**Writing Books for Readers Beyond Academe - Luke Menand**

LUKE MENAND: That was great. Dan Gilbert is an incredibly talented writer. A lot of the hard part is, as he says, finding the voice, who you are on the page. That's what readers want to encounter.

Mainly, I'm going to make some comments that merely repeat and underline what has already been said because this is all excellent advice. One thing that Angela said is important is that as academics, we like to read books about books. But most people like to read books about people.

It really is important to think about the ideas that you're writing about, and the material that you're writing about, in the context of human beings because that's what readers respond to. In my view as an historian, there's nothing dumbing down about that. Because it just is the case that human beings are part of the world of art and ideas that we cover.

If we include that in our story, we're going to enrich it in every possible way. Secondly, also something that Angela said and been repeated is that also readers like a story. We're not trained to do that, most of us in our scholarly writing. That's just not the way a journal article reads.

But again, there's nothing wrong with turning what you have to say into a narrative because people like to follow it in the form of a story. Those are two things that aren't the way we normally would approach a subject for an academic audience but are important for a more general audience.

The final thing is that people are interested in people. And people are interested in stories. But they're also interested in you. They want to get to know you as a writer. In my experience, I put very little of myself into my writing. I'm very stingy about it.

I don't think it's really about autobiography, or confession, or anything. It's about having a personality in your writing to make people want to read more of it and get to know you a little bit better. Malcolm Gladwell is genius at that. Adam Gopnik is great at that.

It's part of what you need to do to put yourself in front of readers. They become interested in you and fascinated by you. And they want to read more of what you're writing.

The second thing I wanted to talk about a little bit was this question about the money. I don't think any of us want to write trade books to make a lot of money. Very, very few people who write trade books make significant amount of money.

I wrote a book that was called The Metaphysical Club that was a bestseller. It took me 10 years to write it. If I amortized how much money I made off that book, it was not worth 10 years writing. I didn't write it to make money. I wrote it because I wanted people to read it. I'm sure that's true of all of us.

The important thing is that you're reaching people and that you're spreading what your knowledge is, what your ideas are, to people who normally wouldn't encounter them. One way to think about that, for a long time I used to work at The New York Review of Books.

The way we thought about writing there was to think about writing an article or review on a topic that you knew a lot about and thinking of your reader as somebody in another academic department who knew nothing about that subject. Your reader is very well educated. Your reader is probably smarter than you are. But your reader doesn't know anything about the subject that you're writing about.

That's a good target audience, I think, for the kind of books that we want to write. Because we want people who are intelligent, educated, interested, but ignorant of our subject. If we can reach those people, you can often think about that as a colleague in a different department. If you can reach those people, you're going to reach a much larger audience.

This is the third point, and it's a little connected to what I just said. The New Yorker has a million subscribers. If you write a book that 5% of those people buy, you'll have a bestseller.

Who are those people? Those people are smart people. They're educated people. They're intelligent people. They're mostly doing something else besides reading books or doing the kind of stuff that we do. Those people are people who don't know a lot about what we know a ton about.

When we write about our research in an academic venue, we mostly want to appear smart. And we appear smart by not saying things that are obvious to other people in our field. We have a very complicated mechanism for sorting out things that might sound banal or apparent to people who are our peers, our scholarly peers.

That doesn't work at all in the non-academic world because you're dealing with people who don't know a whole lot about what you're writing about. Things that are obvious to us are not obvious at all to them. They need to be told. But they need to feel smart. It's a very important part of getting readers interested in what you're doing is it makes them feel intelligent.

You have to devise, and this is, I think, the trick for writing for a place like The New Yorker or The New York Review of Books, you have to devise a way of saying things that are completely obvious in a manner that doesn't make it seem as though you're talking down to people.

If you write a sentence in the sort of standard magazine style and say something like, Charles Sanders Peirce comma the 19th century American philosopher comma, that's talking down to people. Because you're assuming that they don't have any idea who Charles Peirce was.

But you don't want to assume that. You want to make them feel they had heard of Charles Peirce and they know who Charles Peirce is. So you say, like many 19th century American philosophers comma Charles Peirce had a beard. OK?

Then they think, oh, yeah, I knew he was a 19th century American philosopher. It's not that you're not explaining everything. You're explaining everything in a way that sounds by the way. You don't have to explain the obvious. But you do, you just have to insert it in a way that makes people feel good about their reading.

Everything else that these people up here have said is great advice. I think maybe the best thing for us to do is just try to answer some of your questions.