



## Noah Lukeman at the National Society of Newspaper Columnists 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting

KENNEALLY:

I want to turn now to Noah Lukeman and tell you just a bit about his background. Noah is author of *A Dash of Style: The Art and Mastery of Punctuation*, the best-selling *The First Five Pages: A Writer's Guide to Staying out of the Rejection Pile* and *The Plot Thickens: Eight Ways to Bring Fiction to Life*. His op-ed pieces have been published in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Dallas Morning News*, among other places. But he is also – and this is significant for our audience today – president of Lukeman Literary Management Ltd., and has also worked as not only an agent for other agencies but on the editorial side of several major publishers, including William Morrow and Farrar, Straus, Giroux. Welcome, Noah Lukeman.

Noah, it seems to me there's a lot there in what Myra was just saying about Izzy Stone and you can apply it to the current situation. But can you tell us honestly, how do editors today respond to book proposals from newspaper columnists?

LUKEMAN: Thank you, Chris. Well, editors today, if you submit a proposal from a newspaper columnist, there are some advantages and some disadvantages to that from a literary agent's perspective. One advantage is that they're used to deadlines, which is a nice thing. A lot of times you do book deals and the author has one year or two years to deliver, and they'll be a year or two year late, and that can be a little frustrating for some editors, and that can cause serious problems. Newspaper columnists tend to be much more disciplined in that regard and usually will say, "Noah, my book is due tomorrow. Is it OK if I'm one hour late?" And I'll say, "Yeah, it's fine. If you're a week late, don't worry about it." So that's good.

They're used to, obviously, asking tough questions, in most cases. They're used to doing research. They take their writing very seriously as a job and as a craft and as a discipline. All these are big advantages.

The disadvantage could be that they're writing style can be a little bit choppy, a little bit geared towards newspapers. They're used to writing to – condensing things to small paragraphs, to small columns, to making it fit to 700 words or 1200 words. They're used to quoting people a lot. So as an agent, when I get queries or

manuscripts from someone, I can just glance at the page and immediately tell if it's a columnist, because you'll see a lot of people being quoted, you'll see a lot of short paragraphs, you'll see a lot of short sentences.

So there are some advantages, there are some disadvantages. But ultimately, as far as how editors at book publishing companies will perceive them will ultimately depend a lot on the content of the particular book proposal, what you propose. You could be a wonderful columnist with a bad idea and no one's going to want to buy it, or you could be not such a great columnist with a wonderful concept which is done in a great way, and they might all want it. So, a book proposal is very much its own thing, and has to be taken on its own terms.

KENNEALLY: And although Jeff Seglin's going to tell us about a really positive experience with a collection of columns, I believe it's your view that the collection is something that people should avoid thinking about, and think more about how to take what they have gathered up through all of their writing and build that into a book, that fundamentally a book is very different from a column.

LUKEMAN: Yeah, that's true. One of the biggest mistakes from an agent's perspective that columnists make is they'll send me a manuscript which is filled with a collection of their columns and think, well, now I have enough columns to actually physically fill out 200 pages, so now I have a book deal. Editors don't want to buy – If I take this on and submit it to editors, they'll all tell me the same thing, which is that, "I don't want to buy a collection of random columns just for the sake of having a collection."

It's very difficult to sell a collection of columnists unless the person is a celebrity columnist. In that case, yes, you can do it. Even then, you might have a difficult time, and even then, it might be a much smaller advance. Editors – and they're responding to the way that book buyers respond. There are exceptions where book buyers will buy and a collection will be very successful, but in most cases, the hard numbers tell you that most collections of columns don't sell as much as single-topic books, so most editors are reluctant to buy them. It goes all the way down the road.

So as a columnist, you're much better off choosing one column or one great story that could be book-length and writing a book on that one particular subject, as opposed to saying, well, let's just collect everything I've ever done and try to sell that as a book.

KENNEALLY: Right, and that's not a discouraging note, I don't think, because it's not saying throw out everything, you have to start fresh, but to really try to think about what it is as a columnist that you've pursued over time. Perhaps there are some characters that have been important to you, there are some things that can withstand the development necessary for a 300-page book, isn't that –

LUKEMAN: Yeah, absolutely. The main thing is you have to think of yourself as an author, not as a columnist. These are two very different things. So if you're an author of books, you have to think of writing a book as a totally different medium and a different form, and you have to try to become that book author instead of remaining the columnist, which means you have to choose one topic that could sustain 300 pages, instead of choosing a topic that could sustain one page or five pages or 10 pages. And that means finding a story that has a lot of depth to it and approaching it as a book, and giving the form of the book true respect. Saying, well, I can write. I write columns, so I could write a book, that's not the best way to approach it. The better way is to say, well, this is a totally different medium. Let me really study and understand this medium and try to adapt to the medium instead of just feeling like because I write I can write anything. Yeah, for sure.

KENNEALLY: You mentioned the medium and respect for it. Today there are so many medias on offer. What do you think about columnists trying out different media? Do you urge that they do that? Do you really want to see them stick to the printed word? What are your thoughts on that?

LUKEMAN: Yeah, I think that the more media that someone can have at their fingertips, the better, because when it comes to getting a book deal, one of the most important elements to sell your book will be, how big is your platform, how big is your following? If someone's a syndicated columnist and they reach 10 million readers daily, they'll probably get a book deal, even if it's not a very good book. And if somebody has a blog and they have 500,000 people visiting it every day, and they reach millions of readers, and they're on NPR, and they're on national television, when their book comes out, this is what's going to enable them to actually sell the books in the stores. So if they have all this media at their fingertips before they approach the publishing industry, they'll have a much better chance of getting a book deal to begin with. Just like if Oprah decides to write a book, she'll have a book deal regardless of what it's about, because of her platform. The same thing with Howard Stern or anyone who has a huge platform.

So obviously, not all of us have the capacity to have a show with millions of viewers every day, but you do what you can and you slowly build your Internet presence, and you try to build a bigger and bigger readership, and you try to get a radio presence and a television presence, and you wait as long as you can until you approach the publishing industry to have as big a following as you can, to help make the case that if your book comes out, you'll be able to help sell it on the back end. Because otherwise, you walk into Barnes and Noble and your book sits there with 100,000 other books, and it's very hard for someone walking in off the street to just find a particular book and buy it. Usually what sells books is publicity, is a radio show or television show driving a particular book buyer to the store to go in and ask for that specific book.

KENNEALLY: As a matter of sort of practical application, then, the proposal, in order to be a winning one, from a literary agent's standpoint, not only has to explain why

this story is something that's going to be engaging to readers over the course of a book length, but also who those readers may be. You need to document all the various parts of the media that you are involved with, and really make it clear to whoever may be buying the book that you have this reach, right? You can't just assume it. You have to really document it, and the editor wants to see that.

LUKEMAN: Yeah, absolutely. You have to make a strong case for who your readership will be, which is part of the reason why it's so hard to sell a collection of columns, because several columns could cover several different topics that are of interest to a whole broad range of people. So in order for a proposal to be successful, an editor has to immediately get it, that oh, I see who the audience for this will be, oh, that there really is a need for this, oh, that nothing else like this is out there. You need a great writer, you need a great concept, you need a great execution.

And you have – there've been proposals I've shopped around from columnists where editors will say, well, wow, that was a great 30-page read. I feel like I've read enough. And that question will come up all the time, that issue. That's probably one of the biggest reasons why you can't get a book deal for a lot of columns, because they'll say, well, I think it's a wonderful story, and I think that it's covered very well in a 20-page article. I don't think readers, after reading 20 pages, will feel compelled to go to a store, spend \$25, and read 400 pages more on the topic. Feel like they've had their fill.

So the challenge for you is, how do you take a – You have to ask yourself, will a reader be satisfied after reading a 30-page article on this topic, or will they be compelled to read another 400 pages, and that's a very hard question to answer. You need a really deep, multilayered story to compel a reader to do that.

KENNEALLY: The subject for a lot of columnists is their lives, their friends, their families, their work, and it sounds like a great preparation for a memoir. And yet, I think you've talked before about some of the pitfalls in trying to be a memoirist and moving from columnist to memoirist. Can you tell us about that?

LUKEMAN: Yeah. In general, nonfiction is much easier to sell than fiction, from an agent's perspective, so it's probably 100 times easier to get somebody a book deal when it comes to nonfiction. So if you're writing nonfiction, you immediately have a huge advantage over novelists.

The one exception to that is memoir. Memoir is basically taken on its own terms, very much like fiction, and it's basically as hard to sell as fiction. And when it comes to memoir, it's all about the execution. So you can have somebody with a quite boring life who writes about it in a brilliant way, and they want to buy the memoir; or someone with an amazing life who just can't really write about it and nobody will buy it at all. So when it comes to the memoir, it's all about your writing skills, and it's all about your skill as a writer, basically. So for a columnist to think, well, I have several columns about my life, I can automatically get a deal

for a memoir, again, it's not the case. You have to respect the form that you're entering into and treat it on its own terms.

KENNEALLY: And finally, Noah, what I think is most intriguing about what you had to say is to remind people to be patient with their book proposal, to not rush it, to not feel like they have to get a book out, that a book takes such a long time to develop on its own – Myra's laughing. I think your book was about 15 years in the works.

MACPHERSON: Off and on. I had to wait for FBI files for about 10 years, I mean, you know.

KENNEALLY: But for Noah, that notion that to the aspiring author, to say, take your time, is kind of counterintuitive, in a way, but may be the best advice.

LUKEMAN: Yeah, it might be. I mean, publishing is a long-term endeavor. From the time you sell a proposal, it could take a year or two years until the author actually writes and delivers the book, several months back and forth with the editing process, and then once you have the finished manuscript, it could take another year or more until it actually hits the stores. So from the time I sell your proposal tomorrow until it's in the store it could be easily two-year process. It could be quite longer, actually, for some books. There's a deal I did I think about seven years ago and we're just getting bound galleys right now.

So you're best served taking your time and realizing this is a long-term endeavor, to get your writing skills the best they can possibly be, to find the best concept you possibly can, to really work on respecting the book medium for its own sake, and to build your platform in the meantime. So to line up all your ducks, so when you put your proposal into an agent's hand, you've made the case in all these areas. It'll maximize your chance of getting a book deal.