

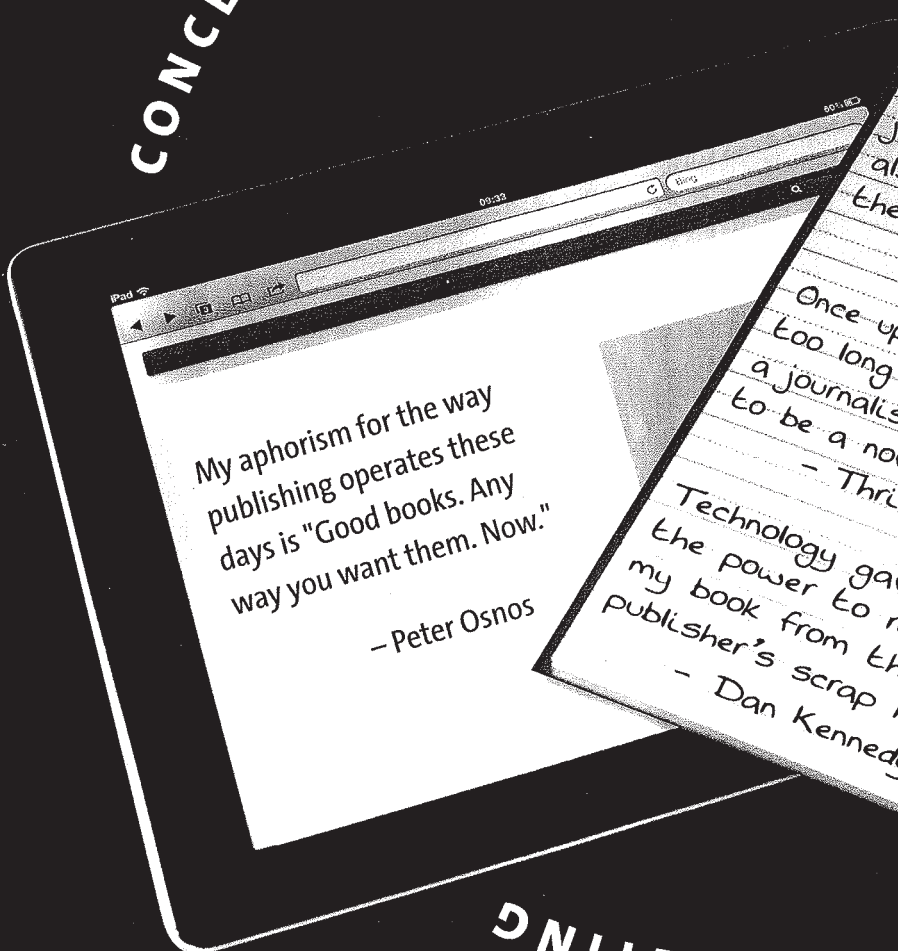
Nieman Reports

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION FOR JOURNALISM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

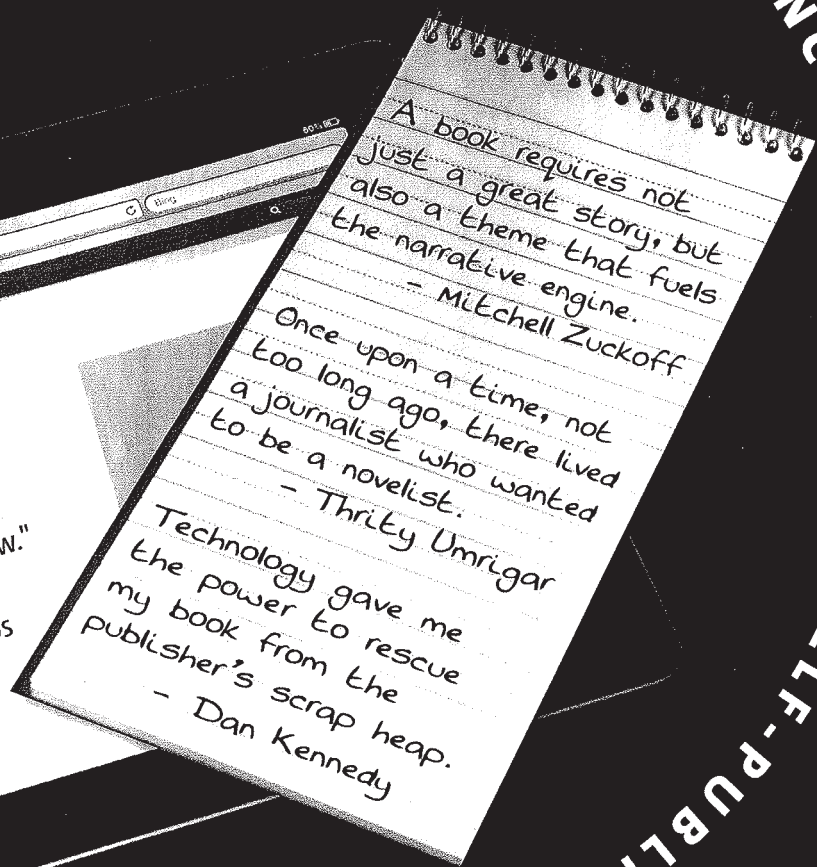
VOL. 65 NO. 4 WINTER 2011

Writing the Book

CONCEPT • VOICE • STYLE • LENGTH • AUDIENCE • PLATFORM • SELF-PUBLISHING • MARKETING



My aphorism for the way publishing operates these days is "Good books. Any way you want them. Now."
— Peter Osnos



A book requires not just a great story, but also a theme that fuels the narrative engine.
— Mitchell Zuckoff

Once upon a time, not too long ago, there lived a journalist who wanted to be a novelist.
— Thrity Umrigar

Technology gave me the power to rescue my book from the publisher's scrap heap.
— Dan Kennedy

Transformation in Publishing and Optimism About Books

'An enduring challenge for journalists is to take their experiences, background and skills as a writer and turn them into a fully developed narrative.'

Nieman Reports editor Melissa Ludtke talked by phone with Peter Osnos, the founder and editor at large of PublicAffairs books. In "The Platform," a weekly column he writes for The Century Foundation, Osnos often focuses on book publishing. The two decades he was at The Washington Post—as Indochina bureau chief, Moscow-based correspondent, foreign editor, national editor, and London bureau chief—as well as his years at PublicAffairs publishing books written by journalists give him a valuable perspective on the topic of reporters and editors who decide to become authors and the publishing industry in the era of e-books. Edited excerpts from their conversation follow:

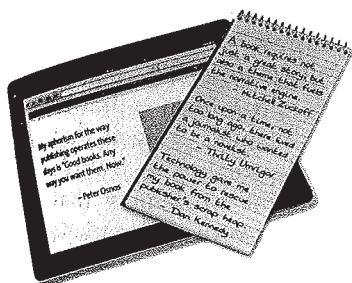
digital publishing was really marginal. Now we know it's very substantial. As far as I can tell, writers are still writing in the traditional way with an awareness that a substantial number of their readers will be reading on digital devices. The content is consistent. What's changing—and changing quickly—is the means of distribution.

Ludtke: You recalled in another article that almost a decade ago writer and futurist Esther Dyson indicated that we no longer live in the information age but in the attention age. You wrote about how writers were becoming marketers of their work. In the news industry's transformation, journalists have had to learn how to brand themselves by communicating in ways

one of the ways in which people now access information. It used to be that you hoped your book would make it on its merits, with perhaps a boost from a review or two.

Today that's different. It's essential that journalists recognize that to truly reach their audience, it is necessary to devote as much attention, time and effort to the promotion of the book and its contents as to its writing. It used to be that all you had to do was get the story, and it was someone else's job to sell it. That is no longer the case and it makes some authors uncomfortable because they don't understand the importance of their role in this process.

You'll notice I haven't mentioned social media. That, too, is important.



It's essential that journalists recognize that to truly reach their audience, it is necessary to devote as much attention, time and effort to the promotion of the book and its contents as to its writing.

Melissa Ludtke: In April you wrote: "Publishing is now undergoing the most significant transformation in the way books are distributed and read since development of high-speed printing presses and the transcontinental rail and highway systems." If we think of the digital highway as the road that books are traveling on with greater frequency, how do you think this affects those who are writing them?

Peter Osnos: It's too soon to say with certainty. It's all happening so fast. As recently as 2007—before the Kindle—

that go beyond just doing their work. So when it comes to books, do these skills put them in the driver's seat?

Osnos: It certainly helps to be well-known. And how do you get to be well known? Well, if you're a journalist, it's because of where you work. Traditionally it was the major news organizations. Now a lot of journalists are well-known for their multiple platforms—they appear on television, write a blog, may contribute to magazines, and are on the radio. An author gets to be known by communicating in every

Social media is today's word of mouth. If enough people hear about something and tell other people who are in their network, and they tell others, it spreads that way. Authors can make a significant impact through what amounts to digital word of mouth.

Ludtke: At the other end of things, though, there has to be this exercise of judgment in choosing which books actually deserve to be written or supported, as you point out in one of your pieces, because now anyone can write a book and publish it. It's a question

of whether they're going to get support from a publisher to do it. Do you have ideas to offer journalists about what separates their daily stories from what works well as a book?

Osnos: That's a central question. Journalists are familiar with writing in the same way that musicians are familiar with music. But that doesn't automatically translate music into a symphony or a piece of writing into a book. An enduring challenge for journalists is to take their experiences, background and skills as a writer and turn them into a fully developed narrative. I

often find myself saying to would-be authors, "Remember, if you write this for a magazine or a major newspaper or even the significant online news outlets, you're going to probably reach a bigger audience than you would if you write a nonfiction book. Only write a book if you need that kind of length and are truly compelled."

How a book is defined, particularly a digital one, is evolving. Increasingly, we have what are coming to be known as singles—essentially essays written in book form. When a big news story breaks, many major news organizations take what they already have, put it

together, call it a book, and post it through Amazon or on some other digital channels. Book publishers start from the premise that we are not basically the extension of a magazine. Our goal is to find the writers and subjects that justify the range and depth and length that a book should have and that distinguishes it from either short, medium or even, in some instances, magazine-length journalism.

How that content is delivered is what is changing. But the process of producing a coherent, well-argued book is not. Experienced editors still help even the most gifted authors articulate

Sooner Sounds Better

By Philip Meyer

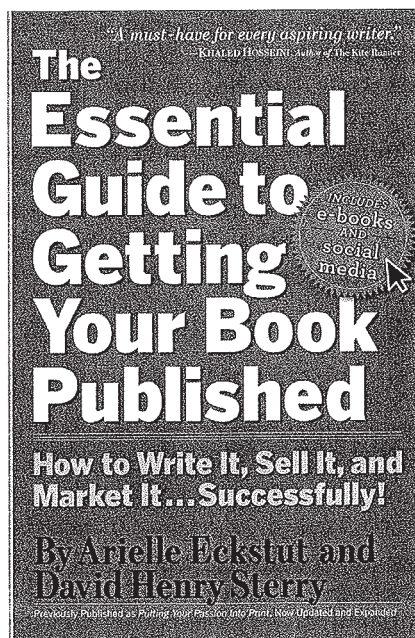
Recently I wrote a memoir with the working title "Paper Route: Finding My Way to Precision Journalism" and then I started looking for a publisher. One of my first stops was the website of Algonquin Books, a boutique publisher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina owned by Workman Publishing Company of New York. It had advice for prospective authors.

"If you'd like more information on what goes into a great book proposal," it said, "click here ..."

The link took me to an excerpt from a title on the Workman list, "The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published: How to Write It, Sell It, and Market It ... Successfully!" by Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry. So I bought it.

I found the book, at 481 pages, clear, thorough and convincing. The part I liked best was Chapter 11, "Publish Thyself." Modern technology, with e-books and on-demand publishing, makes assisted self-publishing fast and inexpensive.

Putting the book down, I looked at the calendar. To go the route taken with my previous books, I



would first need to find a publisher willing to read my manuscript. It might take a year to get a decision. If the decision should be favorable, getting from manuscript to a bound volume ready to ship would take another year.

For an author who is 81 years

old, faster is better. So I signed up with iUniverse of Bloomington, Indiana, which will have my book out in paper and e-book by spring. Its plan pays royalties quarterly instead of annually. The modest fee gets me a range of services including editing, cover design, and worldwide distribution.

That's not all. I have a drawer full of old publishing projects that never seemed worth the trouble before but might work now that targeting the narrowest of markets is feasible. Good thing that I'm not too old for a new career. ■

Philip Meyer, a 1967 Nieman Fellow, is Professor Emeritus in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has written several books including "Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods" and "Ethical Journalism: A Guide for Students, Practitioners, and Consumers."

their message, and even though digital publishing is pushing 20 percent of the net sales of books, the overwhelming percentage of books are still being published in the traditional way. That number will go down and the digital number will go up, but when you sit down to read on an e-reading device, in most cases you're doing exactly what you would have done had you been holding the book in your hand. You turn electronic pages, stop when you want to, and pick up again where you left off.

The most important thing about the digital reading experience is that it addresses what for a very long time was the major challenge for publishers: How do we give consumers what they want, where they want it, and when they want it? My aphorism for the way publishing operates these days is "Good books. Any way you want them. Now." I think that is the essence of where we are in publishing. It's up to us to choose the books and to enable authors to write the best book they can and then make it available in every way that a consumer could possibly want to read it.

Ludtke: Some of the e-books published by news organizations appear to be driven more by there being a market than by their content so they are a vehicle to repurpose content and increase a revenue stream.

Osnos: Increasing revenue is a completely legitimate objective. All of us know that in order to function we have to constantly be looking for new forms of revenue and new ways to reach consumers. There was a question as to whether people would read long-form journalism or narrative on devices. For the most part, we've found that the traditional laptop or desktop wasn't a particularly good way to attract people to read at length. Even now lots of people, if they get to a long article that they really want to read, they print it out. I would do that. Maybe it's generational.

After the e-reading devices appeared and accommodated very quickly and read with considerable pleasure. The

best of these devices make reading a completely convenient experience. There's another aphorism appropriate to this age and that is that the two things that people look for are convenience and quality. Now people know they can get the book they want when they want it. That is a formidable asset in how people feel about books; if you hear about a book, see a review, hear an interview, know an author, you don't have to go through the prolonged process of figuring out where to find it.

Ludtke: Former New York Times executive editor Bill Keller wrote about journalists and book writing, and you called his tone cranky. When news organizations, specifically the Times, "indulge our writers," Keller wrote, "we do so at a cost. Books mean writers who are absent or distracted from daily journalism, writers who have to be replaced when they leave their reporting beats and landed somewhere when they return." There is, he went on to say, "the tricky relationship between what they unearth for their books and what goes into the paper." And this happened in a noteworthy way with the book that Times investigative reporter James Risen wrote about the CIA and the Bush administration. "There is the awkwardness of reviewing books by colleagues," Keller continued. "There is the resentment of those left behind to take up the slack." Do you think Keller has a valid point?

Osnos: Absolutely. "Where you stand depends on where you sit," and as the paper's executive editor he'd see a writer come in and say, "I've just been working on this story for the last year for you, and now I want to take time and go off and write a book about it." That creates problems for him. Whether that means that journalists shouldn't write books in general, which is what he goes on to argue, that's another issue. I don't agree with him on that score at all.

Newspaper and magazine editors need to accept the fact that the people who work for them will have the natural inclination to want to take a story and

spin it out. Keller identified all of the major problems that editors have when their reporters go off to tell a story at greater length. This will always be the case. Increasingly, as more journalists feel that their role at the newspaper or magazine or their day job is a platform, they will want other means of reaching an audience and will do that through books. An extraordinary number of good journalists are eager to write books, and whether they will depend on whether they can find a publisher and if they have the energy to move through the process.

Ludtke: In writing about e-books you observed that Amazon's long-term intention is to condition consumers to the lowest possible price. At a time when paywalls are being put into place at some newspapers, there remains the belief among many that news wants to be free. So there is a question of how reporting will be paid for both in newsrooms and in supporting the journalist in the time needed to report and write meaningful nonfiction books.

Osnos: As I said, this is a dynamic process. It has moved very quickly. In a bit more than a decade we have reinvented the way information is distributed. We've been here before. Between the late 1940's and early '60's television went through multiple stages. A curious feature of network television is that it was always advertiser supported. Buy a TV and watch it. Then came the cable system; now you buy a TV, but also pay your cable provider that in turn pays people who create the content. This happened in essentially a generation.

We're going through that now with books and, to some extent, news. The thing to remember about books is that we never had advertising as a revenue stream so unlike news that's not an issue for us. Nor did we really have subscribers. For book publishers the issue always was whether we could manage inventory: Can we put books where they need to be when the consumer wants them? It is a considerable virtue that we now can do this—giving the reader options

