



**Interview with Jason Boog, editor,  
MediaBistro Publishing & GalleyCat**

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**KENNEALLY:** We're looking at the best and the worst, and a special conference coming up in New York City today.

Welcome, everyone, to Beyond the Book. My name is Chris Kenneally, your host, and we'll be talking about the e-book summit being brought to New York City December 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> by Mediabistro, and appropriately enough, we have on the line with us today Jason Boog, who is editor of Mediabistro Publishing, where he curates publishing events and shapes their digital publishing curriculum. Jason, welcome to Beyond the Book.

**BOOG:** Good morning, Chris. Thanks for having me on. I'm excited to talk to your audience.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, likewise, it's a pleasure to have you. We'll tell people briefly a bit about you. Apart from your work for the Mediabistro Publishing wing, you're also the editor for the GalleyCat blog there, and host of a podcast yourself, so this is something you do from the other end of the microphone, if you will, their daily Morning Media Menu, which I listen to and enjoyed.

Before joining Mediabistro, Jason was an investigative reporter at *Judicial Reports*, and a blogger on publishing for *Know More Media*. His work has also appeared in *The Believer*, *Granta*, *Salon.com*, *The Revealer*, and *Peace Corps Writer*, so somebody who has come from the publishing and journalism side of things to one of the leading Websites for authors of all sorts. And it must be exciting for you to be working there at Mediabistro.



BOOG: Oh, it's such a cool spot to sit. I feel like I'm one of the luckiest people in publishing. It's such a warm community, and it's just cool to be here at this moment as publishing's changing, and watching these people to help guide, and also be part of the process of just figuring out what happens next. And no one really knows what's going to happen next, and it's fun to be able to talk to all these different people who have good ideas about what will happen next.

KENNEALLY: Well, yeah, I think that's very true, although it must be said, Mediabistro wasn't born yesterday. And in fact, because of its standing as one of the very early innovators in the whole online news delivery system, you really – if it's coming from Mediabistro, I would say it's very much worth paying attention to.

BOOG: Oh, absolutely, and I think you kind of – I'm very fortunate to be here as well. You get a lot of – the context that came with it – this blog, was basically started by Ron Hogan, the senior editor now at GalleyCat. And the work that he's done over the last few years has really laid the foundation.

And when I came in – I guess it was a little over a year ago, I had some big shoes to fill, and I was kind of just taking the day-to-day responsibilities from him. He still posts. And the kind of community he built and the context that he had established really, really helped me take my reporting to the next level.

KENNEALLY: Well, for people who might not be familiar, tell us briefly what kind of subjects you cover at GalleyCat.

BOOG: I cover everything, actually. Today I've already posted about National Novel Writing Month, which is a national contest every November to write a novel in 30 days, and so we cover that beat. Every November, we connect with those writers. I've also written about a publisher was offering 99¢ e-books today, so I write about that. I write about publishers, mainly publishing deals. Any news that's happening within the publishing community, I'm trying to be on top of that and cover that.

But then we also have authors in the audience, people who are looking for advice. So today I interviewed one of the editors from Babel.com, and I really gave him some pointed questions that would help freelance writers shape their own work, and maybe pitch parenting magazines, and parenting publications, and write books about parenting, and so try to have a hands-on approach for the writers in the audience, and give them some practical advice for their careers.

KENNEALLY: Right, which is always useful. As a former freelance writer myself, I am a reformed freelancer, but I understand how valuable it is to know, not what's



happening today, but what's coming tomorrow and the following day, because if you're on the outside looking in and trying to get in, you need to know what people are going to want, not what they've already bought, but what they're going to buy next. And I think that's always very helpful, and we watch GalleyCat regularly, and we will be linking to it from Beyond the Book.

But let's talk about the e-book summit, which sounds very grand, very important. It's coming to New York City December 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. You're putting together this program, you're part of the program –

BOOG: Yeah, no, no, I did not do this alone at all. This is the work of many, many people here at Mediabistro. They have an events team that's coordinated the whole space, arranged for the speakers. I helped pick or gave suggestions for many of the people that would be on the list, but then the events team put it all together. And then the teaching side of Mediabistro is also very strong. They have a very strong – we offer classes and conferences about other topics in media as well.

And so that whole team, they really came together to build the structure that you see here. So I've been brought in as a consultant many times, but they did so much work to put this together for December 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>.

KENNEALLY: Well, we'll make sure they know that you've given them credit then, a modest man on top of everything else, Jason.

But tell us about some of the highlights of the program for you. And indeed, I'm looking at the very start of things on Tuesday, and a couple of names we recognize here at Beyond the Book. The Art of Disruption, it says, Thinking Differently about the Changes in Publishing, and that's going to feature Jane Friedman as well as Jeffrey Sharp, who we met and talked to at Book Expo a couple of years back. But what do you expect from that program?

BOOG: Well, I've followed – they just started this brand new kind of digital book outfit called Open Road Integrated Media that's going to kind of – we don't know too much about it yet, and I'm really excited to find out more. They're supposed to unveil some new things and show us the shape of its new project. But they've got a lot of venture capital that they've raised, and it's just great to see a new publishing outfit getting funding right now. It makes me really excited to see that.

So they're going to be working, I think, with publishing digital books, new ones, but also bringing back orphan works and things that have been out of print. I'm not exactly sure what their business model will be, but it's really exciting, and it looks like – I mean, Jane Friedman was the CEO, the former President of HarperCollins.



She knows her stuff. She's been in this business for so long, and you kind of need someone with her connections, and her kind of experience, to bridge this gap between the new digital stuff where everyone's trying to figure out what to do next, and then also she has a bridge to the old world of publishing, and the more profitable side of it as well.

KENNEALLY: And Jeff Sharp brings an interesting perspective, because he's not necessarily from publishing, he's from the film industry. A number of his films have won the top awards in the industry, Academy Awards and Golden Globes for *Boys Don't Cry* and *You Can Count on Me* and all that sort of thing. And he has worked with Jane in the past at HarperCollins, where they were trying to develop jointly projects that would be books and film. But what's interesting, I think, about having Jeff on there is, this is a man who is thoroughly steeped in media, well beyond the printed page.

BOOG: Absolutely, and I think that's – for me, it's the most exciting promise of all of this, is the fact that you can start with the digital product, blending video, blending some audio elements into books, to not replace the printed word, but to augment it, and bring these kind of special features and extra things for the readers that are really dedicated out there.

Even in my own work here at Mediabistro, I do as much video work as I can, interviewing authors, and just doing very short pieces, because I do think, at some point, readers will be expecting a little bit more multimedia content with their books as we go more fully digital, and we have devices that can actually play video while reading. And I think this kind of multimedia product is going to be really fascinating. And, so, I'm really excited to see what he talks about, and the future of this new book as well.

KENNEALLY: Right, and again going back to the notion of Mediabistro's effort to reach authors and let them know how they can be successful in their own business – and writing is a business, after all.

What I recall from my own background is that I decided early on, I wasn't just going to be a writer for newspapers, I was going to write for radio, and television, and very early days of Web, and so forth, because I felt that I needed to be ready to work for anybody. When you're a freelancer, you eat what you kill, and so I really wanted to be able to say yes to any assignment regardless of the form.

And what's happening here, I think, was the kinds of people you're bringing to the e-book summit is you're letting authors know what they need to be thinking about, and how perhaps they want to shape their work to fit these new forms.



BOOG: Oh, absolutely, and I have to stress, I was a freelancer up until about a month ago myself. I was working for Mediabistro fairly intensely for the last year, doing a lot of blogging and things for them. But then they brought me on for full-time for this position, which was a really exciting thing.

But I completely understand what you're talking about, just that scramble of trying to know as many tools as you can have, and bring with you in that toolkit, and just trying to make a living as a freelancer. It's not an easy life.

KENNEALLY: No, it never gets easier. And as I say, you never want to be put in a position where you're saying no.

There's another program that I think is apropos of that coming up later in the day on the 15<sup>th</sup>. It features Susan Danziger, who's the CEO of DailyLit – you might tell people a bit about that – as well as some others who are really at the forefront of e-publishing. It's called Cracks in the Pavement, the Opportunities that Digital Publishing Provides. And what's going to happen on that program?

BOOG: Well, that program's going to actually be kind of looking at the people who are in the stage of creating this new content that we can use.

Lexcycle is – they publish for the iPhone. They've created a reader where you can actually read books. They've got millions of people using it. Neelin Choksi is the CEO of that company. They got bought by Amazon last year. I've been following them pretty closely. I actually read books with it on a fairly regular basis. I enjoy having a book with me when I'm on the subway or something like that. I always have one loaded into my iPhone if I need it, and so that's cool.

DailyLit's kind of the same thing. They do serialized books in digital form, so you can read it on your iPhone, you can read it on your computer, you can do it in all these different formats. But they're working with the serialized form, which – something we haven't seen, really, since the age of pulp fiction or even Charles Dickens. Serialization's been kind of passé. But maybe digital will be the way to do it.

And finally, the two other guys, Andy Hunter and Scott Lindenbaum, they're from *Electric Literature*, which is a literary journal that's using these new things. They actually only print on demand their journal, so print copies are only printed what they need. And at the same time, they have a variety of digital products that they offer, so if you want to read it on your iPhone, you can; if you want to read it in a printed form, you can order a print on demand. And so they're cutting back on the



excess of your traditional literary journal that prints a certain amount of copies every year, and they're being a little more flexible.

And they're also able to pay their writers, which is something pretty rare right now. And they made headlines for paying \$1000 for each story they published, which is pretty rare these days. I think you'll know that as a freelancer.

**KENNEALLY:** Absolutely. What did Dr. Johnson say, only a fool ever wrote for any reason but for money. And the dwindling ranks of those places that pay for writing is a sad part of what's been going on out there, but it's nice to hear that there are some who still think that that's an important thing to be doing.

Finally, and to the point of money, maybe, is a program that you're going to be the moderator for on the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup>. It's called Writer, Agent, Publisher, and it's got a couple of interesting panelists there. Steve Wasserman, who's now at the literary agency of Kneerim & Williams, which is based in Boston. He was former editor at the *LA Times Book Review*. And you've also got another agent, Jason Allen Ashlock, who's with Movable Type Literary Group. And what do you expect can come out of that conversation? Where are you going to try to drive that?

**BOOG:** Well, like I said, we really try to focus and stay practical. And I'm going to push every single time to say, well, can you give me a specific example of – for Jason Ashlock, for example. I want to know how his clients, how they've seen contracts change, how their relationship with publishers are changing. How much publicity do they have to do by themselves now.

The publishing world is a much – is a very downsized place right now. There's not as many resources to go around. We had a lot of layoffs last year. So the role of an agent's kind of devolving a little bit. You're going to have to do more work to support your writer, to make sure your writer's still working.

And so with him, I'm going to try to really stay practical and just see – get examples of how it's working with his writers, and what – how they're surviving in this brand new world that we're facing, and how digital books might change the way contracts are written, and how much writers get paid for their work.

**KENNEALLY:** Yeah, well, agents and authors, I think, are going to be under a lot of pressure. You mentioned layoffs, cutbacks, this whole notion that we can squeeze as much out of authors as possible, getting them to do some of the things that publishers traditionally did before, and I think there's probably going to be some pushback from the author side of things, because there's only so much time in the day.



BOOG: Oh, absolutely. And it's such new days for this. That's what's the most exciting thing about this conference, is – I mean, I do. I'm very plugged into the publishing industry. I'm reading these stories every day. But like I said, I would be lying if I said I knew exactly what things were going to be like a year from now. It's going to be a very different landscape.

And to talk to these people who are actually in the trenches, writing contracts, figuring out distribution lines, and – or editing book reviews, as it were, for Steve Wasserman. Those people are kind of – they're in the trenches, and they can give you the intelligence that you need. And I really – I know it's hard to pay \$375 for a ticket right now in this economy, but I'm pushing to have the most practical value for the people that are attending the conference.

KENNEALLY: Well, money well spent, and, of course, it is tax-deductible, so – as a very appropriate business expense.

We are chatting with Jason Boog, who is editor of Mediabistro Publishing, and he's part of the organization that is behind the upcoming e-book summit in New York City December 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>.

And, Jason, what's interesting about the program, of course, as you say, that it's very much tied to what's happening today, what's expected to happen tomorrow.

And as we close out 2009, it's an opportunity to look back on the last 12 months and see some of the best and the worst in terms of news stories that you've covered at GalleyCat and at Mediabistro. You put together a short list on all of this. I would have to say – I don't know what Merriam-Webster thinks, but I would have to say, the word of the year is Twitter.

BOOG: (laughter) Yeah.

KENNEALLY: And so your – I'm not sure if you put this in order of importance, but your first on the list of best and worst is Twitter book deals, which almost sounds like military intelligence. Twitter books here? What are we talking about?

BOOG: (laughter) Yeah. Well, it's been a really funny trend that's been happening in publishing. I didn't put these in any order. It was just a fascinating thing.

I mean, I spend a lot of time on Twitter every day. A lot of our readers really enjoy Twitter, and communicate a lot on Twitter. We get a lot of traffic through Twitter. And it's kind of changed the way we have our conversation with our readers.



So, naturally, I'm following a lot of these stories, and I've been able to report on it. I watched Soft Skull Press bought a book earlier this year from a writer who actually published his novel on Twitter, line by line. It was kind of a painstaking process, and –

KENNEALLY: Emphasis on pain there. My thumb hurts even thinking about it.

BOOG: Yeah, yeah. And so I interviewed him a little bit, and watched it all shape up, and within a few weeks he had a book deal, which is pretty wild.

And then some college kids got a book deal for writing *Twitterature*, which is kind of a Twitter look at famous works of literature, and just kind of watching all of this happen.

It's interesting. It infuriated some of our readers, and some of them it made them excited to see this new medium getting its day, as it were.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, no, I'll confess, very early on – and there are people who will remember, I was at a program at the New York Center for Independent Publishing back in April, and had one of your colleagues, Jeff Rivera, on the panel, and what I begged all of the panelists to do was not to bring up Twitter, because at that point, I felt like it was the pet rock of 2009.

But I have come away from that position, and indeed, we Tweet on Beyond the Book, and like you, find it a terrific way to communicate, a way to pick up an audience that we wouldn't have been able to reach in the past, have a little bit of fun, maybe, and to see things develop.

And I think probably the attraction for publishers around Tweeted novels or any kind of work – the other example that's very obvious is the fake *AP Stylebook* that caught on like fire, and I believe has a book deal as well – is that you're able to validate for the publisher that there is in fact an audience for something.

BOOG: Absolutely, and I think they found, like we did, that a lot of our readers were out there on Twitter, and – I don't know. It's really – David Pogue earlier this year actually collected Tweets from his own readers and made a book out of them. So he kind of crowd-sourced his work, and built a book that way.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's a Tweet novel.

BOOG: Is that a Tweet novel, exactly. It's just – it's a fascinating kind of development.



So we will – I think 2010's going to be a big test year for Twitter. I think there's still time for it to be a pet rock-type situation. If something better comes along, or if something else catches people's attention, I think we could see that happen too.

KENNEALLY: Also on your list of best for the year is just the saga of the *Twilight* saga and the way that that has really sold not only books but swept through the box office.

Another book-film duo here, of course, is the Dan Brown machine, a million books in a day or some crazy number that he sold there. That's a terrific brand he has developed.

And every year needs somebody like him, doesn't it? I mean, the book publishing world, so many titles every year, more than ever, but as it stands right now, a few books are the ones that really prop up all the others.

BOOG: No, I think there's a lot to be said for that. And at the National Book Awards a couple weeks ago, I went around and asked a lot of these finalists – I was expecting some snooty responses – I asked them all what they thought about the *Twilight* books, and the success that these books have seen. I mean, she single-handedly propped up the publishing industry during the darkest period last spring and early winter. She was selling a lot of books at a time when no one was buying books.

And so I asked them all how they felt about her, and I was expecting some anger. I was expecting snooty responses. But every single writer, almost, told me, they said, well, anything that gets someone into a bookstore, and hopefully they're going to see my book next couple aisles down, or something like that. But anything that gets people in bookstores right now is important.

And so that's why in included it, even though not everyone likes Dan Brown, and not everybody likes Stephenie Meyer, it's like, both of those people are very important foundations to the publishing industry.

KENNEALLY: I think that's absolutely true. Also on your list here is something that really is fundamental to the e-book summit, of course, and that is the record levels of adoption, the record acceleration of adoption for e-books, e-book readers, digital books, etc.

But, as you point out, it's been happening out there without a lot of numbers to go on. Of course, journalists like numbers, and Amazon notoriously is stingy with them, particularly around the Kindle, although they have come clean just recently.



BOOG: Yeah, with how many Kindles they've sold. They did give an odd figure. They said it was the – for every 100 books we sell in physical, we sell 48 Kindle books. And so it's hard to measure that, since they don't reveal their sales statistics, but that's still very impressive. I don't think anyone anticipated that they were selling – I mean, assuming they're telling the truth here, no one anticipated, I didn't at least, that they were selling 48 Kindle books for every 100 books. That's a lot.

KENNEALLY: I agree. And my suspicion would be that, of the 100 books, the print books, there might be – maybe not 100 different titles, but dozens of different titles. My guess is, the 48 units sold to the Kindle, that might represent only a handful of titles.

BOOG: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that's totally true. And I think people are going for the bestsellers, the thing that they don't want to keep on their bookshelf. That's how I look at digital books. The ones that I'm reading on my devices are books that I want to read quickly, and the pulp fiction novels that I pick up from the past. Those things that I read quickly. Those are the ones that I'm looking at.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of like potato chips or something else, you know, when you finish one bag, you just want to get another one. And I think those kind of titles, the sort of pulp fiction titles, one is done, and you just need another to feed the fix.

On your list of worst stories, there's some that are just sort of sad, and we won't dwell on them. HarperCollins shuttered Collins. It's sort of – I don't know, Abbott and Costello, Abbott fires Costello there. But that was something that really struck deep, I think, to the business.

You've got the hideous price war that's been going on at Wal-Mart and Amazon that unfortunately is going to put plenty of scars on the backs of publishers all around the country.

BOOG: Yeah. And that, I actually wanted to add a footnote to that that I didn't put on the list when I gave it to you. It's a big problem that e-books present a similar thing – and we're going to discuss this a lot at the conference – is the pricing for e-books is about \$9.99 is kind of the standard price right now that people are expecting, and that's going to put a big toll on the publishing industry next year as there's more devices arriving. So it's a looming problem.



The Wal-Mart price war was on physical books, but it's going to also affect digital books very dramatically. We'll see that a lot more next year as an issue at the conference.

KENNEALLY: Certainly a story to watch, because there's just – even if the number of e-books – the adoption is tremendous, if the margins are so razor-thin, this isn't going to do a lot to keeping the lights on at publishing houses in Manhattan.

On the list here is a story we've covered pretty closely at Copyright Clearance Center, the Google Books settlement. It's an agreement that can't seem to agree on much. We've got the revisions just recently, and hope for the best, I suppose, if you're in the parties there going into court.

But if I can – and we'll post this whole list on our site at [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com) – but the one that really struck me, and I'm afraid to ask you about it, because it's bringing up somebody who probably is best left forgotten as a trivia question down the road – but Rod Blagojevich, he had a six-figure book deal, and a book that was promised for delivery this fall. Do you know anything about that?

BOOG: Yeah, it has not arrived. He had some legal problems with it – or not legal problems, legislative problems. The legislature was trying to shut him down and keep him from profiting off of this whole scandal that he put himself through. And he just really had a blitz, a media blitz for a little while there.

And I remember we first reported that someone had spotted him inside a publishing house, and then (laughter) later we heard that there were nondisclosure agreements being signed. And then we heard – and then when this deal finally broke, no one could believe that he would get a six-figure deal for betraying the public's trust the way that he did. And it was just low moment. A lot of people were very unhappy about it.

We had to report on it, obviously, but it was a dark moment, I think.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, that's one of those things, when you read about it, you wish that more editors had whatever it takes to say, thanks but no thanks, you know? But, of course, the fear always is that if they don't say yes, they're missing an opportunity that somebody else is going to scoop up.

BOOG: Yeah. It was a big year for memoirs, too. I mean, we had Sarah Palin selling a lot of copies of her memoir recently –

KENNEALLY: And a lot of books that kind of –



BOOG: – Kennedy memoir.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, sorry, Jason, but, I mean, interesting thing about Sarah Palin – and, again, the business is thankful for anybody who can sell books – not only has she sold her own books, but she’s helped others sell books that, if you will, are parodies of her books.

BOOG: (laughter) Yeah, it’s pretty wild, the *Going Rouge* effect was pretty amazing. Some people were actually confused in bookstores. So, yeah, that was funny story too.

KENNEALLY: Well, it’s fun looking back on the year 2009. We’ve been doing that with Jason Boog, who is editor of Mediabistro Publishing, and one of the organizers for the upcoming e-book summit that Mediabistro is putting on in New York City. I’m going to be there listening, and hopefully finding out what’s going to be happening in 2010 and beyond.

Jason, look forward to meeting you there, and to hearing from folks like Jane Friedman, Jeff Sharp, Jennifer Stenger, Susan Danziger, and so many more.

We will link to the various places that people can learn a lot more about this if they are in New York and can join us. We hope to see you there.

Jason Boog, thank you very much indeed for being on Beyond the Book today. Jason, apart from being the editor of Mediabistro Publishing, he edits the GalleyCat blog, and hosts his own podcast from Mediabistro called the Morning Media Menu. We look forward to having you back some time.

BOOG: No, I really appreciate it today. I can talk about this stuff all day. I’ve had a lot of fun, and your comments were really good too. It’s been really interesting looking back at the year, this crazy, topsy-turvy year for publishing. I really appreciate the opportunity.

KENNEALLY: And indeed, well, we’ll be Tweeting about it, and God knows what else, in the future. But thank you again, Jason. And to everyone in the Beyond the Book audience, thank you very much for listening. This is Chris Kenneally. Have a great day.

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