



Beyond the Book®



BEYOND THE BOOK @ BOOKEXPO AMERICA 2006 **Books of Inspiration with Jay Allison**

KENNEALLY: Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to this special program here at Book Expo America. My name is Chris Kenneally, and I'm the director of author relations at Copyright Clearance Center, which sponsors an ongoing series of conferences and programs for authors and people in the publishing business, which we call Beyond the Book. And I want to welcome you to Washington D.C. and the Washington Convention Center for what I think is going to be a very spirited and inspiring discussion about inspiration itself.

This is, famously, a nation of laws made by men and women for men and women, and in that way I think that makes the United States a profoundly nonsectarian and some might even say nonreligious nation. Yet we are also a nation of faiths. Religions thrive and multiply here like blossoms on some magnificent hybrid fruit tree in spring. And while the practices differ from church to church and from temple to meetinghouse, what unites us in this profound sectarianism is a deep trust that God truly has blessed America and always shall. And what troubles many, of course, is that this almighty is also free to judge us and in that judgment he may find or she may find America lacking somehow.

The ideals we profess to live by, which we have written ourselves into our laws and into our most sacred documents that are on display in this very city – most famously that phrase “all men are created equal” – thus present this nation with a challenge, perhaps even a curse. Well, I sound like I might be giving a sermon, don't I? Well, if so I want to make a little bit of history and be the first preacher ever to cut himself short because I know you want to hear some other people talk, and that's our panel here.

I'm going to start by welcoming Jay Allison. Jay is an independent broadcast journalist. His work airs on NPR's *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*, PRI's *This American Life*, ABC news's *Nightline*, and other national programs. He is now heard weekly on National Public Radio as the curator and co-producer of *This I Believe*. Over the past 25 years he has created hundreds of documentaries, essays and special series for national and international broadcast, and has won

virtually every major industry award for his productions and collaborations, including five Peabodys. He was the 1996 recipient of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's Edward R. Murrow Award for outstanding contributions to public radio, the industry's highest honor. In the long history of that annual award, Jay Allison is the only independent producer to ever have received it. And finally in 2002 he received the Public Radio News Directors' Leo C. Lee Award for lasting commitment to public radio journalism. And I want to welcome Jay, who is the co-editor of an upcoming volume, *This I Believe*. And perhaps, Jay, because of that outstanding record in radio, a good place to start is to hear some excerpts from *This I Believe*. So we'll do that right now.

(recording plays)

M: *This I Believe* is a unique space in the media where Americans convene to share thoughtful and respectful statements about the philosophies that guide their lives.

M: *This I Believe*, by that name we bring you a new series of radio broadcasts presenting the personal philosophies of thoughtful men and women –

F: I believe that freedom of speech should not be so abused by some that it is not exercised by others.

M: I believe in the brotherhood and equality of man.

M: I believe in a supreme power whose handiwork, the soul-enlarging firmament declared.

F: I believe in being a good friend, lover, and parent so that I can have good friends –

F: I believe in the power of love to transform.

M: I seem most instinctively to believe in the human value of creative writing.

F: If I have one operating philosophy about life it is this, be cool to the pizza delivery dude. Tip him well, friends and brethren, for that which you bestow freely and willingly will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return.

M: *This I Believe* has struck a chord with Americans. A listener in Ashland, Oregon, says the series is a wonderful forum to pause and reflect on our own humanity. It serves as a reminder which we desperately need, surrounded by trivia and materialism as we are, that thoughts are still what connect us each to the other and to our world.

(end of recording)

KENNEALLY: That was a nice sampling of the program, which, as we said, is heard weekly on National Public Radio. It was inspired by a similar program from the 1950s, and I wonder if you could talk about that inspiration and also how today's series is different from the earlier one?

ALLISON: The series in the 1950s was hosted by Edward R. Murrow, and it aired every day on the radio. It was a broadcasting and then a publishing phenomenon. The book sold more than any book other than the Bible in those years. It was on the air for five years, and they – they were wrestling with many of the same kinds of things we're wrestling with today. I mean, I think if you read those essays, and we have found in archives all over the country – we've now found 1000 of them, all in the original audio, and we are in the process of transcribing them and they'll be available in an archive, too. It's a remarkable snapshot of this country at that time. And they, like we, were in a mix of hope and fear. And there was McCarthyism, there was nuclear threat. The issues they were talking about and the things they were afraid of and wanted to make better were very much the same. It was racism, and it was immigration. It was America's place in the world.

And now 50 years later the series then kind of went out of – completely out of circulation, and my colleague, Dan Gettiman (sp?), and I found the original books and starting down the producers. Found Murrow's son and the son of the original producers, Casey Murrow, and said we think the time is right to bring this back and we think that people need to talk – or more particularly, to listen to one another again without again without ranting or trying to convince or persuading another of your beliefs so that they may adopt it too, but simply giving a protected, respectful, safe space to reflect what has meaning in life. And we brought it back to the air a year ago, and the response has been incredible to it.

KENNEALLY: And the point you made is that it's important that this is not negative, it's not attacking, it's always very much a positive message, and it has to be something that whoever is delivering it needs to stand by. That's important.

ALLISON: Yeah, the parameters – you can go to our website at NPR.org and see that there are very few rules about it, but it is required to be a positive statement. It's not about what you don't believe, and it's not your belief as against the belief of another. And so each statement has to be framed in those terms. And it's not a restatement of any political or religious dogma because those texts are available. But what is not is your personal experience, the thing that catalyzed for you the central kind of driver for your daily life. The thing that you organize yourself around. The values that abide.

And we've had people writing from – we've had people – centenarians writing and teenagers writing. And we've aired from all spectrums about – and I think when those kinds of audiences hear each other, and hear each other say in a vulnerable way what it is they hold most dear, it has a real power. We now have gotten close to 14,000 essays written for us and sent in over the Internet. This isn't like

checking yes or no on *American Idol*. It's a commitment, and people spend weeks working on it, distilling it, pulling it down. We've had people say it was like trying to pack for a month-long trip in an overnight bag. It's 500 words.

KENNEALLY: Well, how difficult is it for people to be, as you said, non-dogmatic at a moment in our nation's life when it seems that we have – when we're more divided than ever, that people are more crystallized in their positions. Are you finding that perhaps it's easier than you would have expected for people to do this and that they've been wanting to do it? And just now you've given them an opportunity to?

ALLISON: People like to preach and they – in this series, because we haven't given them a license to preach, and in fact have pulled their license, they find more subtle ways to do it. And they use the subtly sermonizing “we” to really mean “you.” And we try to – if we find an essay that does that we try to pull people back away from that, and we want the essay. Otherwise we say, look, this is only interesting to the degree it's important to you. Don't tell me how to live or what to believe, and don't prescribe for me. Just tell me what you know. And many – the ones we've aired I think have responded to that call for authenticity, or the call was absolutely unnecessary because what they had to say leapt from the page as being so clear and so from their center that we needed to do nothing.

KENNEALLY: Have any of the statements surprised you? Is there a belief in something that was unexpected and that therefore really felt to you that was important to put on the air and to eventually put in print?

ALLISON: Can I say they all surprised me? Is that a cop-out?

KENNEALLY: That's a fine answer, but give me an example.

ALLISON: I was just talking to someone. One that was surprising, literally, was one that began, it's – “I believe in feeding monkeys on my birthday,” which is a surprising hook, to say the least. It was a young guy in Seattle who came from Burma, and when he was born, a monk had told his family, make sure he feeds monkeys on his birthday, and you and he will prosper. So living in Burma, it was very easy to do. There are monkeys all over the place. But in Seattle there are fewer. So the narrative really tells the story of how he has abided by this belief and gone and found lab monkeys, he's gone into zoos, he's tried to get into pet stores and places that train animals desperately saying, please, just let me feed your monkey by the stroke of midnight. But the essay really is about a belief in his tradition and his family and honoring them, and that it's important to them and therefore, it will be important to him, so the belief drives much deeper than the nominal artifact of it.

KENNEALLY: That particular story illustrates the difference, really, for your series from the one in the 1950s, and that is more or less the '50s series was limiting. This is really open to the public. And at least originally in the '50s series, it was famous people. They opened that up eventually, right?

ALLISON: They did. They started thinking – it was a bit didactic. It was thinking you would like to hear the beliefs of successful Americans, those to whom you would – whose lives you would aspire to model yours after. And they realized fairly quickly that that was – they were speaking from on high. If you listen to those '50s essays, everyone spoke in a much more declarative formal way than they do now, but then they opened it up and they started seeking through newspapers and other outlets to find ordinary people.

We, from the beginning, learned from – we've learned from them all along. They did a magnificent job on their series. But we have the Internet. And also I put – so I'm able to put out a call on the air on *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* every time one of these airs and say this is for you, too. So it has opened it up well beyond our efforts to do so.

There's a town in Vermont where the townspeople get together and they wrote *This I Believe* and had an event in the library and sold the whole library out. High schools around the country are doing it. It's not from our provocation. It's simply because the idea is good and there's power in this way of communicating. It's enormously gratifying to us that we've been able to help catalyze it, but we fundamentally don't take credit for it.

KENNEALLY: And yet you continue to include not just, as you say, ordinary people, which would be simply anyone who volunteers for this, but you do have essays by the famous, the well-known, at least. I wonder if you can talk about an example or two there and what struck you in their contributions. And perhaps also how their contributions have changed from the 1950s.

ALLISON: I'm trying to think of a specific one. I admire everybody who's done this. It's an act of bravery. As I say, you're vulnerable. You stand up there. You say these are words I'll stand behind, and you stand there basically unclothed and without defense, opportunity to spin, refine, retract, equivocate. You're saying these are my central beliefs. That's a brave and dangerous act, I think, in a modern media climate which favors attack and rant and mockery.

So the famous people that have done this I have great admiration for. I can't say whether they're fundamentally different than they are in the 1950s, but the people in this book have really stood up and taken a chance (inaudible).

KENNEALLY: You teased us a bit, Jay, and told us that Bill Gates has a contribution. What is it that Bill Gates believes in?

ALLISON: He believes in computers.

(laughter)

ALLISON: It's perhaps not surprising, but he believes in the power of personal computing, and then he goes on to explain how he thinks it will revolutionize society. It's very persuasive.

KENNEALLY: Well, I'm going to also ask you for an exclusive here. You've said that everybody involved in the project has written one of these essays, each individual has. You have. You're not going to publish yours.

ALLISON: No, no.

KENNEALLY: But can you tell us what Jay believes in?

ALLISON: The topic line is I believe in listening. And perhaps that seems odd for a broadcaster. I don't really think it is. All my work's in public broadcasting. I started the public radio stations in my town. I do a couple of websites that help citizens tell their own stories. One's called Transom.org, which just won a Peabody, and PRX.org, which is a way for citizens to get their work broadcast. I believe fundamentally in our need to talk to each other, and more particularly to listen to each other, and everything I do in my working life is to figure out how to make that happen, how to get our stories, our truths, shared among us so that we can understand each other better. And the only way to do that is through listening.

KENNEALLY: Did that come difficultly? You do a lot of talking, obviously. Was it hard to get yourself to listen? How hard is it to do that as a reporter, for example?

ALLISON: You just have to remind yourself all the time to be quiet.

KENNEALLY: I'll leave it there, I guess, Jay. Can I ask one more question, and that is about the book itself. Describe how it's going to come to us.

ALLISON: This is an advance reading copy. It's got a CD in the back. You can get these for free down at the Holt booth. The CD will be great because it's all the essayists in their own voices, 60 modern essayists and 20 from the '50s. And it's due out in its full version – this is short about a dozen essays, ten essays that we've added, some really nice ones. We're getting some really good ones in. If you listen to *NPR*, I just – editing one last from an interrogator in Guantanamo. It's amazing. Anyway, I recommend it to you. I think it's good.

KENNEALLY: Thank you Jay Allison.