazine. She once asked me, would you write an article on x topic for our magazine? I said, you know, there was just something published on that last year. She said, if it wasn't published this month, it was never published. That's the rule in journalism.

Well, in fact, your reader has to be stumbling on your message for the first time, but you don't have to be the first person to ever say it. Furthermore, you're the expert. They already trust that what you're saying is right. What are they, going to read my book and go, well, what does this guy know about psychological science? I'm a professor at Harvard, for God's sakes. What I have to convince them about is the one thing you never have to convince your audience about in academics, which is that what you have to say is interesting, and important, and worth listening to.

These are people with options. OK? They could be doing something other than reading your book. They could be in the bath tub with macaroons and a party hat. They could be reading one of Luke's books. You have to convince them that every page should be turned, and that they are not wasting their money or their time.

Third, I really think that readers may not know what's right. They may not know what's original. But they smell bullshit a mile away. They have a nose for authenticity. And I think your book-- a good book is written in your voice. I had a colleague who once told me-- after my book came out, his wife read it. He said, you know, she came to me and she said, my god. Reading this book is like having a conversation with Dan, except you don't get to talk back-- to which, of course, he said, how is that unlike any other conversation with Dan?

But I actually took that as a great compliment-- that, in fact, when she read my book, she heard me talking like I'm talking to you now. Now, you may think your academic voice isn't your voice. You may think your academic voice is your voice. It isn't your voice. You don't go home and talk to your spouse like that. If you do, you don't have one at home, waiting to listen to you. Right?

You have a real voice in which you communicate the things you care about with people you care about. And I think that's the voice in which you have to write a book, if you want people to resonate to what you have to say. I think along with that, as we all laughed when Betsy said something about tickling the public's imagination, but you know the public. I think you can't have contempt for your readers or, again, once again-- no point in writing.

There are a lot of people out there who are every bit as smart as your students, and they're more motivated to hear what you have to say than your students are. They really want to learn what you have to teach them, and they're smart. Your job isn't to show them that you're a little bit smarter.

Your job, as a writer, is to show them that they are very smart, and they may even have kind of known what you're telling them, but couldn't quite put it into the words you can. You're sharing a journey with them. You're taking them someplace. You're not leading them and impressing them.

The one caveat I would warn you is that if you do write a book that sells a lot of copies, you will be asked to blurb books for the rest of your life. So I can only imagine I get a small smattering of what Luke does. But I would say 10 books a week-- somebody sends me and says, could you say something nice?

I'm at the point where, basically, I can't blurb a book-- and I'm actually saying this, in case any of you think you're going to send me an email-- I can't blurb a book unless you're a member of my immediate family, you've seen me naked, you've pulled me from a burning jeep and given me your kidney, or you're Bob Dylan. Any of those, I will probably be able to blurb the book.

Yeah, so there's two errors you can make in writing. One is to stop before you're really finished, and the other one is to stop long after you're finished. So I think I'm going to err towards the positive and stop before I'm done. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]