

# Writing Books for Readers Beyond Academe

## Introduction

JUDY SINGER: Good afternoon everyone, I'm Judy Singer, I'm the Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity, and I want to thank you all for joining us this afternoon for this panel on academics writing books for audiences that are beyond academia. We have been running, from the Senior Vice Provost's Office, a number of book events over the last few years, all designed to bring Harvard faculty together to talk about the publication process, to try to facilitate your publishing, getting contacts with editors, and getting an inside behind-the-scenes look. This particular event has proved so popular we actually had to turn people away, and so we're videoing it, so it will be up on the web to be available to other people.

The purpose of this particular event is to stretch ourselves a little bit, and to think not just about the audiences we typically write for in terms of our professional colleagues, but also the wider world. Part of being a Harvard faculty member is having an impact on your field. But part of being a Harvard faculty member is to have an impact beyond your field.

The context for this work though is a little bit tricky, and I'm going to quote from this week's Chronicle of Higher Ed, that had a story on Charles Murray and his new book. And I'm going to read through the opening paragraph and the closing paragraph to this piece. It's an interesting piece, you can read the whole thing. But I think it sets the context for today very well.

"Publishers, forget about carefully reasoned, nuanced discussions of the issues of the day. That stuff is for college professors or yuppies yammering away in their salons. If you print politically oriented books and you want to make the big bucks, you need to think like a boxing promoter and stage fights that will get attention. And nothing, but nothing draws hype like a match up between liberal pundits and the man they love to hate, the belligerent behind the bell curve, the warrior against welfare, the proudly political, incorrect Charles Murray."

And it goes on to talk about his most recent book, which I will not go into, and the arguments for and con. But at the end of the article, it's summarized by saying, "At the end of the day, the

cultural and economic divide most illuminated by Coming Apart--" that's Murray's new book, "might be one found in scholarly publishing. On one side are authors and publishers who produce nuanced books that offer only conclusion stemming from research and tend to be too esoteric for wide readership. On the other side are authors and publishers who cash in by producing best selling polemics in which research is used to buttress foregone conclusions."

So I think the challenge for everybody here is how to figure out how to walk between Scylla and Charybdis and come up with something that you can feel good about, but, that also satisfies the broader goals.

I'm going to yield the podium to my colleague, Amy Brand, Assistant Provost for Faculty Appointments who helped organize this particular panel, in fact all our book publishing panels, and the one thing you need to know about Amy is she was an editor at MIT Press for many, many years, and so has a lot of experience with the book publishing world so, Amy.

AMY BRAND: As Judy mentioned, we've been doing a whole series of events on book publishing I count seven or eight in the last two years. And the reason that we decided to focus on trade books is that in all of these events questions about how to write for a broader audience keep coming up. So surely questions about working with agents and editors, and we'll address those, but also questions about defining the crucial difference in the writing style that's required to reach a broader audience. In other words, how to unlearn how to write like an academic.

So the great panel that we have for you today is here, not just to expound, they're also here to answer your questions and engage in discussion, and I trust you'll do your part when the time comes.

We'll start with Angela von der Lippe, Vice President and Senior Editor at Norton. Angela's also a novelist, and among her many other qualifications for kicking off this panel, Angela was an editor at Harvard University Press for many years, and has also worked with many Harvard faculty as authors.

We'll then turn to Betsy Lerner who's a literary agent in New York. Betsy's author of the book on writing that you now all have, if you picked it up at the registration table, The Forest for the

Trees. Betsy also has a blog on publishing, which in her own words in part, "strives to address complex issues involving writers personalities, especially, but not limited to their self-destructive proclivities. But mostly, it's a place to regularly vent about publishing."

And then we'll turn to our two eminent faculty members and writers from the faculty of Arts and Sciences, Dan Gilbert Professor of Psychology and author of the New York Times best seller, *Stumbling On Happiness*, and Luke Menand, Robert M Bass, Professor of English, a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* and author most recently of *The Marketplace of Ideas*.

## 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 world-- 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]

## 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]

## 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]

## 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.