

Trade Books, Monographs, Textbooks - September 17, 2015

Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Judy Singer. I'm the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty, Development and Diversity, and I want to welcome you to today's event on book publishing, and in particular trade publishing and learning a lot of the tips of the trade from our distinguished panel.

I just want to welcome people and say that this is part of the ongoing series that we have for the faculty, both in terms of professional development events like this, as well as fun social events like things at the American Repertory Theater and the museum, so just keep a look out for the emails.

I'm going to introduce my colleague, Elizabeth Knoll, who's the Assistant Provost for Faculty Appointments, but I think a particular-- who works with me on the appointment process at Harvard, and you can ask her or me lots of questions about that.

But of particular relevance, in Elizabeth's former lifetime, for many, many, many years, she was the Executive Editor at Large at Harvard University Press. She's worked at the University of California Press, has a lot of experience. In fact, in previous iterations of this kind of panel, Elizabeth has actually been on the panel as opposed to convening the panel.

So I want to thank Elizabeth for organizing this, for our panelists for coming. Elizabeth will introduce them. And hopefully we will all learn something about the tips of the trade. Thanks.

Putting together this panel is a real pleasure for me, as you can guess, because it's a chance for me to see old friends and colleagues and ask them to come and talk about the things that I expect to learn a lot about, having been away from publishing for a year and a half, which is a long time in the way the world is changing. We have a wonderful panel here. And so I'll sort of take them in order to introduce them.

We'll start with Gita Manktala in the middle. Gita is the Editorial Director at MIT Press, and she's been in that job since 2009. Before that, she was the MIT Press Marketing Director. So she really has covered the waterfront in knowing a great deal about all ends of the academic publishing world. She oversees the acquisitions of 225 books each year, and she herself works particularly in information sciences and what I kind of think of as internet studies.

Two of the books that she is particularly interested in and proud of lately I'm going to show to you so we can have a show and tell. One of them is Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, *Obfuscation, A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest*. Another is Whitney's Phillips' *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things, An Introduction to the World of Online Trolling*.

As a kind of inspiration point, you should know that this is a first book by a scholar in literary studies, and it's getting a lot of attention, selling well. So that's a very good sign for what the combination of a good subject and a good author can be for a first book.

Second we have Sharmila Sen, who is the Executive Editor at Large at Harvard University Press. She came to Harvard Press in 2006. Before that, she was an Assistant Professor of English here at Harvard. So she has been sort of ambidextrous in this world, being both on the authorial-professorial end of University Press publishing, and on the inside.

At Harvard Press she has overseen the development of the Digital Loeb Classical Library and the creation of the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, and she's expanded the whole idea of classics by envisioning and raising the endowment for the Murty Classical Library.

Two versions. Among the books she particularly is proud of are Mary Beard's *Fires of Vesuvius*, Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* and Nick Sousanis' brand new book, *Unflattening*, which is the first dissertation in the US created entirely in a comic-book format and the first comic book ever published by Harvard University Press.

Third, we have Jill Kneerim, one of the great agents, who's a former editor and publisher, who's been a literary agent now for 25 years since she and Ike Williams co-founded Kneerim & Williams in 1990. She represents bestselling novelists, academics, and journalists whose books sell well and are also widely respected and endure for many years.

Her many authors include novelists like Brad Meltzer and Sue Miller, journalists like Larry Tye, Bo Burlingham and David Laskin. And close to home, some friends from 02138 and 02139, like Steven Greenblatt, author of *Will in the World* and *The Swerve*, Caroline Elkins, author of *Imperial Reckoning*, and Sean Kelly. He's sitting in the back, being quiet, author of the wonderful, *All Things Shining*.

She's also working with Matt Desmond, whose book, *Eviction*, will be published next spring. Among this group are two Pulitzer Prizes, one National Book Award, and one MacArthur Genius Award, by my count. She has also been the agent for MIT historian Pauline Maier, books on the Declaration of Independence and on the Constitution.

Jill seeks essentially good stories well told by good authors in many fields. And I can tell you from experience that she works astutely and effectively with those authors and that she ever so graciously drives very hard bargains with publishers. It is a pleasure to have this group here, and I'm looking forward to hearing from them.

Gita first, to talk about the nuts, and bolts, and complexities, of thinking about your book and finding the right publisher for it.

Thank you, Elizabeth. Can everybody hear me? OK. It's really a pleasure to be here today and my reasons are completely selfish. The panelists and I were just talking about how if it were up to us, we would spend the next two hours asking you about your work because, that's what we're really interested in. But we came here today to talk about publishing, so I want to start out with a story.

About nearly 10 years ago, when I was still a marketing director, not an editor, I got a call from someone, from Dan Ariely, who went on to write a book called *Predictably Irrational*, a best

seller. But at that time, he hadn't conceived that book yet. And he called me up and he said, I'm a researcher at MIT and I want to write a cookbook.

And the cookbook that he wanted to write was going to be called, Dining Without Crumbs, The Art of Eating Over the Sink.

[LAUGHTER]

And he wanted to know whether the MIT Press could be interested in a book like that. And I said to him, well, no.

[LAUGHTER]

Actually, we don't publish any cookbooks at all. We wouldn't be the right partner for you on that. And I suggested to him some agents who I thought might be able to help him find a good home for that book. Now, if you look up Dan's 2008 TED talk, you can hear him tell this story and say what happened next.

Apparently, he called up a bunch of other publishers after talking with me and they all gave him some version of the same answer. That sounds great, but it's not for us. And eventually-- this went on until eventually he spoke with someone, he doesn't identify in his TED talk. I can only assume this was a very sensible and very astute editor for a publishing company who said to him, you really need to write a book about your own work. And Ariely resisted this advice. He said, you know, I publish papers about my research all the time. I want to do something different. I want to do something fun. The cookbook.

[LAUGHTER]

But the editor was adamant and said, absolutely not. You're not going to get that cookbook published until you write a really good book about your own work. And that's how he came to write Predictably Irrational. And I really hope that the editor who gave him that excellent advice, which I wish I had given him, became his editor. I don't know. Do you know?

I don't.

No. OK.

But I've had the same hope.

Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

So I bring this up because I think it illustrates a few things, beyond the obvious point about telling the story that only you can tell and presenting research that, if you present it properly, can

engage a wide audience and can be consequential for people within your field and possibly beyond it as well.

But also, doing a little bit of homework in terms of the publishers that you contact, because even though in the end it worked out for Dan Ariely, he finally ran into this editor who gave him good advice and he finally was able to take that advice at the end of a long chain of inquiries. Probably you don't want to spend your time talking to people who don't publish the kind of book that you want to write.

So how do you find the right publisher? Elizabeth asked me to talk a little bit about this and I think it's a very good question because it's actually-- it appears more mysterious than it is. It should be easier to find a publisher who would be interested in your subject matter.

I think the best place to start is your own bookshelves. Who publishes, which publishers work with the leading lights in your field? What are the best recent books in your field and who published them? If this is a university press or a couple of university presses, you know that you can start with those. Start with one of them.

Now, why can't you just go straight to Sharmila at Harvard, you know, regardless of what your subject matter is? The reason is because most university presses publish in focused subject areas and they have to do this unless they're very big, like Oxford or Cambridge, because they can only market effectively to a finite number of readerships.

At the MIT Press, we published in about 16 major subject areas. These do span the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences, but we don't publish everything. There are certainly fields in which we don't publish much. We don't publish physics, or chemistry, or even, surprisingly, very much in engineering these days.

So the question of fit is important. On the other hand, although editors will have to-- the project that you propose will have to fit what the press does for them even to talk to you, they will not consider your book on the basis of fit alone because by itself, that's a pretty weak rationale for considering something.

OK, so the homework part of it is not that difficult, certainly not as difficult as writing a book, making time to write it.

[LAUGHTER]

--Come up with an argument and presenting your evidence effectively. But I think that's a very necessary first step. Once you have identified a publisher, whether it's a university press, or a trade publisher that you think would be a good match for the project that you're working on, you then need to find the editor who covers your subject area and would be the right person to query. You can go to the publisher's website, you can usually find that out relatively easily.

At the MIT Press, we ask for queries by email. Drop the editor a short email, just write to one editor. If it looks like there's another who could possibly be the right person, pick the one that

you think is the closest fit for what you're working on and write to that person first and ask them to forward it on to someone else if they're not the right person to work with you.

I think that that brief email query is very important. It needs to be crisp, it needs to be short, and it needs to tell the editor what your book is about and what it's going to contribute to our existing knowledge of the topic. It should say, again briefly, why you're the right person to write the book and what evidence you're going to present. If you've done a lot of primary research, tell the editor that. And what conclusions you're going to draw from it.

Most important, your editor needs to know that enough readers are going to want to buy this book, will be sufficiently interested in your subject and the way that you treat it, that you're going to be able to command an audience of a certain size, so talk about that briefly in the query as well.

If the editor likes your answers, he or she will ask you to submit a full proposal and will usually provide some guidelines for you to use in preparing this. I have a handout here which-- it encompasses our proposal guidelines, and feel free to take a copy of that. But other publishers have other versions. Usually you can find these on their websites, and they're all pretty similar I think.

So just to recap before I hand this over to Jill, briefly, the things I want to know about your project when you first write to me or one of my editors, what is your book about? What argument will you make? What evidence or scholarships will you present? What are the best books or resources already out there on this topic and how is your book going to compare with them? What is it going to add that's unique? Why are you the right person to write this book? Why is now the right time? And why is the MIT Press the right publisher?

I think it's Sharmila's--

Oh, Sharmila next.

Sharmila [INAUDIBLE] is next.

Jill, go ahead.

Yeah?

Yes?

Yes, go. Fine. Is this broadcasting? I guess it is. So I am a literary agent. What does a literary agent do? They represent writers who are writing so-called trade books, books for the general reader, the kind of books that you find on the front table at Barnes Noble. And we love the university presses. We do sell books to the university presses, but by and large, writers come to us to sell a trade book.

So-- and a lot of people who teach think that they're writing a trade book. So I thought I might simply say what is a trade book. What constitutes a trade book? Why should it go to an agent rather than to Sharmila or Gita or the other editors working in your area?

So a trade book is for a general reader. I think you could safely say that if the national press is reporting that your podcasts are being listened to by cross-country truck drivers, you probably have a trade book in hand. In other words, if a person who's not in your field is very interested in your subject and many people are, then that's a trade book.

And in a way, the best way to think about it is that you yourself are a general reader, as long as you're outside of your field. And you could quickly say, I imagine, like all the rest of us, that you really don't have very much time to put into reading books for pleasure. I mean, we all work too hard. So the reason that you read books for pleasure has to be very compelling.

And if we talk about numbers with my two colleagues here, I would venture to say that a university press, I'm sure you have minimum numbers that you want to see and sell, but a trade-book publisher is going to consider your book a failure if you don't sell at least 10,000 copies. So it's a big world out there.

And I think that an agent can-- not just me, but any good agent-- will, if representing you on your book, will want to meet you long before you start writing your book. So every once in awhile, someone who has already done a great deal of work comes to me, but if you've never written a trade book, you just might not have the idea of how to focus it.

So I'll tell a small story about that. A colleague, an editor at one of the trade houses, one time sent me an author because she wasn't publishing series anymore that this author had published in, who was writing a, or proposing to write, a biography of Florence Nightingale.

And this editor, recommending the author, said to me, may I send you this author who's writing a biography of Florence Nightingale? And I said no. I don't even want to see that because I think selling a biography of Florence Nightingale would be difficult. I mean, I fall asleep at the very idea of Florence Nightingale.

[LAUGHTER]

Would others do that too? And we all know that a biography needs to really go from soup to nuts. So anyway, please, please, please, Jill, look at this. So I said, OK. She sent the proposal and a sample chapter. The proposal was terrible. Most people don't have any idea how to write a good proposal, to tell the truth. It's really an art form. And the sample chapter was absolutely out of this world.

So I said--

Out of this world good or bad?

Good. Really superb. Wonderful, irresistible. And it was about Florence's childhood. So I got in touch with the author and said, could I persuade you not to write a biography but to write instead the story of Florence and her family, which was a phenomenal piece of social history in a way? It had a lot to do with women's rights and prospects in the mid-19th century. And she said, you mean I don't have to spend 40 years reforming public health? And I said no, neither does your reader.

[LAUGHTER]

So I basically am just saying, if you are dreaming of writing a trade book, come talk to an agent. I'm sure you can find-- as a professor at Harvard or MIT, you're very likely to get some kind of response. And by the way, how to find an agent, I think there's a handout here on suggestions as to how you could do that.

But an agent can sit down with you and talk about how to really shape the book. There was an intervention that I happened to make that made a tremendous difference in the prospects for that particular book. And it wasn't that I was putting a pencil on the page, it was that I was trying to apply a piece of logic.

So I think somebody who's working full time in the trade-book world can really give you advice about that. And I'm not here to advocate that you write a trade book, I'm here to say, try and understand whether what you want to write about has that kind of audience, because though people sometimes think trade books are marvelous because they reach so many readers, the truth is that the big publishers who publish most of the trade books have a spring list or a fall list that's really rather like a corral of wild stallions, waiting to break out of the gate.

And if you want to have your little darling trampled underfoot, that is a good way to have that happen. They pay most attention to the books that they have on their list by Tom Brokaw or whoever. And so one of the things the agent will do is try to advocate for you in such a world.

But I think you may all be at the point of deciding, am I writing a trade book, or am I writing an academic book, or possibly, best of both worlds depending on your project, am I writing a trade book for Harvard University Press or MIT Press, because they also know how to publish trade books very well.

And in fact, I hope-- maybe Sharmila will tell us how they publish them differently.

Well, I was not expecting that hand off, Jill. Thanks.

[LAUGHTER]

I was charged by Elizabeth to, first of all, make sure no one leaves this room depressed.

[LAUGHTER]

Or down or feeling overwhelmed. The weather clearly has made it-- I know what my job is. Can I first-- I don't have something written up. I don't have a handout, but I am here, fully here, and I want to-- before I kind of talk about a few things, I want to see-- how many of you have already written a book? Published a book? OK. So roughly half this room.

So some of the things you already know. And whenever I kind of think of-- Gita did such a great job of explaining how to find the right publisher. And then Jill, trying to assess if you need an agent or how to find an agent. But I have to say, at the risk of breaking rank perhaps, that's the way things are. Look at you all. Look-- I mean, scholarship has changed, professors have changed.

I really wish-- I want to develop a product, kind of like a Tinder but for finding publishers and authors. Yes, Sean. You are on our syndex and you heard it. You know, where you swipe me. I swipe you. We surely got to have a better way of getting this going because sometimes I worry that our method of kind of communicating with each other, finding each other, frankly is still kind of like 30 years behind.

And the reason I'm saying that is not just because I think an app is a solution to the world or one of those things, but largely because when you think about these methods of how you find Jill, or you find Gita, or how we find you, is until we kind of vigorously rethink those methods, we could be replicating all sorts of ways of kind of basically reinstating nepotism, cronyism, elitism, all these things, which is bad for all of us, for the university, for publishing, because we might not be finding all the talent that's there and the talent that's there might not be able to reach us.

So offline, if anyone wants to discuss with me quite seriously how we can come up with different ways of finding each other, because people have found other ways of finding each other for love, or dating, or marriage. Why can't we do it for publishing? So it's like the hook up of publishing.

OK.

[LAUGHTER]

That said, Elizabeth had told me to kind of talk to you a little bit about where does book writing fit into your life, your professional life. Because you're not just any kind of authors, you're very special kind of authors. You are all-- all of you are teachers, you're professors, or either you've been professors for a long time, maybe some of you are in early stage of that career.

So the writing of the book has to-- it's something that's part, a larger part, of who you are, what you're doing here. And how many of you got into academia because you wanted to write books? That's not a lot. How many of you got into academia because you wanted to teach? How many of you got into academia because you were incredibly curious about a subject, you were a researcher, and that's--

I'm assuming the rest of you somehow just wandered in.

[LAUGHTER]

And are just brilliant and--

[LAUGHTER]

It happens to the best of us. So one of the things I think is, you have to think about why write a book. How many of you wrote a book because you-- those of you who already have published-- how many people wrote a book because you wanted to write a book? That's good.

[LAUGHTER]

Because you know, these things sounds silly, but it's important to sometimes pause and ask yourself, are you doing it because you think that's what you're supposed to do, because that's what the Academy expects of you, your teachers, your mentors?

Because these are, as all of you know much better than me, this is an active discussion in many aspects. And we have to kind of put this discussion about book publishing within that larger context, so we don't take any of these things for granted. The book should not be the default. It's not something you just do because everybody else does.

You do it-- if you write a book because you want to. You write a book because you choose to. Maybe many of you have to write a first book because you have to because that is the way in which promotion and tenure occurs. A further question can be, why write a second book?

And sometimes, your reasons for writing a first book will be different from writing a second book, and the third, and the fourth, because you're evolving, you're changing. Your role in the Academy, who you are as a professor, is changing.

So each time you say-- whether you're a veteran of publishing and you have many books to your name or whether you're a first-time author, I think it's very important for professors to kind of ask themselves, why do I want to write a book?

Second question is, why do I want to write this book or what is that book going to be? It's not work that appears in a proposal. I think that's homework, because that work has an incredible resonance throughout everything you do, how you'll communicate, how you'll write, how you will organize your life. And there are certain skills, I think, that faculty already have. And it's a little bit of a shame that in the Academy sometimes, we partition teaching and writing.

And you know, there's a way in which in the way you're evaluated, or in the way in which people talk, because you have transferable skills. And often I kind of-- which is not to say, by the way, by that I don't mean, just turn your popular course into a book. That, I think, is a very lazy, false reading of the transferable skill of teachers should know.

Its other kinds of skills. If you teach a 50-minute lecture, you know that you can probably, at most, cover two really important points, if that. Try to cover five, you're done. So because you know that, any veteran teacher knows how much you can cover in a 50-minute-- you prioritize,

right? You think about, if they don't learn anything else, what is it that I want my students to remember? What is it that I want them to know? And in what order?

That's narrative, because narrative is important too. It's not just any random two facts. There's a particular order in which-- and as people become-- some people are natural teachers. Some people learn it on the job. But as you become better and better at it, you figure out how the retention will work. What is the way in which you tell your story, or you make your argument, or you demonstrate a problem?

This is what I mean about transferable skills. So you need to kind of stop, sit back, and think about those things you already have, and think about ways in which you can use them when you're writing-- whether it's a chapter, you know?

When I sometimes talk to people about-- we've all talked about what is a book that appeals to more than 50 people in your field and your immediate relatives, right? And then there is this kind of-- people go from that to everybody in the world. The man on the street, you know?

Now, Jill might be in the good position of publishing, having shepherded books that are for the man on the street. And I always say, well, we ought to think about what our street is, right? What street I'm on and what the HUP street is. But it doesn't have to be so complicated.

So oftentimes, for faculty, a great way of thinking about this is I say, you know, what department are you in?

History and literature.

History and literature. OK. I'm sorry, what's your name?

Nicole.

Nicole. So if I were talking with Nicole, I would say, OK, Nicole, imagine yourself at a-- you had to go to a dinner. You went to a talk, afterwards there was a dinner. It was an interdisciplinary talk. There are 12 people around the table. You're in hist and lit. There's going to be someone from government, someone from the law school, maybe someone from the school of public health.

And you have to present yourself well because this is still kind of a professional setting, but it's a social setting. They ask you what you do. How do you talk to the person in the economics department or in the school of public health? Because they're not stupid, right? It's not watering it down.

But they might not read all the journals you do, and they might not be deeply invested in all the fights that you are passionately invested in. How can you talk to them without them kind of wanting to go to somebody else at the dinner table?

[LAUGHTER]

And many academics already have that experience, because surely you have all sat down at that table that I'm talking about and have tried to talk about your work in a way that sounds reasonably intelligent but is not going to make your colleague from another division or another school just inch away from you with that look on their face. And you also know that you can't talk down to them. They're not freshman. They're not stupid people. So you can't actually just kind of pander, because they won't like you then either.

That's a great way to start thinking about things like voice, how to read. Because I think things like the general educated reader-- I really try to ban that word in my head because I wouldn't know who that is. It's too big. It's shifting all the time. It's too large a category, I think, for it to be useful to think with.

So I try to kind of make it, real size it, and think about these kinds of things. Which is another way of saying, you have these skills if you're surviving. If you're not just thriving, if you're flourishing on an academic campus and getting there, teaching your courses, sitting through these dinners, talking to your colleagues, you have a number of skills. But because we partition our writing from our teaching, we kind of don't let that crossover.

So those are things that I want you to think about and I want you to just also think about why write a book. Because anything we do because we think we just have to do it, it's just-- you'll have certain amount of success, but at some point, it doesn't quite work out. And in the end, you don't really feel satisfied with it, right?

So there has to be some-- I'm a publisher. I'm supposed to think about my sales and all of this. But today we're here for you, and in some way-- how do you actually-- you got into this profession with certain kinds of ideals and goals.

So the process of writing a book, the process of thinking about the book, the process of-- and everything won't be fun, and games, and pleasure. But hopefully also meeting an agent or an editor, somebody in the book world that you work with, there should be some pleasure in it. There should be something meaningful, because otherwise it's really not worth it.

So those are my-- and I hope that we can kind of develop some ideas more during Q & A.

I think that's a great introduction to a panel [INAUDIBLE] think about, but I asked all the speakers, rather cruelly, perhaps, to keep it fairly short, because I thought, people are going to come with questions that we [INAUDIBLE]. They can't necessarily anticipate. We wanted to hear from you about the things that are on your mind, because it's very probable that the things that might be on your mind, your questions about what you're working on, and whether to transform it or develop it, would be put across the room in somebody else's mind. So if there are questions, please ask them now.

I have two quite different questions. I have two quite different questions. Is this on? Yeah.

Mhm.

First, introduction. I raised my hand when you said you write a book before, and I did, 58 years ago, and I swore I'd never do it again.

[LAUGHTER]

So that's just the background. I've been giving a course here in the general education program for six years now. Each year the student's say, there's no text. You should have a text for this course. Well, it's an interdisciplinary-science course. It covers the waterfront, astronomy, geophysics, biology. There's no book for that. True. So I decided, well, maybe I'll turn my course into a book.

The point is, I can't go to a publisher of physics books because it's not a physics book. Can't go to biology, because it's not a biology book. Where does one go for something like that, if one bothers at all? Maybe I should just put it on the web and not worry about it at my age, publishing a book. That's question number one. Should I let you answer it before I give you question number two?

I think hit us with both.

I can hit you with both.

[LAUGHTER]

The other is a quite different question. In putting together the chapters for this book, I've needed illustrations. I want to put in a picture of famous scientists or a picture of something that illustrates something in the book. And where do I go? To the web.

So I have lots, and lots, too many, hundreds, literally, hundreds of figures from the web. And I don't know to whom to credit it. You go to the web and you ask for a picture of such and such and you get a hundred choices but they don't come with any attribution as to where it's from. So what is one supposed to do in such cases? That's question number two.

I'll take the first question.

[LAUGHTER]

You may need to speak with an attorney about the second.

[LAUGHTER]

I think the material question is, are there other courses like yours? No. Yours is the only one?

As far as I know.

OK.

I made it up myself.

OK.

It's not based on any, as far as I know.

Is it a pedagogy that you want to export, or do you think that-- that you think could be valuable in other contexts?

Well, it's mainly directed towards giving non scientists an education in science.

OK.

The course is called Unity of Science--

OK.

Showing how things from one field relate to stuff in another, and it's unity in about seven different ways, which I mentioned in the first chapter.

I'm going to bet that there are other teachers who teach courses like that. Maybe they're not--

Not at Harvard.

--structured the same way as yours, but I would think that you maybe should give some serious thought to pulling together that sort of a textbook and working with a publisher to bring it out. And you could take that textbook to Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press. I think they might be very interested in it. Princeton might be interested in it.

Harvard might be interested in it.

Harvard might be interest-- Harvard might be interested.

Not by my reading of body language.

[LAUGHTER]

I have a thought on this too. If you want to make it a textbook, that's the route to go. And then you're going to have to meet, obviously, the requirements of-- that these very high-level publishers want to make sure your meeting in each of the realms.

If you wanted to turn that instead into a trade book for the general reader, I just thought it might be useful to people to sort of hear. OK. How would that work as a trade book? Well, the one thing that a trade book reader, the general reader, you, yourself if science isn't your field, feels is, that they don't want to be lectured to. They want to be stimulated, fascinated, entertained. You can't do it as a series of lectures on, OK, here's what astronomy is all about, here's what physics is all about. You have to tell them a story somehow.

That's what it is made of.

Stories.

Stories that never end and are fascinating.

That's great. And do you have an overarching story for the whole book, or is it a string of beads?

No, they're interconnected.

Mhm. It sounds like you're doing a book.

I try to make it funny.

Uh huh.

[LAUGHTER]

Whether I succeed or not is another question.

I think I will jump in and-- you probably very astutely read my body language, but I'll tell you that it has nothing to do with your subject, but it has to do with something very serious, because you are a professor in this university so I owe you a serious answer.

Because if you think of the-- and maybe, hopefully, this also is illustrative for others here who might be thinking of similar things-- because if there is a kind of a textbook version, which is what Gita was talking about, you want to go with the press which has an established tradition of publishing textbooks, by which we mean course books and things like that.

And this is what-- there are very good presses, but that is not exactly what HUP does. So it will be irresponsible for a press. Now what Jill is talking about is something different.

I was not thinking of a textbook.

Oh, OK--

I was thinking of a book that could be used as text.

Right.

But not as a textbook.

Right.

That's too much work.

Right. And I think that what Jill-- Jill's suggestions are also very useful. I would say though, at some point-- and this is for all authors-- one has to decide that what the core-- who it's really aimed for, right? So that-- of course, ideally, it's a general reader book that's also adopted for courses, but if one had to choose-- because I think it's very difficult.

If we try to please everybody, we end up pleasing nobody. And also a publisher-- it's also the publishers responsibility to think very clearly and think about this book, I really want to market it for this-- this is the primary audience I'm going to market it for.

If the secondary thing happens, that's good. But you know when people sort of proceed with the kind of, I want to do X, Y, Z, a lot of publisher promises that, it's probably good to apply a little caution because it's a difficult thing to get both course adoption and the kind of general reader book that you were talking. It's not impossible, but it's not the easiest thing.

And the way in which these books are-- things like how they are sold, how they're marketed, how they're priced, how they're put out in the world, entirely different. So just in general, which is to say, just kind of-- it's good to know what this beast really is, or primarily is, and go with that. And if the secondary thing also happens, that's icing on the cake.

Thank you. Can I ask if anyone has an answer to the second question that I posed?

The second question, it really depends where you're finding these images. A lot of images on the internet, there are protocols and ways of citing it and saying where it's found from. Is this a Wiki Commons thing? If it's truly impossible-- and so that's something that me, or Gita, or any of us can help you a bit if we know actually that exact provenance or where in the internet these images are from.

I just use Google, you know? And I--

I understand, but beyond that-- and because there are ways in which of finding who should be given the proper credit, or if it's licensed, and things like that. Of course, if one does a lot of-- and there are ways of researching these things. Maybe some of your students in these classes could do some of that research for you. And if you really have tried your best and can't find, there are ways of-- assuming this is in the public domain. But I wouldn't assume just because an image is appearing on a Google search that it's in the public domain.

If you get a publisher, you'll answer this question.

Yeah, they'll figure that out.

I wouldn't fret about it too much until you get a publisher.

But they'll probably also tell you, you don't need all of those images.

[LAUGHTER]

You only need some.

Yes, and they'll probably say, if it's on Google, then people can find it there. These are--

By the way, just to clarify, it's not clear to me that I want to go through the process of finding an agent and a publisher. I might just want to put it on the web and anyone who wants to use it. I'm not out to make a million dollars at my age. I wouldn't be able to spend it.

Excellent. So you're in great shape. We should probably--

But the point is, I should know so I don't get into trouble on the question of provenance.

Mhm.

Thank you very much.

In the back.

Hi. Thanks. I'm sorry. I came in late, so you may have covered this. But my friends who are fiction writers say they would never just send their work cold to an agent because it never works. It just goes into some big pile, and to avoid, and they never hear from them. Again, even if they've already published one. And so I was wondering if you already covered how one finds an agent if you're making this transition from academic writing to trade book writing?

There's a handout somewhere. Elizabeth?

[INAUDIBLE].

In the back there from me. I am an agent.

Right.

Essentially suggesting how to find an agent. Really, use your basic, good sense about how to network. The more they know about you, the more-- you know, you don't want to just submit something to a whole bunch of people. I get-- I and my agency get like 30 or 40 a day. It's just crazy. People are just--

[VOCALIZING]

So if you do some homework, it will pay off, basically. If you discover who agents are that handle this kind of material, which you can do by looking at your own shelves, as Gita said, or by looking at the bookshelves at the bookstore. You find the books that feel like they're family members of your kind of work. Look in the acknowledgements. People usually thank their agent. And you get a list that way.

Then you have to network a bit and see if you know anybody who's represented by that agent. Let's say you don't. I mean, if you do, it's obvious that you'll get a recommendation from that person. But if you don't, it's still fine.

I mean, I will stop and pay attention if a letter comes in that seems knowledgeable, seems to know who I am, and to have actually chosen to address this not to 500 agents, but to me, Jill Kneerin, at my agency, because I represent this, several other works that are-- so I'm immediately aware that this person has at least put a little thought into it,

And then you, ideally, will write a killer letter.

[LAUGHTER]

And your project is a great idea. I really want to add, I think I said it before. I will repeat that it's very rare to get a flawless, fabulous proposal. I think you need to try and think it out. I think there's another one of my handouts is How to Write a Book Proposal, and I'm glad to talk some about that if you want.

But basically, you should be getting some help from someone knowledgeable. So sort of think it through as much as you can, but at least I don't feel it needs to be completely finished when I get it. It just needs to be a great idea.

Hi. Thanks. So this is sort of actually following on that question. And that is, how do you know when is the right moment to start sending out proposals? In other words, how do you sort of say, OK, I've done enough research that I have something that I can write knowledgeably and compellingly about, but I mean, I took your point, Jill, also about not sort of writing a whole book that ultimately you'll want to recast anyway. So do you think a sample chapter is absolutely requisite? Would you recommend somebody send a proposal before that? I guess, yeah, just how do you think about assessing that right moment?

OK. It's not necessarily a hard and fast. You know, we people in the business are looking for good books. You're probably writing one. So you might not be at the right moment, but someone will probably perceive a good idea and be open to talking about it, like the Florence Nightingale Gail biography. it's a conversation in an odd way. So I wouldn't get too hung up on that.

I do think it's helpful to have some kind of outline. It's really useful in your letter to think of what we affectionately call the elevator pitch, because in an odd way, I guess in all our lives, it's not unique to the book business but it's very big in the book business-- that a lot of people who have not read a book have to pitch the book and have to discuss it, because publishers can't read all the books that they publish and even agents can't read all the finished books, you know? There's such a flood of stuff.

So if you can do a great elevator pitch on your book, you know, it's the only book that has ever done X. And of course we, agents and editors are also looking at who you are. As Gita described, if you have a surprising and interesting subject, or if you have some special background, you just got a special prize for doing this particular thing, it'll be of interest.

So that's a very wishy-washy answer, but you can have this conversation a different times. And if it doesn't work the first time, don't give up, for heaven sake. Take it as wisdom. It's like a piece of research.

And can I add something to it, which is obviously, and many of you will say, how do I find a publisher, an agent? The other way to think about it is approach it exactly from the opposite angle. How do I get found out? How am I found, right? Many of the books I publish, I found somebody.

Nick's book, *Unflattening*, I was following his blog for five years. And here I know there is a-- while he was a second year PH.D. Student, because he was posting his drawings online. I was fascinated by these drawings. And I was drawn to all these conversations going on in higher Ed. What is the nature of a graduate education? What should the 21st century dissertation look like? Can you make an argument in a non-verbal form, right? I mean these are serious questions.

And I Google stalk a lot of people all the time.

[LAUGHTER]

But I know that there is a kind of a generational change in this, and I talk about it with my friends. So you know, I went to graduate school in the early '90s and there was this kind of-- we had this crazy notion, like, if this is my idea, I'm going to hide it because, oh my god, someone's going to steal my idea. That there was this kind of decision to try and kind of keep things under wraps. And I see you're nodding and many of you might remember that.

But you know-- and there's a lot of conversation going on among academics, younger academics, about this, that there's actually-- the dial has moved from that. And now, I mean, sometimes it's a little shocking to me, because it's not the culture I grew up with or was trained in, where people are kind of putting it out there, hard, and fast, and early. So whether it's through their blog, they're tweeting about it, you know, they're practically trademarking things, sometimes, perhaps, a little early.

But it's the exact opposite, which is a way of saying, I am Gita and I have this theory about this bottle of water and I'm not going to wait till I have this whole, fully-formed thing. I'm going to start putting it out on social media. I'm going to start talking about it. Which is another way actually-- what it is is a way of marking turf. I know that.

But it leads often-- and it depends. There are many kinds of editors. There are many kinds of agents. There are many kinds of publishers. We're not all the same age, race, sex, gender, all of that, and we work differently. But people can also sometimes be found that way.

Which is just a way-- kind of keep that in mind, that you want to find somebody, but you also want to be found, and how people are found these days, or what kind of things people check on, even once they've gotten your proposal. Is it just the paper, or is it, you know, am I going to just-- it's going to take me two seconds to go online and try and look into you.

And I can see, oh my god, this woman's been writing these amazing op ed's. And oh, I see here she's got this amazing kind of following on this particular topic. So I will see a lot more about you. And these things were not possible 25 years ago, so keep those kinds of larger issues in mind.

I'm not saying you have to be like-- everyone has to run out there and make a self-promoting website. But I'm just saying that, keep in mind that these are all different ways in which publishers are also looking and seeing who's doing what, and also looking into people who are proposing things to them.

This is, I guess, a question more about the academic press. Can you give a sense of the typical timeline for, I guess, first authors or second authors, that takes place between the initial conversation, then the proposal, and the final product? Oftentimes, to do these things in academia, we kind of have to really plan the time with teaching loads and semesters, with different capacities for writing time. And so just to kind of understand, what's your average in the industry, I guess. How long does it take?

That's a great question and it's a great problem with academic publishing, that it always takes too long because there's so many stages in the process of considering a book for publication and then actually developing it for publication, and then actually manufacturing it.

It's a long process. And it doesn't map well onto your own schedule necessarily. It doesn't map well onto an academic calendar. But it does depend on the commitments of a wider community of scholars who are going to be helping your publisher and your editor with peer review, for example.

That's one of the things that can really delay this process, is that peer review takes a long time and it can take longer even than your editor initially thinks it will if reviews don't come back in a timely way.

So I would say, from the time you have your initial conversation, you send your initial query, it does tell you something if an editor gets back to you really quickly. That does suggest that he or she is interested in your work. And if you fall into a trough in which you're not getting timely responses, you really should follow up with the editor and say, what's going on? Should I take this somewhere else? And it's entirely within your rights to do that if you're not getting-- if the person you're in touch with is not responsive.

I would suggest that you do that because university press editors, especially in the humanities I have to say, are overloaded and they have way too much to do, and way too much to read, and they're not always as responsive as they should be. But it's perfectly legitimate to check in with them regularly about their consideration process.

Could you just maybe elaborate a little bit more on the-- not just the first step of the conversation, but the full process.

Yeah. OK, the full process.

To the proposal, to the published book. What times are averages in your field?

Well, I think again, you know, it depends on so many things. So if somebody sends me a query today and I get back to them by next week, and I say, I'm really interested in what you're doing, could you send me a proposal? Here are my guidelines. And I'd like to see your CV, and I'd like a couple of sample chapters, if you have them. I might not hear from that person for a month, or the person--

Or a year.

Or a year. Because they don't have all that material yet and they're not going to have a chance to prepare it immediately. So a lot depends on you as well. But I think-- so I don't even know what the average would be, because there's so many things factoring into it, but I can tell you as a general principle, that the more interested the editor is in what you're doing, the more promptly you'll hear back.

The trough tends to happen when the editor is on the fence about something and doesn't know whether to say, look, this is not going to work out for us, I suggest you take it somewhere else, or this is something we really want to move on. It's when there's a conflict of some kind that you stop hearing. Yeah.

I think that you should also-- I mean, you know, and some of it is-- I'm sorry to say-- it's a culture, and it's a bad culture, and you shouldn't accept that culture. I hope it changes. There's a kind of-- and it's because it's a form of kind of abuse of the poor, young, academic, just this not responding for months and months, and the kind of horror stories I hear.

And that makes me deeply ashamed because in some ways, I think that reflects poorly on the profession. And I actually don't accept that idea, that when people say, oh, so and so, my editor, was too busy. So I'm going to say it. No.

There is-- and Elizabeth was my colleague for many years and we both know this. Of course we can always give a prompt and professional response, and even just sort of say that this is where you are in the process, right? So this disappearing game that's a kind of a-- I hope that it's a culture that will just, frankly, die.

But there are also a lot of university press publishers, obviously, trade publishers. The majority of the books I work with are under something called an advanced contract. It just means, usually, there's something like a twinkle in someone's eye.

So-- but I'm very clear about the schedule. So you know, at HUP, we can map out exactly what happens from when you have turned in a manuscript-- say a book is under advanced contract because it was just the most promising, fabulous, thing. And I want to work with you. I want to work with you and I want to help you shape it. And that's why you're under contract, because I also have to think about how I spend my time, right? People like Elizabeth and me, we couldn't go around shaping everyone's manuscript.

So now let's say your manuscript is in and we've both been looking at it. It is as good a shape as you can get it for it to go out to peer review, right? That's the process. And again, these things can be managed and I kind of feel like I don't like perpetuating these myths about, oh, peer review is this kind of unmanageable beast. No, it's not.

I get average-- I get back-- I've done this for nearly a decade-- four to six weeks is what I get my peer reviews in. Why? Because I've developed a network and I'm also responsive. I think scholars respond to editors. If I'm responsive to Sean Kelly, Sean is going to be responsive back to me. So I think we do get what we give out.

But let's say six. Maybe something happened. Eight weeks. If I don't see something-- and editors can do that-- I can say, dear Professor so and so, it seems like you're very busy. Perhaps I should send this to another reader, because I'm not going to keep an author hanging for six months because a perfectly wonderful scholar who agreed to-- things happen. Someone agreed to read a manuscript and stuff happened. But it's horrible to leave something in that limbo. There are things we can do that's perfectly within the bounds of the profession, right?

When it comes back and you need the two reviews and let's say they're positive. At most university presses, and certainly at HUP, we have another process. This is when it goes to our board of syndex, where the syndex have-- and one of whom is sitting right here directly across from me-- where the syndex are the final arbiters of this. They are looking at it. They're making sure the process has been followed, so they look at the two reader reports and all the materials. Most HUP editors from getting the reader reports, it's within weeks it goes to syndex. We don't wait for it.

From when it comes-- so basically from when you get your reader reports on the manuscript that had gone out, most of my authors take about two months to revise, unless the reader reports are suggesting serious reconstruction. So let's say after that two months average, and by the time-- it also has to be taken to syndex. Some of these things can happen in parallel process.

So when that manuscript is in two months later, from then to bound books is an average of nine months at HUP. So we have a very specific schedule. We, like many publishers, publish in the fall and the spring. So these things are not mysteries. And the reason I'm saying it is when you're talking to an editor or a publisher and ask them- it's within your rights to ask these questions and be very specific.

And if anyone's kind of hedging, Gita's absolutely right. Maybe they're not so committed to you. And by the way, you can have your manuscript be considered by multiple people until you've signed some sort of a contract. You should, out of courtesy, of course, let-- say you've sent something to both of us, you should just let us know, right? But you're not--

And you'll get a faster answer.

Yes.

Exactly. You'll get a fast-- right? It's human nature. If someone says, by the way, this is also under consideration at MIT, Princeton, Yale, Oxford-- you could do it very politely and nicely and it's perfectly fine. Of course, once you sign a contract, or there'll come a point and the editor will say, look, you know, we're this close now to the contract. Is it just you and me? Or are I competing?

So these are ways in which you can protect your time, manage your time, a little bit, so you don't feel like you're in the kind of-- at the mercy of some mysterious process that's holding you hostage.

Thank you for this. I'm a Robin. I'm at MIT as an assistant professor studying the history of science and medicine. And I guess I have two questions, both of which relate to envisioning this sort of mythical, broader, readership. I think I'm not so-- I'm modest enough to not think that my book is going to interest everybody, but I'm trying to figure out who it could interest, beyond the five people who come to my talks at conferences.

And in particular, I work on the history of cancer, which is probably a promising topic in the sense that people tend to be interested in cancer. But I'm wrestling with the narrative arcs that trade books, or academic trade books, can tell, in the sense of how you can tell people a story other than. Sort of a story of decline about something they care about, or sort of a story of heroism and success, and sort of balancing those poles.

And I'm not sure how-- I think for other topics, maybe sort of like in politics or great people, I'm not sure how much these-- there are sort of general narrative lines that trade marketers think about, or agents think about, when considering the shape of a book.

So the bottom line of your question is, exactly what? How do we--

Well, I'm at the early stage of shaping my manuscript--

Mhm.

I'm trying to figure out if there are sort of-- if there are actually as stark a set of choices, in terms of like, it's either going to be a narrative of progress, it's going to be a narrative of failure, or are there other sort of--

Well, a narrative of progress is a lot easier to sell than a narrative of--

That's the question I--

[LAUGHTER]

That's the answer to the question I was asking.

[LAUGHTER]

I couldn't urge you more strongly to do this in the form of a proposal. Because what happens-- let me just talk for a minute about what I see as the core elements in a book proposal. The book proposal has three really crucial parts and the rest is sort of window dressing.

It has an introduction, which is the seduction, and ideally leaves the reader, who's an editor such as the ones you're looking at right here. And the editor reads that introduction and says, wow. This is such a great idea, but he'll never pull it off.

Then the next section, which is the chapter outline, proves that you can. You've thought it out. You thought out basically the plot. And I just think-- and then finally there's a very easy to write thing about yourself. And some people like to see sort of where the other books section in the proposal.

But the key part of a book proposal is the chapter outline. And if you can do a chapter outline-- and it could begin very modestly. I've often-- I work with authors and said, please write me a paragraph about each chapter. And let's say you have 14 chapters. It's very easy-- or maybe you should just write one sentence about each chapter. You start to discover actually whether you have a plot really.

And I think in the course of that, you might make quite a few changes, and developments, and basically learn. It's such a great-- and some people, I know, feel they can't really think unless they write a lot of the prose, and I certainly respect that. But in the end, if you can come back and write a good, really compelling, dramatic chapter outline that has a conflict, a crisis, and a resolution to your argument, you will have a good book.

And I've had many an author-- I really can be a demon on this subject. And I've had authors spend more than a year writing a proposal, and they almost always say afterward-- they grumble all the way along and want to have me shot, but then we sell the book for a wonderful advance and everybody thinks it's very important. And then, *mirabile dictu*, they have a roadmap for writing the book. So that's a good way to think about it.

I have a question about-- suppose you've been found, as you say, and at what point-- so you have an editor but you don't have a manuscript, or you have a conversation-- do you need an agent? And if so, at what point should you-- sort of the reverse. At what point should you find an agent? Do you have to have an agent? How does that work?

Since I'm an agent, I'll be the first one to answer that.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, I don't think you necessarily do need an agent. If you're going to publish with a university press and you know exactly what university press, you might very well make a deal with them. Although I've always advised-- please forgive me-- but I've always advised authors when the editor calls you up and says, this is great, we want to publish the book, here's our offer, don't say yes.

Say, you're thrilled. You've got to call your mother. You've got to call your lawyer. But don't say yes until you've thought about it and thought about anything on your mind. But if you want to write a trade book for Random House or Simon Schuster, you have to have an agent basically. Don't even think about doing it.

But for an academic press, it really doesn't--

I don't think you do. I mean, agents do submit books too.

I mean, do you shop around from one press to another? Or, I mean--

Well, you've just--

--Looking for.

Well, I just don't want to be stupid. That's it.

[LAUGHTER]

But it's a question of what's-- sometimes it can be a question of what's the goal.

That's market-- selling, you know--

Are you looking for the best royalty rate? Are you looking for the best of the best name? Are you looking for an editor who you click with the most? Are you looking for as much control as possible over the publishing process? Because you can't necessarily have everything. If you find what really matters to you, you can control the jacket design.

[INAUDIBLE].

Then that might be something you should think about while you're shopping around. But for an agent to take on the book-- an agent has to make some money from this process because it's an agent's business. So there has to be some amount of money in the deal for it to be worth the agent's time. It's useful to think about what your goal is and what your real priorities are with a publisher when you're shopping around [INAUDIBLE].

I mean, I think the goal would be to sell as many books as possible.

[LAUGHTER]

That would be my goal anyway. My other question is about publicists. Where do they fit into this constellation and do most people have them or--

You mean have a private publicist? Not one that is employed by the--

Yeah.

--publisher?

Yeah.

Well, I think you should imagine a world in which you don't need to do that. I really-- I mean, that is the publisher's job.

Yup.

And if you happen to have an agent, that would be a subject for discussion. But why should you hire-- and it's very expensive-- a publicist when the publisher has a publicist there who's going to be assigned to your book?

So I've always thought there's plenty that an author can do to publicize her book, but hiring a publicist is not really usually the best. It's so expensive, you know, \$10,000 for what? To do a job that was about to be delivered to you free? And you probably don't-- I'm sure you work with outside publicists, but--

Yeah, no. We actually have excellent publicists on our staff, and so do you. They prefer not to work with outside publicists because they duplicate efforts and so much coordination has to happen to avoid that that it's more work for everybody.

OK.

So, yeah.

Good.

So I have a couple of questions from a very different sort of prospective and issue. I've co-edited a big reference book on viruses. We've now published six editions, but we've been very unhappy with the-- and it's successful. It's sort of the leading reference book, but we've been unhappy with the e-book that they published along with the two big volumes that go with it.

And so what's happening with e-publishing? That was one of things that was sort of promised on the agenda, but what about e-publishing, e-books for large textbooks or reference books? And is that advancing? And is there a business model for that that any of the publishers have? And how do we go about getting a good e-book that goes along with the textbook? I mean, we're ready to switch to an e-book. Of course, the publisher still wants to publish a book.

And the second question is, if we're totally unhappy with the publisher that we have, how do we go about making a switch?

OK. Do you want to go, or--

Sure.

You start, then I'll take-- this is a quickly-evolving area and publishers are-- university presses and commercial academic publishers are trying to figure out what to do about reference works in particular, because we all understand now that reference works need to be digital and that's how they're most useful.

The problem is finding a platform to serve up this content that can be monetized, as you say. The business model is an issue. Ideally, you would put a reference work-- I mean, to make it most useful and accessible, you'd just put it on the web and anybody could access it and search it. But you have to put a pay wall around it somehow.

So all kinds of publishers are looking for solutions. And publishers with resources have developed their own very elaborate platforms for serving up textbooks, as well as reference works. And you could look for that kind of a publisher, one of the large, commercial academic publishers, because they have made those investments. Smaller publishers haven't and they work with partners to do that.

So I would say in the case of an existing book, you would have to get the rights back, if your publisher's not reaching the market with their e-book solution. But if you're writing a new reference work, I mean, definitely do the research and work with a publisher who can provide the kind of platform that your book needs. But you can ask for-- you can negotiate to get the rights returned if--

Yeah, you can.

Yeah.

And so, I just want to reiterate that. Yes. And it's going to be a bit of an undertaking, of course, depending on whether the publisher is willing to relinquish those. But you can. And you probably should consult with somebody for some legal advice looking at that contract. But what was wrong-- what did you not like about the e-book? Or was there no e-book for this reference work?

So the last two editions, in the first one was sort of a CD and then there was a-- basically it ran off of a website. And then the last one was this sort of awkward XML format or something that's online. It's just a very awkward--

And is it for sale online or is it just open access?

No, you buy it. So when you buy the book, you get access to the e-book as well. So the e-book comes free with it.

Oh, OK.

So you pay for one, you buy a package. So now they want to switch to Inkling, which I think is being used for some textbooks, but that's still problematic in that the figures, the diagrams, are not available to download as slides for teaching. And so that's desirable in a reference book.

I think you should-- if this isn't working to your satisfaction, there are good people out there doing publishing law, intellectual property law. And it's not that you necessarily want to be adversarial with your publisher, but get some good advice from somebody who knows.

Yeah, yeah.

You know, the value of--

And what our rights are. OK. Thank you.

We've answered all their questions.

[LAUGHTER]

Thank you all for coming. As we have said, there are some handouts here on this circular table toward the back, close to the door as you leave. [INAUDIBLE] from [INAUDIBLE] about writing proposals, about finding agents, about helping, in a sense, helping you organize your thoughts and helping you organize the search. And we have a number of copies. If we run out, we'd be happy to email them to you later on, since we have all the email addresses.

And thank you for writing books--

Yes.

Because it's a great person. pursuit.

[APPLAUSE]