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**NATIONAL WRITERS UNION PRESENTS
“MEET THE EDITOR”
Featuring Saunders Robinson of The History Press**

Boston, Mass., May 14, 2009

Q: Well, welcome everyone, my name is Chris Kenneally. I really appreciate your joining us here for an event sponsored by the National Writers Union in Boston, and the Steering Committee, of which I am a member. I'm also the host of a program we call *Beyond The Book*, at Copyright Clearance Center. And joining me today is Saunders Robinson. Welcome Saunders.

A: Thank you.

Q: Saunders received her BA in Classic from Northwestern University, and her MA in Writing, Literature and Publishing from Emerson College here in Boston. She's worked a freelance writer and editor for local newspapers in Memphis, Tennessee. And upon receiving her Master's, she worked for Allyn & Bacon as an editorialist assistant in communications and as a freelance development editor.

Saunders became – or began working with The History Press in 2007, as one of the founding commissioning editors for the company's northeast office, which is based in Salem, Massachusetts. She is now the Senior Commissioning Editor, and Northeast Publisher.

Which sounds all very sort of high falutin', and you're going to tell us how you got into this at some point. Tell us a bit more about History Press. But from the website, which is at Historypress.net, we learn that it's based in Charleston, South Carolina, a city rather like Boston, in some ways, very historic. History Press publishes high quality history and heritage titles that seek to bring to life the past, in a variety of areas across the United States. And you're attempting to bring a new way of thinking to history publishing, to seek out history and heritage titles that are written by historians capable of making their area of expertise understandable to a wide audience. And that's going to be something we'll get into, and just how you help them achieve that goal.

And, what's interesting about this, is just the way that, despite the national interest in history, especially regional history, the book business has, frankly, underserved this area in the past. And so, The History Press is attempting to kind of balance that by providing books that seek audiences that exist, but have been overlooked in



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the past. And I think as somebody who's written a history book or two, this is interesting to me. And when I've spoken about history, some of these people have asked me what was I trying to do? And I say, well, I remembered being in history class in high school, and at some point everybody said history was just names and dates. But names and dates don't make history –

A: No.

Q: People make history.

A: Absolutely. And I would say that names and dates are not necessarily the most accessible way of delivering history to a reader. And that's something that we really focus on, is telling the story, and engaging readers in that way.

Q: Yeah, I look forward into going into that. But give us a quick 30 seconds on The History Press. What have been some recent titles that have done well for the company? And in particular some titles you may have published yourself.

A: So, I think the first thing to – just to point out is that we're publishing local and regional history books. And our books are really intended for a local audience. And that's what we're always keeping in mind, whenever we make a decision to publish a book.

So, while larger publishers who catering towards a national audience may think that a book like *Duck Hunting on Currituck Sound*, would be a ludicrous book to do, that it's certainly not going to be a worthwhile investment, we see value in that. There is, in fact, a very strong duck hunting community in Currituck Sound, which is, I believe in the – on the outer banks of North Carolina. The book is written by a local duck hunter. It is their histories, their stories that he experienced as a child growing up, with a father who was a duck hunter. And having a son, as a duck hunter. And there is a very real community that identifies with it. And that book has been a great success for us. So, while it may come as a surprise to other publishers, it doesn't to us, because we're aware that there really is that market that's going to identify with it.

Q: So, you're really looking for, not only authors with stories to tell, but authors who have communities that they can connect to. And they can be very esoteric, but this is a big country.

A: Absolutely. And I would say that the authors are a part of the community that they're writing about. That's really important. We're not looking for someone who is an outsider telling someone else's story. If you're writing a history of



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Somerville, Massachusetts, you should be from Somerville. If you are writing a history of food, drink and celebrations of the Hudson Valley Dutch, you should be Dutch. And you should be a food historian, and Peter Rose is that, and that's why this book has been successful. She knows her community, she's a part of it, she can be an advocate for it, and she knows how to reach that audience.

Q: What is it about history these days? We live in a very fast moving society. You would think that history doesn't matter. History is yesterday and the day before. But yet, you're talking – that cover there seems to indicate a time from the days of Rip Van Winkle or something, back in the 18th century.

So, what is the attraction for readers in history, do you think?

A: Well, for us, because we're talking about local history, I think – and that's an important distinction for us to make. The importance is, especially at a time where we're losing our local newspapers, our Mom and Pop businesses are going out of business, and people are really struggling to find their own kind of – well, rather, they're really struggling to maintain and hold on to those establishments that made their community. Books that explore a community's history and celebrate it, reinforce that identity. And I think that's why our books are successful. Because, in a way it's reinforcing the reader's own identity, as well as the community in which he or she lives.

Q: Kind of a shared sense of place. I'm mean, I'm looking at some titles that are on our table here, and we may come back to *Duck Hunting on Currituck Sound*, just because it's so unusual a title. But there's another one here that sounds like an oxymoron. There's *The New England Cookbook*. And one doesn't really associate New England cooking – or New England with cooking, I should say. But tell me what that's about.

A: Well, so, it's interesting. We thought that this book would be really successful. It's got a great cover. It is very quirky. It has all sorts of funny recipes for if you're sick, an invalid's diet, a lot of stuff that's very charming.

Q: I see. It's a reprint, actually, of an original book from – it says here, a collector's edition of the 1905 classic, yeah.

A: Exactly. And we thought that this would do quite well. Well, in fact, although we had a forward by Annie Copps, who is the food editor for *Yankee Magazine*, this book did not get as much traction as we thought that it would. Whereas, a book like *The Hudson Valley Dutch*, and of course this year's *The Year of the Hudson*. But with a book like this, this book did quite well. And I think a lot of the huge



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factor in the success of the book, was the author and the author's relationship to his – to her, rather, community.

So, it makes a huge difference. The author is crucial to the book's success. If you have the wrong person telling Camden, Maine's history, people aren't going to buy the book. They want to know, well Barbara Dyer's the local historian, why is so and so telling our history? It's our history.

Q: So it's a matter of authenticity that really you're looking for.

A: And credibility as a insider.

Q: So we're going to talk about some of the requirements you have that go beyond just that sense of authenticity. You've got online a publication proposal form that we might walk through, because I think that will be very interesting for authors. And it seems to me that the kind of author you might be looking for could range from a very serious and very well experienced journalist, or academician, to somebody who's just a local historian who may never have thought of themselves as a writer before, but is well versed in the subject, and capable of telling a good story.

A: Absolutely. Our authors really run the gamut. What the most important quality is, is to be an active participant in your community.

Q: So how do you find these authors? How do you get the word out that you're looking for these types of books? And talk about that process.

A: Well, I will say that we have a very active commissioning staff. In fact, that is – that's what my office focuses on. Because, as you said, many people – many local historians that we work with maybe don't think of themselves as a writer. And, in fact, they are the person who knows the most about their community's history. So, you have to be very active in pursuing them. And we reach out to local historical societies. We're on the H-net list serve, where local historians are talking about various topics all day long. Talking to the local newspapers and finding out who's active in the community, who is writing about history. Talking to the local librarians and finding out who's coming into the local history room and doing research.

So, it's very active. It's not acquisitions as much as it is commissioning locals to tell the story.

Q: And I can imagine that the web is making that job a bit easier, I would hope.



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A: Absolutely. In fact, sometimes my colleague and I wonder how we would even – how our business would even exist without the internet. With the amount of communication that goes into just securing that one book, you may have so many – you may have eight to ten conversations just to find someone to do a particular book that you want.

Q: And yet, I can imagine if you're covering the northeast, there's still a fair amount of travel. Because the real interaction with the historical societies, with the authors, with the communities, still counts even for you and your editorial staff.

A: It does. It does. But I will say that most of – ironically most of the communication that goes on is really over the phone and over e-mail. So – but with certain communities that in person meeting is what is going to make the difference. It's cultural, in certain states it's different. So, it just really kind of depends.

Q: And you worked first in the office in Charleston, is that right?

A: No, actually. I've always worked in the northeast office. I came into the Salem office as an editor.

Q: I was just wondering whether there's been any – have you noticed that the way things go down in South Carolina are perhaps different than the way things work up here in New England? Or is it pretty much the same?

A: Well, I will say that there seems to be – authors and potential writers tend to become very depressed in the winter. And so we see a lot of deliveries falling away, and I will say that my experience has been that New Englanders are a little more reserved. They don't necessarily just want to talk to you on the phone just because you want to talk to them. You may have to send them a couple of letters, follow up with a phone call, send them some more letters. Show them what their book could potentially look like. And then maybe they want to talk to you.

Q: Well, that's interesting, yeah. I can identify with that. We're more private.

Well, what should an author do to prepare to a winning proposal? And I alluded to the online availability of a publication proposal. We could walk through that if you like. But are there some real basics even before you sit down with a proposal?

A: Absolutely. I think one important part is just the description of your book. And often just even letting us know what you're proposing for a title, because that oftentimes gives us a really good idea what you're thinking your book is.



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Also, including a table of contents is really helpful. Because, I've found that often the 100 word description that you may give of your book can be very different than your table of contents. And your table of contents often reflects something entirely different, whereas you may think that your book is very chatty and accessible. And then the table of contents might reflect otherwise.

So, it also makes it easier for an editor to quickly respond to you. Because they've got the framework of the book. Sending one sample of chapter is helpful, or a portion of it, rather than sending the entire manuscript. Just because editors have only so much time to kind of access the viability of the project. You want to make it as easy for them as possible, as digestible as you can.

- Q: I'm looking at the form here, and there are questions about previous works published, affiliations with historical organizations, societies and museums. If you haven't published in the past, listing similar projects that have kind of touched on the same kinds of research. So, you're looking for some experience. You're looking for somebody – you're looking for someone to demonstrate what you were speaking about before, access to the right information, authenticity, all of that.
- A: And activity. Maybe you haven't written before, but you've done several exhibits for the museum. Or you work on the newsletter, but maybe you haven't written for it. What we're not looking for is someone who is just in town writing their thesis and wants to publish their book. And is then going to be – isn't going to be there when the book comes out, and be there to promote it.

So, we're really looking for are you a part of the community? Are you on the Chamber of Commerce? Are you organizing the Fourth of July parade? Are you engaged locally?

- Q: Right. And you had told me when we were chatting about this beforehand, some of the structure at History Press is very much traditional in terms of how you pay authors, how you work with your authors. But, what you're describing is something that's much more the new model of the relationship between the publisher and author. In the past, the author kind of delivered the book, in manuscript form and waited until the galleys came and had a launch party and all of that. (laughter). But you're really looking for authors who are prepared to be partners with you in the whole piece of it, right? Not only writing the book, but the sales and the marketing and all of that?
- A: In a way those are the books that yes, those are the books that tend to sell the best. But I would say that it's a function of the audience that we're trying to reach. So, if



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the audience – if locals identify with you, and know you, they, and your part of community building, then they are going to buy the book.

- Q: Right. And it seems to me the history – I wonder are there certain niches? Again, I'm looking at the variety of titles here. And it's fascinating. You've got *Connecticut Baseball, the Best of the Nutmeg State*. Now that would be something that would appeal to people in Connecticut. But if you're a baseball fanatic, baseball is a global sport these days. And there may be characters who came out of Connecticut that have just got appealing stories for anybody in the world.

So, you're – so you're looking – so, therefore, your audience there is people in Connecticut, but it's also baseball fans.

- A: Right. And what I would say is we're really catering to very specific targeted audiences. It's a niche really. There are people who love Connecticut baseball and very proud of that. They've never gotten a book. Don Harrison has been covering them for 40 years. And following the players, following the games, and is very passionate about it. And this book is doing really, really well. And who would have thought that Connecticut baseball would do well? But there's a group of people who have never been identified as a group. Although, they identified as a group –

- Q: Kind of on their own.

- A: Right.

- Q: But they haven't had a kind of recognition, I guess is what you mean.

- A: Right, because it just wouldn't be a large enough group for a publisher to cater to.

- Q: Well, it seems to me that a book can convey that. It gives people a sense that they've been recognized. We're at a moment in book publishing where there's all talk about the digital revolution, and everything's moving on to e-Book readers and Kindles and certainly online. But there's still something about the actual artifact of a book that really counts. That counts as a gift, that counts as a memento, that almost kind of speaks to achievement, don't you think?

- A: Absolutely. And I would say that one important part of the physical book for us is that there's a lot of – I think there's a lot of sentimental value and identity wrapped up in our books. And so people want to possess that physical book. And as we move into the digital age, I'm not quite sure how our books will fit in, in that way. So, we'll see.



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Q: Well, I'm pretty confident the book's going to survive. I mean, as a real book. At Copyright Clearance Center we do some surveys on this, and we've been asking people the question what's going to survive, what's going to die, and the range of things goes from the scientific journal to the newspaper and so forth and so on, all the way to the book. And the last time I looked at one of these surveys, the book almost got 100% expectation that it will survive, the actual book itself. People think newspapers are dead. People think scientific journals are dying. Magazines and all of that. But books, people seem to have an expectation they're going to survive. So, I'm optimistic myself about that.

But, for authors who have grown up in this culture where success is defined in millions, right, best selling and all of that. While there are books that are successful for History Press, I think it's fair to say, we're not talking about *New York Times* bestsellers here.

A: No.

Q: And so really there's a difference between a large audience, and a right audience. How do you help authors set their expectations?

A: In terms of the audience that we're hoping to reach?

Q: Right. And what's successful. If they publish the memoir of Bill Clinton, successful is five million copies sold the first day, or whatever it was. But if you publish a book on Connecticut baseball, what's successful there?

A: I would say about 1,500 to 2,000 in the first year would be really successful for our books. We're not looking at huge print runs. We're able to go back to press very easily. There's no need to overprint, and because we're very targeted, both with our printing, with our audience, it's a model that does work. We're not having to print 1,000 or 100,000 copies and kind of hope that a small percentage buys the book. We know exactly where they are.

Q: Right. But I've been influenced by a book that I read a few years ago called *So Many Books*, which took a look at – what it said was that reading and writing in an age of abundance. And there were so many books published these days, and so many people who want to be authors. So you hear like a number 1,500 or 2,000 copies, and you think, well that doesn't sound like much. But there's statistics that say that the average book in this country sold fewer than 500 copies in a single year. So that's three or four times the average sales. So, you're doing quite well at that point. And it's good to hear that.



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Tell us about some books that have surprised you. You kind of alluded to that. The *Hudson Valley Dutch* book on food and celebration has done well, but the *New England Cookbook* didn't do well. Tell us about some other examples, because people that will – that will help people get an idea of what works, what doesn't work.

A: Absolutely. Well, again, *Duck Hunting on Currituck Sound*, an example of a book that might be a surprise for a lot of people, was not a surprise for us. We have this book *Under the Clock, the Story of Miller and Rhoads*. This is about a dried goods store that eventually became a very important department store in, I believe, Richmond. And it – I'm not sure when it closed, I think probably recently. And there's just been a lot of sentimental attachment to that store. This book has done exceptionally well. We didn't really - we weren't really expecting it, because we always feel like if a landmark is no longer in use, is it realistic to bank on nostalgia? Well, it is, because so many people have fond memories of this.

Q: Right, right. There's so much – there's associations wrapped up in perhaps going shopping with mom and dad, or being there for a special occasion or whatever it is.

Well, I'm holding in my hand here, *Duck Hunting on Currituck Sound*, *Tales from a Native Gunner*, and I can't even imagine going duck hunting. But nevertheless, I think what I imagine is that any activity that like this, the stories are what count.

A: Absolutely.

Q: People's sense of adventure, probably that goes with it. And are there duck hunting communities elsewhere in the country? Or is this specifically to this area here in, is it North Carolina, I guess?

A: Well, I will say there is, as far as I know, in my territory, there are not large duck hunting communities. And this book would never work here, but it works in the south. And we see books that come through our southern commissioning team all the time, and we think, my God, are – I can't believe that this book is a possibility, but it really is. And it's really – it's all about the regional audience. So *Maple Sugaring in Vermont* is an example of a book that probably would only work in Vermont. And is inconceivable in the south.

Q: Well, your office is in Salem, and I visited it, it's right downtown. And so probably every October you're surrounded by all the festivities, if I can call it that, that go with being in Salem. And you mentioned to me kind of a compare and contrast between two titles. And in fact, they kind of relate to Salem, and how



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people tell the stories of that. There was a title you had called *Murder and Mayhem*, and there was something else about *Wicked*.

A: Yes.

Q: One worked, one didn't, and why not?

A: Well, so we have a *Murder and Mayhem* series, we also have a *Wicked* series. What's interesting is that the *Wicked* series does very, very well. It's essentially the same subject, as far as I'm concerned. But, the *Wicked* books are – have an entirely different cover treatment, and it's just remarkable how cover treatment can influence sales. More so than content. And so the cover treatment in our *Wicked* books is very quirky, it's colorful, it's not threatening, it sells very well in gift stores. It sells well in independent book stores, and in chain bookstores. And so it really works on many – in many retail settings.

Whereas our *Murder and Mayhem* books, if you have one splash of red across the cover, and the phrase *Murder and Mayhem*, it's an entirely different ballgame. Gift stores, they don't want to sell the book. And a Hallmark store is not comfortable with that. If you're doing a book on the Cape, and you've got a lot of kind of gifty, touristy sales channels, they're just not going to be able to move copies the way they could if you just made it seem like being wicked was really actually kind of fun and cute.

Q: Right, I was thinking that. That there's a fun element. And that's certainly what goes along with Salem. The people who come to Salem in October are there for the fun, most of them anyway. There might be a few, and you might have seen them past by your office window who are there for serious reason, more to do with mayhem. But I think most people are there for the fun, and that might be a good lesson there. If you've got a title, or a subject that really kind of gets people going and brings a smile to their face, that's potentially more successful than one that might make them frown.

We've been talking with Saunders Robinson here at the Boston University Bookstore, for a program for the National Writer's Union. And I want to just sum up something here, and that is you know, the connection these days between the web and book publishing is stronger than ever. And showing off your expertise is perhaps easier than ever, because you don't necessarily have to show published works. But if you've put together a blog, and really have devoted yourself to that blog on a subject, whether it might be a certain department store, or a certain regional style of cooking, or anything like that, you can pretty much on your own



create that bona fides that will convince History Press, at least, that this is a worthwhile topic.

A: It is possible. Certainly, I mean, if you're very active on your blog, then you're engaged in writing in some way. And if you've got a blog about all things Connecticut, then we're certainly interested in talking to you. I did speak with some of my editors to find out what their experience had been as far as making – actually finding and contracting writers who have very active blogs. And while I will say that obviously bloggers are very engaged in updating their blog, some of my editors did say that because they were so involved in their blog, they really didn't – they didn't think they had any time to devote to book projects, which I thought was kind of surprising.

But I think that it can go either way. If you're obsessed with your blog, you may not have time for putting together a more serious book. But, if you're really active, and are already generating the material, it can be a really great way of promoting your book and engaging the rest of your community and any of your kind of readers that are – will probably become a built in audience.

Q: I have to say, that brings a smile for two reasons. One, I just try to imagine a blogger who's been so obsessed with their work that they couldn't be convinced to write a book. Because you would think would be a relief to them. But then I was also imaging maybe 25 years from now, or 50 years from now, you'll be publishing – History Press will be publishing books that will take a nostalgic look back at the blogs of the early days of the 21st century. That will be fun to see.

Saunders Robinson, who is the Senior Commissioning Editor and Northeast Publisher for the History Press, based in Salem, Massachusetts, thank you very much for chatting with us.

A: Thank you so much.

Q: And thank you to everyone in the audience listening. And on behalf of the National Writer's Union, the Steering Committee at the Boston Chapter, and as well, for Beyond the Book, podcast series of the non-profit Copyright Clearance Center, this is Chris Kenneally. And thank you very much for listening.

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