



**Sara Nelson at the 2009 PubWest Conference  
November 13, 2009**

Q: We're in Tucson at the PubWest Conference 2009 asking the question, is publishing dead? And we certainly hope the answer is, absolutely not. But we'll find out from Sara Nelson, a name you probably recognize. She is now books director for *O*, the Oprah magazine. But for a number of years, from 2005 to 2009, in fact, she was editor-in-chief of *Publishers Weekly*, during which time she overhauled the 135-year old magazine editorially and graphically and lots of other ways, too, I think, just in spirit. But we want to welcome Sara Nelson to Beyond the Book. Sara, good to have you here.

A: Hi, thank you for having me.

Q: You are asking a question that probably frightens a lot of people in the publishing business just by asking it in the first place. Is publishing dead? Is the book dead? I think of the Monty Python scene, bring out your dead, and they carry some fellow out who pipes up and says, but I'm not dead yet! It seems to me that if we're having a conference on publishing, publishing is not dead quite yet. So what's your answer?

A: Well, when Ken asked me to tell him what I was going to be speaking about at this conference, I came up with the title, *Is Publishing Dead?* But I was back and forth between whether the title should be, *Is Publishing Dead?* or *Are Books Dead?* Because I think people confuse those two things, and I think that they're significantly different. I mean books, if by book you mean narrative, story, information, that people publish, i.e., to make known – that's what publishing means – to people who want the information, books are not dead.

Publishing, the publishing business or the book business as we know it, is also not dead, but it is undergoing tremendous change and will die in the way that we know it. Publishing as we know it will die if changes are not made. I think that there will always be books, there will always be people to read books, the books may be in a different format from the way we read them now, some of them. But I don't think that the way the systems, the back-office systems, the distribution systems and so on, will be the same. I think those are changing. Dying? I'd rather say that they're morphing rather than dying.

Q: Well, saying that publishing isn't dying but it's going to change unless it does a few certain things is rather like saying, well, Mr. Kenneally, I'm your doctor, and unless you lose 50 pounds, quit smoking and stop driving so fast, you're going to be in



trouble. So if you're Dr. Nelson to this patient, what is the prescription, what is the advice you would give to publishing executives, and we're here at PubWest, so a lot of these are independent, smaller publishers, but thinking, too, about the bigger houses, what's the advice Dr. Nelson gives as they lie there in the examining room worrying about their future?

- A: Well, I think if somebody could lose 50 pounds, stop smoking and not drive so fast and do that all at once, that would be terrific. I think it's not realistic any more than it's realistic to ask publishers to completely change the way they've done business for the last 50 or 100 or whatever years. But you start with some stuff. To me, the biggest problems in publishing have to do with the distribution of books, have to do with the business model of how books are bought – in other words, advances against royalties. Have to do with certain quaint procedures that we have in publishing, like returns, which was, incidentally, I'm sure you know, started during the depression to help book sellers. And now it's not helping anybody, but nobody can change that until everybody is willing to change that.

So I don't think that digital, per se, is the culprit. I don't even think that Google, per se, is the culprit. I think that there are a lot of people in publishing who look to those things, to Google, to eBooks, to Amazon and say that they are the devil, and they are killing our business. I think it's not that simple. I think that publishers need to think about the business model in which they operate and to give advances – and it's less true of some of the people here, it's less true of the small and medium sized publishers, and for that reason, they're in better shape than some of the big guys – but when you're giving several million dollar advances on books, you are destined to lose money. And that is only going to become more true if more books are read digitally, because the amount of money you're going to make on a digital book is a lot less than the amount of money you're going to make on hardcover.

But I think – what's that expression? The horse is out of the barn already on that one. And publishers, I think – I mean, I come from New York, I come out of New York publishing – and I have seen in the last six months, the beginning of a sea change that probably should've started years ago, that publishers are starting to understand they can't pay \$3 million or half a million dollars for a book of short stories, however great the short stories are, because those books are never going to sell, and then that writer's never going to get published again, and the whole system falls apart. Plus the publisher's going to take a bath.

So I think that publishers are learning that they have to look at other business models. I mean, there are some examples within the larger publishing community. Harper Studio is one that people talk about a lot that is a smaller advance and a



higher percentage of royalty to the author. There's been a lot of grumbling about it, because their smaller advance is a \$100,000, and I know people who work at Farrar Straus and say, well, big deal, I don't pay \$100,000 anyway. But at least it is the beginning of thinking about a different way of publishing. And one of the things that Harper Studio and that I see smaller and medium sized publishers doing much more than the big guys is understanding the author – and agent – but the author's role in publicizing and distributing the book.

Q: Well, in fact, I wanted to ask you about the authors and the agents, because they're going to be the ones that are going to have to take the hit first on this, if what you're describing comes to pass. I mean, the publishers are taking a hit, but they're able to kind of ease into that. For an individual author to move down, to downscale an advance or to see a different kind of return or royalty rate and so forth, could be a more immediate hit. What's the convincing argument that an author or an agent should hear to buy into all of this? Or should they, instead, think about moving downstream a bit to smaller publishers, or maybe even doing some independent publishing of their own?

A: First of all, and I have been booed for this, but I'll say it anyway, it's only in the last, maybe, 50 years – or not even – in this country, that we think that one has a full-time profession as a writer that supports you and sends your children to private school. That has never been the norm. And I think part of the reason for that is writing programs, which I think are in many ways great. I take some responsibility for it, as the former editor of *Publishers Weekly*, because we would run articles about people who got \$500,000 advances for books of short stories. And then everybody thought they were supposed to get \$500,000 advances, and I would always counter that I was in the news business and that's why I would write a story about that, because it was news, because most people don't get \$500,000 advances.

Q: That was the man bites dog story.

A: Right. Exactly. And I think that there are really exploded expectations on the part of authors and agents, and I think there's going to be some tough medicine to be taken there. But I also think that – and there are writers, I don't know if they would come out publicly and say so – but I know some of them who did get a big advance for their first book, and it didn't sell, and then they couldn't sell their second book. And occasionally you come across a first author who doesn't take the biggest advance he gets offered. He takes the advance from a house that he feels is going to help his book more or with an editor who's going to work with him on the book, because – I mean, it would make me crazy. People would say, well, if I get a million dollar advance, I'll never have to work again. And I think, isn't the object



of this that you want to work again? Where is it written – no pun intended – that a writer doesn't want to ever write again? I thought that was the antithesis.

Q: Right. You're looking for a career. Although I would imagine a lot of writers felt that the career was going to be in the writing itself. And what I heard you sort of hint at, and we can explore a little bit more, is the role of the writer is now to do much more, to go beyond turning in the manuscript and waiting for the tour to be booked. Talk about that.

A: Well, absolutely. You hear a lot about platform. Authors need to have their own platform, they need to have a radio show, they need to run a business, they need to have some place where they can go and they need to be self promoters. And I think this is very hard – depends what kind of book you're talking about. If you are talking about inspirational business books, or inspirational books, or lots of nonfiction where an author is really telling his own story or giving advice, I think a lot of times those authors are able to translate what they put into the book into some sort of speaking or public service.

When I published a book a few years ago about being a reader, I was shameless, and luckily for me, my elderly mother was shameless. And she called – I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania – and she called up the school I went to and the various local organizations and said, you know, local girl makes good, have her come here and give a speech, and I did. And I went all over the place, and I sold some books. I mean, I'm not Dan Brown, but it did OK. The problem is there are a lot of writers who are not that way, who don't write those kind of books and who are not naturally outgoing or self promoting or comfortable in that kind of venue –

Q: They can hire your mother.

A: Right, they could hire my mother (laughter), yes. Fiction writers, for example, they're fiction writers. Their work is in their head and on the page, they're not self promoting. And they do need to hire somebody, probably not my mother, but they do need to hire somebody who can help them shape some kind of campaign. But it's antithetical to the way a lot of people think. Now, I also think that there is always going to be room for the fiction writer, the person who writes serious books that they want to write, because they want to write them, not because they think they're going to be famous. I mean, my sister is a novelist, and – struggling, but she's published one novel – and she said to me last year, I want you to tell me everything you know about this digital stuff and all these new devices and all this. And I said, well OK, why – sure, but why? And she said, well, because it's going to influence the way I write. And I said, no, it's not.



# Beyond the Book®



You're going to write the books you want to write, and unless you want to write a cell phone novel, like the teenagers in Japan write, you've got to write what you want to write. And writers ask me all the time, what's the next trend, and what's the thing that's going to make me money the next time? I go – well, usually they're not quite that bold, but that's basically what they're getting at – and the answer is, a, I don't know, nobody knows, and if we knew we'd all be doing something else. But a writer is by definition somebody who has something to say and wants to write it, and I think you can get too hung up as a writer in the trend and what's going to sell. And you just can't do that. And I think books that are written sort of cynically that way and that are published cynically and that are sold cynically, for the most part, don't do very well.

**Q:** I think you're right, but let me ask you a question. It's a little hard, because at *PW*, for example, I rather doubt you ever reviewed a self-published novel or a self-published nonfiction book, but yet the trend we're seeing, I think, is probably going to drive many authors to make the decision that publishing their own work is a great place to start. It's kind of the minor league, learn the game, build a platform, and then hope to leap from there. That has begun to happen some. It gives them the control they're after. And I've heard one industry observer say, what kind of a business is it that says no to 90% of its customers? So Thomas Nelson, for example, is allowing people to publish their own books, the ones that they don't publish in their own lives. Do you feel that self publishing is a viable solution moving forward, or is going to remain tainted, as it was in the past, as a kind of vanity press?

**A:** Well, I think it has started to change, and that there are books that have been self published that have gotten some traction and have taken off. I think there is a taint, I think that – well, one of the places that there's a taint is with reviewers, and that reviewers – I mean, *Publishers Weekly* was hardly the only place that didn't review those kind of books – so that's a problem, if you're relying on traditional reviews to sell your books. But since a lot of those outlets are going away, there are a lot of other ways to sell your books. I think the problem is – there was an article recently that said more people are writing books than are reading them. And I think that the problem is that people think that – everybody thinks they're a writer, and listen, I know I'm going to get booted out of here, but we all think we're writers.

I don't think I'm a painter, and I don't think I can play the violin. I know I can't. But we all went to school, and we all learned to write, and we all learned to read. And, therefore, I think that there is – some of it is justified, a real sense among writers, people who want to be writers, want to be published authors – that it's this closed world that's shut off to them, and that those people don't know any more than I know, so why don't I just go out and publish my book. I think that's true to



some extent, but I also think that it is harder to write a good book, and I wouldn't say it takes a village, but everybody needs an editor, everybody needs some help marketing things. And I think self publishing is fine, if your expectations of it are realistic.

If you want to write a book of your family history or your memoir of your family, and you want to get it out to 100 or 200 or 500 people that you know, or that are friends of friends, etc., I think that's fine. I really do, and I think there's nothing wrong with that. But if you secretly think, or not so secretly think, that you're going to do that and you're going to be Dan Brown at the end of six months or a year or five years, then I think you are misled. And I know many of the people who run the self publishers, and they are not stupid, and they are not evil people by any means. But I think that one's expectations need to be realistic about what you expect to happen.

And I think this happens for writers at traditional publishers. I see it over and over, and I fought against it myself when I published my book, which was before I was at *Publishers Weekly*. You think your book is going to be published and your life is going to change. And somebody once said to me, the best description of what happens when your book gets published is it's like going in a revolving door. For a couple of weeks, you're going around and around and around and around, and then you're deposited right back where you started. In 99.99% of the cases, your life does not change. So you better enjoy the process of the writing, the thinking, the promoting, every piece of it. And if you can do that and keep your expectations of sales and fancy cars and lots of young, beautiful women in check, I think you'll be all right.

Q: Well, we've been talking to Dr. Sara Nelson here, getting the prognosis and the course of treatment for the book publishing business and enjoying doing that. Sara Nelson is the books director now for *The Oprah Magazine*. She previously was editor-in-chief at *Publishers Weekly*. Sara, thanks for joining us here at PubWest.

A: Thank you very much.

Q: It's been a pleasure, and we look forward to seeing your keynote address tomorrow. And for everybody in the audience, thank you very much for listening to Beyond the Book. This is Chris Kenneally.

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