



Beyond the Book®



The Art of Column Writing with Suzette Standring

OPERATOR: Welcome and thank you for standing by. At this time, all participants are in a listen-only mode. During the question and answer session, please press star, one to ask a question. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. Now we'll turn the meeting over to Chris Kenneally. You may begin.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you very much, operator, and welcome, everyone, to another edition of Beyond the Book. We really appreciate you joining us for what we think will be a very informative program on the art of column writing. It's to celebrate the publication of a book by Suzette Standring, who is a past president of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, and she has managed to get contributions from a host of columnists giving us their insights and their experiences on column writing and some suggestions on how to make your own writing in your own columns even stronger.

We'll have some special guests to address particular aspects of all of that, so I think you'll be – you'll find the program a very informative one.

We will make you a promise. We said we would take an hour, and we will take no more than that. We really respect everybody's time and appreciate how busy everybody is.

We'll do a couple of things first. We will interview Suzette. We'll bring the special guests in, and as the operator said, we will give you an opportunity to ask questions. You can do that by pressing star, one on your phone. If you would like to e-mail a question, you can do so directly to me. I've got my e-mail right here in front of me. E-mail me at [beyondthebook](mailto:beyondthebook@copyright.com). It's all one word. [Beyondthebook@copyright.com](mailto:beyondthebook@copyright.com).

These programs are brought to you and everyone in authorland, if you will, by the nonprofit Copyright Clearance Center where I serve as director of author relations. And again, very pleased to have everybody with us.

I want to welcome now Suzette Standring. Hello, Suzette.

STANDRING: Hi. It's wonderful to be here.

KENNEALLY: Thank you for joining us and congratulations on the book, which is called *The Art of Column Writing*. It is published by Marion Street Press, who you can find all about at marionstreetpress.com. They specialize in books on a whole host of subjects about the writing craft. In fact, some of the titles are rather intriguing. There's something called *Life on the Death Beat: A Handbook for Obituary Writers*.

Happily, we're not on the death beat today. We're on a much more lively topic, and that is column writing. Columnists are often really the reason why people buy newspapers, Suzette. They really follow their columnists. They love their columnists. Sometimes they even hate their columnists. But it's a good reason for reading the paper on a daily basis.

And so what you're doing here is offering advice to people who are just beginning or even thinking about beginning, as well as reinforcing some lessons that experienced columnists may have learned along the way. And you practice what you preach. You're a columnist yourself.

STANDRING: Yes.

KENNEALLY: Let's tell people a little bit about you. You're a syndicated columnist with the GateHouse News Service. You write a twice-a-month spiritual life column for the *Patriot Ledger*, which is published in Quincy, Massachusetts, for eastern Massachusetts. Your work also appears in the *Boston Globe*. You do some speaking. This is your first book.

And I guess why don't we start really at the beginning and ask you about at sort of a 30,000 foot level as to what you think makes for success in column writing. There's a kind of yin-yang, I think, that you feel is important.

STANDRING: Well, there are so many different types of columns and I think that when I started to write the book, I realized that so many people have experiences or opinions or skills that can be parlayed into columns, and I think that if you were to take, for instance, the lifestyle column where people talk about their own personal experiences, I found that the aspect of universal resonance is really important.

So often when people write about their personal experiences, they fail to give the reader – engage the reader in a way that they see themselves in the piece. And I think that those kind of things really make for an excellent column, when you're writing not just about yourself, but you're evoking the emotions of the reader.

KENNEALLY: Right. It's a kind of a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God-go-I, if you will, because the experience or the insight or even when they're relating someone else's story, it has to be something that they can latch onto.

STANDRING: That's right, because for example, if you're going to parachute out of a plane at the age of 60, few people are going to follow suit, but what they will relate to is that sense of adventure or the fear or the curiosity or the joy. Those are the kind of things that will compel the reader to stay with you in that story.

KENNEALLY: And yet, there are skills of the journalist that are essential. I know you've told me that while it's important to be personal, you also feel it's very important to be factual as well.

STANDRING: Yes. And this is something that I think people don't realize. Because column writing is the only form of journalism that allows the individuality of a person to shape the message and the self-portrait, I think that generally, readers make the mistake of thinking that it's OK to embellish or exaggerate or just that it's not completely accurate.

And the principles of journalism – the who, what, when, where, how, why – they do apply in column writing and it's very important that even though you are writing about something personal, whether it's about yourself or a story about somebody else, that it is completely truthful and accurate.

KENNEALLY: Well, absolutely. And it's interesting. Column writing is more like storytelling than almost anything else in the newspaper, and there's the temptation, I imagine – and certainly there have been cases where certain columnists and others have been caught at this, as you say, of embellishing or creating characters or perhaps combining several people into one and trying to make – what do they call it? – a composite figure.

And today, with bloggers and just the Web allowing everybody to kind of catch this so much more easily than ever, it's something to really steer away from.

STANDRING: Well, that's right. And to have a platform and to have a readership that is loyal to you is really a sacred trust, and I think that professional columnists understand this and they don't take advantage in any way of –

It's surprising. I remember there was a situation where a novice columnist didn't think he was doing anything wrong when he was writing about an abortion rally in which he wasn't there but he wrote it in the first person because his friend had told him about it. His friend had an uncanny ear for dialogue. His friend was so accurate and truthful. But you can't write about things in the first person if you were not there.

KENNEALLY: Right. You still need to respect those pretty basic principles.

And in the book, which covers a whole range of subjects. I'm just looking at the table of contents here. We have everything from the Big Bad Blank Screen, which is tips from a variety of people and how they face the blank page or the blank screen. There's Working with Editors. There's the Elements of a Pulitzer Prize-Winning Column, which we're going to talk with someone who's been a Pulitzer Prize judge in a just a moment to learn about that.

And you also look at specialty columns. It's interesting to me that you qualify in two of these categories. You write a humor column as well as this column on the spiritual life. How difficult is it for you, and perhaps can you tell us what others have told you, in going back and forth there. Perhaps it's almost like mutually exclusive. Church or services or whatever seem like very serious places to be, and laughing out loud is something rare enough. But yet perhaps there is some crossover. Talk about that.

STANDRING: It's funny. I started out as a humor columnist and there was a time when I didn't think I could write any other column but humor, and I kind of fell into religion writing. And like any kind of column writing, the writer is going to choose her point of view. And there were many ways I could approach religion writing, and I decided that from my particular perspective, it was going to be from the viewpoint of the inspired observer.

And you're right. There are times when writing religion and then switching to humor can be kind of crazy at times, but what I find – I think that when writing from the viewpoint of the inspired observer about people or myself at times, when they credit faith with getting them through seemingly impossible circumstances, and again, when you talk about universal resonance, there's always that very comical aspect of our flawed humanity. That comes up quite often.

And so, I don't really think that humor and religion is mutually exclusive at all. In fact, if there was more of that in the world, maybe we wouldn't have all the problems we have.

KENNEALLY: Right. Maybe humor and humility go hand in hand.

STANDRING: That's true.

KENNEALLY: You have a number of contributors here whose names are all but household words, Dave Barry, Arianna Huffington. Tell us about some of the significant contributors to the book and some of the special advice that they've offered.

STANDRING: For instance, Dave Barry. He was featured in the humor section. The beautiful thing about Dave Barry is that he makes humor seem so effortless, when

in fact, he will tell you that when he crafts an opening paragraph, it could take two hours and that he works very hard on the jokes and he builds on the jokes.

One of the interesting things that he said was that the majority of humor writers are very – they can be amusing but they're not laugh-out-loud funny. And I think that humor is probably one of the most competitive slots to get into into a newspaper. So those really have to be standouts.

KENNEALLY: That's a good point. Column writing today. You've been president of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists, which if anyone is listening, they can check out and learn more about at columnists.com.

What's the state of column writing today as a business, as an opportunity for writers? Are the opportunities good? Is column writing suffering from the same ills that the newspaper business is? Tell us a bit about that.

STANDRING: I'm sure there are people here on this panel who could address it even more in depth than myself, but I will say that it is difficult to break into a newspaper. First of all, I think it's very difficult to make a great living being a writer. Most people who do it do it because of the passion they have for writing.

And while newspaper space is shrinking, the gigantic maw for content on the Internet is just getting bigger and bigger. In that chapter that I wrote about syndication, Rick Newcombe, who's the president of Creators Syndicate, he was saying that the columnists in his stable are no longer just providing content for newspapers. There's all sorts of the new media forms, iPod, podcasts, all that kind of stuff. So there's like new media that's creating a gigantic call for content.

Now, whether or not it's going to be wildly financially successful for writers, I don't know. But certainly the focus of my book is stellar writing. How do you get your column – how to get your writing to become outstanding to editors and to syndicates and to follow the format of doing vivid storytelling in say, 600 words, which really is quite a specialized craft.

KENNEALLY: Quite a task indeed. And I would think that for people today who are thinking about trying to take their writing into the column niche, if you will, they should be aware of what editors and perhaps people at syndication houses are going to be looking for when they submit their work.

They're going to go online, they're going to do a Google search. They're probably going to want to check out the writer's individual website and so really, to your point about new media, it's not today enough to just write the column. You really need to be across a variety of different content platforms, if you will, and to make sure that all of your work fits together and all of it shows you off to the best advantage.

So as a tip for people, think about if you're writing the columns, I suppose, to create that website. Be sure everything's in the right place and be sure it shows you off to best advantage, because you will be judged by that by editors and others.

And maybe that makes a good segue to introduce a special guest that we have, Keith Woods. Keith, welcome to *Beyond the Book*.

WOODS: Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Keith is the dean of faculty for the Poynter Institute, which if you're not familiar with, you should check out at Poynter – P-O-Y-N-T-E-R -- .org down in Florida. It's a training ground for journalists. He has been a two-time Pulitzer journalist and was chair of the column writing panel in particular. At Poynter, Keith teaches writing, reporting, editing, column writing, coverage of race relations, ethics and diversity.

And his contribution to Suzette's book is based on a workshop that he conducted for the NSNC at a conference in New Orleans. And that was a bit of a homecoming for you, I would imagine, Keith, because you were a sports writer and an editorial writer for the *Times Picayune* there.

WOODS: I was.

KENNEALLY: And so you kind of have walked the walk and talked the talk, but especially, you've gone through the really arduous task of judging the contributions, the candidates for the Pulitzer, that have been nominated by their editors and by their colleagues around the country. And every year, that can mean something like 100 or more columnists that you have to review, and presumably, they each have multiple contributions there.

WOODS: Right. And just for the record, Pulitzer juror, not journalist. I didn't quite make it to Pulitzer journalist.

KENNEALLY: Exactly. Pulitzer jurist. OK. I won't say it again. Thank you for correcting me on that. So which means you have been a judge for all of that.

WOODS: Right.

KENNEALLY: So you've had the responsibility of choosing who is the year's best columnist, and along the way, you and your fellow jurists have contemplated what are the elements of excellence and what are some of the things that immediately tip you off that this is not going to be this year's Pulitzer.

And I'd like to talk to you about a couple of them. Some of them are, I suppose, obvious enough. Having a strong voice, informing and enlightening, which I

think is a kind of echo of what Suzette was saying about the personal and the factual. But there was one here that particularly intrigued me, and that is this notion of offering a clear arc. Can you tell me what you mean by that? And that, of course, is A-R-C, for those who can't see what I'm reading.

WOODS: Well, it's having a direction in the column that's evident to the reader, a beginning, middle and end, a clear pattern in the writing. It's a structural issue. It's less artful than it is structural. It's all about understanding that when we're writing opinion, when we're writing our opinion, we're still communicating some very basic – in some very basic ways with people.

KENNEALLY: And I would imagine that given the short form, right, the 600 words more or less that we're talking about here, you have to pay even more attention to it. You don't have the opportunity to wander.

WOODS: Sure. And you don't want to have to get them – have the reader reading an elaborately laid-out idea that rushes to the conclusion at the end and because now you're at word 500, you have to hurry with your point. And we squeeze middle and end at the bottom, and you were still on the beginning until then.

KENNEALLY: So it needs some rhythm. The timing is important.

WOODS: Right.

KENNEALLY: There's another point here that was something you said that you and your other jurists were having a bit of discussion about. And that is the need to be fair even when you're trying to be critical. Talk about that.

WOODS: It's an ethical issue at its core and it's a recognition that simply because you've been handed the microphone and the podium, you don't suspend some of the basic notions of fairness in presentation. And in fact, in some ways, because you've been handed the microphone and the podium, it becomes that much more important to represent it.

And as I've said to columnists, I'm not saying here a kind of tit-for-tat kind of writing in which every time you say something bad, you have to say something nice. What I am saying is that if you imply, if you infer, if you leave a trail that leads to a conclusion that you can't prove, those things are not fair, and just because it's your opinion that I'm a bozo, there is a level of proof that has to come along with it, or at least some sense of fairness in the presentation of that that still falls to the writer.

I've gotten pushback from columnists on that point.

KENNEALLY: You might almost think of it, if I can offer a suggestion, as the reader feeling that whether or not they agree with you, they feel that your judgment is

one that is reasonable. You've come at your conclusion on the basis of something that they can understand and that is reasonable, whether or not they agree or disagree with you.

WOODS: Yes. It's a recognition of what's actually happening in the communication you're having between yourself and this reader.

And frankly, what I don't think newspapers and journalists in general appreciate well enough is that if at any point you are unfair to him, I can extrapolate from that, but at one point, you may become unfair to me. And when it starts looking like bludgeoning, when it starts looking like that level of unfairness, that you may in fact gain some support from some people who don't mind joining the mob, but for a lot of other people, it is a you're-coming-for-them-today-and-tomorrow-you'll-come-for-me kind of a quality to it.

And really, as you said, the important thing to remember is that you want people to say, wow, he really nailed that guy and he was fair.

KENNEALLY: You also look at what some of the traits in column writing were that immediately turned you all off. And again, there's some obvious things here worth repeating, because everybody needs to be reminded that not every word he or she writes is fascinating and captivating, because many of the columns were just plain boring or dull or too full of clichés.

But again, a couple of things intrigued me on this list here. The notion that sometimes the columnist is his or her own number one fan and that's just a bit too obvious.

WOODS: A lot of times what you would find in these columns is a sentence that begins, as I have said before. Or, as I said in my July column. And I was amazed in some cases how often we found people quoting themselves, and it was an annoyance. It was kind of a circle of information that began and ended at the writer's door.

KENNEALLY: And there's an assumption there that everybody reading the paper has been following this from word one by the columnist.

The other one that's striking, and Suzette touched upon it briefly, but because it's so obvious, I just have to ask you about, and that is that in an opinion column, there's no opinion there. That seems to be obvious, but apparently, it happens.

WOODS: Yes. My roots are in sports writing, where I saw this a lot. But once again, these points were derived from the judging of this very specific contest and we saw these kind of things a lot.

What you find is what columnists do is write feature stories and then stick their mug on top of it and then call it a column. That may, in fact, be the deal that they have with their readers, but as a column, as a reader of a columnist or an opinion piece, I'm at some point asking the question, why are you telling me this. Why are you telling me this? I don't necessarily want to know the be-all, end-all mountaintop kind of response. I just want to know why you are telling me this.

KENNEALLY: And that's the difference between you the writer as a columnist and you the writer as a journalist.

WOODS: Right.

KENNEALLY: Because it matters. And I have to say frankly, we've all been – I was a journalist myself for many, many years, and to be frank, hardly anybody out there except other journalists notices the byline. But you notice the byline, you know the byline in a column. As I mentioned at the top of this, you're often buying the paper because Barnicle is in it or because Pete Hamill is in it or Dave Barry is in it. You're buying it for that person's voice and their opinion and you very rarely buy it because a certain police writer is in there. Does that seem fair?

WOODS: Yes. Although, no offense to police writers.

KENNEALLY: No, absolutely not. Or we could have said sports writers or anything like that. Absolutely.

WOODS: But the thing is that the voice you're looking for in the column, again, the reason that you're engaging, is to get some perspective on something bent through the prism of this particular writer, because something about the way that they present information is interesting to you. And when you leave people hanging, then it's like having someone walk up to you and tell you a parable and then walk away, and you're sitting there puzzling, trying to get to the moral of the story, when it wouldn't have taken much for the columnist to turn the corner.

I think a good writing discipline is to simply write the sentence, the reason I am telling you this, at some point. I don't mean putting that in print, but forcing yourself to finish that sentence at some point.

As a writer, I often found that I didn't know the answer to that until well into the writing of the piece. I knew it was important to be writing about this and I knew that there was something I had to say, but I was going to discover it while I wrote. But at some point in the writing, you have to be able to stop and answer that question.

KENNEALLY: That's a really good point. I like that a lot and I'll try to use that myself.

Let me turn now to somebody who does have to sort of answer that question every time he writes. Joining us is Ray Hanania. Ray, welcome to Beyond the Book.

HANANIA: How are you?

KENNEALLY: I'm just fine. How are you?

HANANIA: I'm doing good. I'm a journalist, a comedian, a Palestinian, and an Arab Christian whose wife is Jewish, and people wonder why I have no friends.

KENNEALLY: Well, that covers a lot of ground, a lot of sins, if you will. Ray, you have done a lot, as you say. In your time, you have been distributed by Creative Syndicate. You're now doing some self-syndication. You were named Best National Ethnic Columnist a couple years back by New America Media. You've won several awards from the Chicago Headline Club, which is the Chicago area's journalism club, a professional organization. And you've got a number of books out there including one with the very provocative title, *I'm Glad I Look Like a Terrorist: Growing up Arab in America*.

Your contribution to Suzette's book, *The Art of Column Writing*, looks at your experiences moving from being a journalist to the work you do in comedy and where the overlap is in the column. Tell us about that, and how did you make the first step from being a journalist to what you do today?

HANANIA: Some people think there's a difference between journalism and comedy. I'm not quite sure if there is, but I view this all as part of communication. And obviously, I recognize the importance of being a journalist, because I think journalist columnists are different from columnists who are activists and bloggers, for example.

I've been a journalist for 32 years, but I got into it as an activist because I recognized that the media, in my opinion, is very biased. They're unfair. They reflect certain institutional and racial limitations and diversity. So I got into it in the 1970s because I really wanted to change journalism.

What happened to me was I realized that journalism became a very effective way to communicate to people who just didn't like you because of your last name or where you were from or whether you look Muslim or Christian or whether you're Arab. And the more I got into journalism, the more I realized that just telling the truth and trying to be as accurate as you can makes you a much more successful activist.

And what I mean by that is, you don't have to exaggerate. If you represent something that you think is important, you don't have to be the activist just

promoting the agenda as opposed to accuracy. As a columnist, I have to be accurate. I have to be fair.

And I want to be funny and I've always used humor in my writing, but recently I became a standup comedian because there was a need for it as an Arab American in today's post-September 11 world.

KENNEALLY: And if I can sort of paraphrase your points in the essay for the book, the humor, particularly after September 11, rose out of your discomfort with the stereotypes, the assumptions, the charges that people were making toward you, and you couldn't take them seriously, almost, they were so absurd. Talk about that.

HANANIA: For example, I had a lady who came up to me and said, I can't believe you abandoned your Christian faith to become an Arab. And I looked at her and I said, oh, my God. How do you address something like that?

KENNEALLY: So absurd, it's hard to really –

HANANIA: Right. You can't respond seriously. So I just started joking with her. I had friends where I worked after September 11 who blamed me for September 11, my people. It's your people. And I'm looking at these people who were friends of mine for years.

Now, I'm used to the media beating up on Arabs. I really think the media has a problem that we're not diverse, we're not as principled as we claim we are and we're not as fair as we like to think we are. So that's part of – there is a cause in my writing, and that's to bring Arabs – to bring Arab opinion into journalism and to bring the Arab community out of activism into professional journalism.

KENNEALLY: Let me ask you this, Ray. Because of the subject matter and because of the times we live in, I would imagine that your work brings you a lot of attention just because of that, and so you probably get some friendly attaboy e-mails and I bet you get a lot of the other kind as well. What's it like to be on the receiving end? And I think people need to be prepared for that if they're going to be a columnist, to be on the receiving end of something otherwise known as hate mail, right?

HANANIA: When I was at the *Chicago Sun Times* covering City Hall – I covered City Hall 18 years almost – I would get letters, hate letters, and the editor would say, look, for every hate letter you get, that means a thousand or 10 thousand people are reading you. Once I started getting hate letters as a journalist, as an Arab American journalist, especially after September 11 where I was pegged as an Arab columnist, I would get hate letters and the editors would call me and say, listen, I think we should re-evaluate whether we should be running this column in the newspaper.

That's the kind of thing. I'm not surprised by the reaction of the readers. What I am surprised though is the response from the profession. I think there's a real resistance to put any kind of Arab American writing in our news media today. It's rare. It's much rarer than we're told.

But humor is so American. Humor is probably the most powerful form of communication out there. You can make a powerful point, especially – not just – people who hate you hate you. They're a small group. They're never going to change. But there a lot of people out there who are angry who look like they hate you. And if you make a joke, and laughter is not something you control. You just don't say, OK, I'm going to laugh. You make a good joke and they laugh. They can't control that. You've actually changed them.

KENNEALLY: Right. That's a great piece of advice, Ray. Thank you for joining us.

HANANIA: You're so welcome, and I just applaud Suzette for the book and thank her for including me in *The Art of Column Writing*.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you for joining us for the program.

And let me just mention a couple of things. This is Chris Kenneally with Beyond the Book. We're a little bit more than halfway through our chat with Suzette and some special guests. Suzette Standring is the author, editor of a book called *The Art of Column Writing* just out from Marion Street Press.

We'll take your questions in just a minute or two. If you have a question you would like to e-mail, you're welcome to do so straight to me at my desk here at beyondthebook@copyright.com. And in just a second too you'll be able to raise your hand here on our call to ask a question of any of the panelists.

But we have one more person I want to just bring in very quickly, Terri Marotta. Welcome, Terri. Terri, are you there?

MAROTTA: Yes, I'm here. Hi.

KENNEALLY: Hi. How are you?

MAROTTA: Good.

KENNEALLY: You have been writing a column, which you've self-syndicated for a number of years. It's a weekly lifestyle column that appears in papers from Maine to Florida. And you've got a book out now that talks about the journal habit and just what one can learn as a writer from that. And I wonder if you could tell us briefly what you think is a key to taking the journal writing and using it in your columns, because I imagine a lot of people who are thinking about trying to

become a columnist may be keeping notes full of ideas or observations or whatever. How do you take those bits and pieces and turn them into a column?

MAROTTA: Well, you just write on anything that you have in front of you. You write on cocktail napkins, you bring a little legal pad or whatever you can scribble on everywhere you go, because if you keep your awareness out and you keep your eyes open, there's stuff happening around you all the time. It's not about you, but that's what's good about it. You just are the camera.

KENNEALLY: Right. So when you talk about a journal, it's really an ongoing thing. You don't have to sit down every day for a half hour and write in your journal. You're saying just keep track of those thoughts.

It reminds me of I was a reporter at one point in Sarajevo and I was told a great old Bosnian proverb, and that was that a fool remembers. A wise man writes it down.

MAROTTA: Ah, ha-ha. Yeah. And if you stay home in your house writing lovely little passages in some leather-bound volume, probably you're going to run out of material pretty quickly. It'll be navel gazing, so the best advice I have is get out, go out the door and ride public transportation and sit on the park bench, eavesdrop, engage with people, look everybody in the eye, greet the stranger, give money to the poor. Open your heart and the stories will be everywhere.

KENNEALLY: That's great advice. Thank you.

Operator? Lisa, are you there?

OPERATOR: Yes, I'm here.

KENNEALLY: Why don't we see if we have some questions. I know sometimes for people who are listening, it's just very comfortable to do, but we want to get you out of your comfort zone just for a moment and see if you have a question for Suzette Standring or any of our guests on the call. If you do have a question, you just press star, one on your phone and that will raise your hand. The operator will call on you. So please, again, if you have a question for Suzette Standring, Keith Woods, Ray Hanania or Terri Marotta or anyone, or just want to offer your own experience, we look to you right now to do that for us.

So star, one on your phone. If you would prefer to e-mail your question, please do so at beyondthebook@copyright.com.

In fact, we have a question here by e-mail from a listener in Washington, and she's asking Suzette. She's saying that basically what I'm hearing, humor is one of the tougher types of columns to break into. What's the best way to break in

and how do you get the attention of newspaper writers, Kay wants to know. Is there any area that's more open to a column at the moment?

STANDRING: Well, to my fellow humor writer I will say that probably the best way to break in is to start with the smaller publications, your local newspaper, those kind of things. You have to kind of start there.

Now, as to what kind of humor, I would also suggest that humor is a great big umbrella, and so if you can narrow it down and be specific as possible as to what is your special take.

Like for instance, if you're going to be a parent. Let's say you're writing about parenting humor. Well, are you the single father whose daughters are dating? Are you the good mother who's also one hot mama? Are you the over-40 mother who started a family? The more specific you can be, the better.

KENNEALLY: Right. The more specific, the more concrete. And I suppose – right away, with those quick descriptions you just gave, it conjures up a picture and I think it probably helps to imagine what is the editor, and therefore, what's the reader going to think of me. It sounds corny in a way, but how are they going to profile me? And Ray, pardon me for that. But you know what I mean.

HANANIA: Everybody's a comedian.

KENNEALLY: Everybody's a comedian. But in a way, Ray, I hate to say it, but doesn't it help that it's pretty clear that you're coming from a very specific place? Doesn't that help you get some attention from editors and to break in, as this writer is asking us about?

HANANIA: Actually, coming from where I come from gives me great material, but in truth, I wrote for Creators for several years but I think there was a recognition that there were very few newspapers that would publish an Arab American-authored column. There are not very many and they were having a very hard time selling them.

But on the other hand, coming from where I do gives me a full range of material that only I could write about, especially with humor, because there are two kinds of humor, laughing with somebody or laughing at somebody. That's why when an African American makes jokes about being African American, it's OK, but when Don Imus makes jokes about being African American, it's not OK.

As an Arab and a Palestinian, I can make jokes about being Arab that the audience will accept. And because my wife is Jewish, I can talk about our unusual ethnic mix and the funny side of it without being offensive. Whereas someone who might not be, might say the same exact things and it's very offensive.

So context does have a really important place in terms of whether the humor is accepted for what it's really intended to do. Are you laughing at somebody or are you laughing with them? And laughing with them is good.

KENNEALLY: Right. Keith, humor columns, how do they do with the Pulitzer board?

WOODS: Well, I remember when we went and when we broke it down to the final – you have to get down to three before you send columns over to the Pulitzer board, which actually chooses the winner out of those three. And I think the fourth and fifth columns were humor columns. And I would say that that's pretty good.

When you look at the things that people were writing about that year, you had major events unfolding in the country, kind of the –

KENNEALLY: 2003 was the beginning of the war.

WOODS: You had the beginning of the war, you had still the fallout from September 11, you had some fairly heavy stuff going on in the country then, and when people brought powerful storytelling skills to those stories, they were hard to beat.

KENNEALLY: Right. Absolutely. Certainly when the competition is those kinds of almost life and death topics, it would be hard. But still interesting that humor was right up there, so it may even be that especially in dark times, we need to be able to do a little bit of laughing.

Operator, do we have anybody online who would like to ask a question?

OPERATOR: Yes, we have one from Peggy Sanders. Your line is open.

KENNEALLY: Peggy, welcome to the program Beyond the Book, and can you tell us where you're calling from?

SANDERS: I'm from South Dakota.

KENNEALLY: South Dakota.

SANDERS: And I met Suzette and Ray in Oklahoma City last March at the Will Rogers Writing Workshop.

KENNEALLY: Wonderful. What's your question and who's it for?

SANDERS: Well, for Suzette. I'd like to know how to get your book. I ordered it from Amazon six weeks ago and they're still saying it's not available.

KENNEALLY: That may mean that they're sold out. Wouldn't that be nice, Suzette?

STANDRING: Last I checked, they were in stock, so I don't know. Maybe you could give it another try or you can –

(multiple conversations; inaudible)

SANDERS: It's on order, so I'm just hoping. But I went on to win the Will Rogers writing contest.

KENNEALLY: Oh, you did?

SANDERS: Yeah.

KENNEALLY: Tell us briefly about that, and what are you writing on yourself?

SANDERS: I write agricultural humor.

KENNEALLY: Agricultural humor?

STANDRING: (inaudible) very specific.

SANDERS: I'm a farm and ranch wife.

KENNEALLY: So what is the Will Rogers – presumably it's an award for humor column writing. Of course, he was the great humorist of the 1920s and 1930s. My favorite line of his, he said once that he was not a member of any organized political party, he was a Democrat.

But what was it about your work that the jurists cited? And maybe you can tell us something about where your work appears.

SANDERS: The contest was to write in the style of Will Rogers.

KENNEALLY: Really?

SANDERS: And because I already write agricultural information, that worked very well. One of my concerns is all of the – well, I'll call them city people moving to country, not to defame being from the city, but they are very shocked at how some of the things are out in the country where we have volunteer ambulance services and volunteer fire departments and wolves actually do eat horses and there are – we do not have sanitation engineers that go around and pick up dead animals in the middle of the road. Just things like that.

KENNEALLY: So you kind of play off of that, the contrast between the city experience and the country experience.

SANDERS: Right. And my point is not just to say how silly the city people are, but to educate and to entertain, but also to bring both sides together because the country people need to learn from the city people.

We had a gal here from New York City and she wanted to know why our rural fire department trucks did not have ladders. Well, we mostly fight brush fires, and we would have never thought to consider why we needed a ladder truck.

KENNEALLY: Right. And probably, that's why they call them ranch houses. They're one level because you've got all that room to build.

Let me ask you, Suzette. You have a whole section on specialty columns, and there's a niche that would be an interesting one to think about, agriculture columnist. What are some of the other niches out there that people may not really be aware of that might not be obvious that you cover in the book?

STANDRING: Almost any kind of interest a person has, there's somebody else who shares that and the more popular things, as we know, are parenting and gardening, but there's a woman in the NSNC who did a very successful column on being the single woman and a dog lover. And Frank Kaiser does a very successful suddenlysenior.com where he addresses with humor and nostalgia and education, concerns specific to the over-50 age demographic.

So it could be really anything. And I think that the more specific, you sometimes have the advantage of being much more marketable.

KENNEALLY: Right. Technology is an area that is covered in the book here, too, and I would think certainly we live in an age of information technology and if you have an expertise on technology, I would think that that would be attractive to editors and would break you out of the kind of lifestyle confines, if you will, because you'd be able to submit the work to the business editor, to various other departments that might be more in a need of a column than different sections of the paper, the metro section of the paper or the living section, which already have their complement of columnists.

STANDRING: Exactly. And recently, I met a woman by the name of Sandy Ojeda who just launched an education column because she'd been a teacher all her life. And now she does this Dear Teacher column where it's questions and answers.

KENNEALLY: That's a great idea.

STANDRING: So those are the kind of columns, also, that can be very informative, the question and answer format.

KENNEALLY: Can I ask you, Suzette first, and if anybody else on the call wants to throw in an observation or two, and that is about syndication. Self-syndicating is

perhaps easier than ever, given the Internet, but will syndicates like Creators, Ray, or the others that are out there, which are United Features and a few of the others, are they interested in unminted columnists or do you have to already have a kind of successful column to be picked up by a syndicate?

STANDRING: Are you asking me?

KENNEALLY: Yes, Suzette first, but if the others on the call have any observations, that would be great, too.

STANDRING: In Creators Syndicate, if you were to just go onto their website, you probably would be one of the very, very few out of thousands to ever get picked up. Basically, Creators, for example, this is what they would be specifically looking for. Someone who could provide information not found from another source, great writing, brilliant analysis, a proven readership, i.e., the bestselling author or a newspaper's most popular columnist, or a big name.

I've been given to understand from interviewing a couple of people at syndicates that they – nowadays, they don't really want to invest in someone untried, unproven. They are looking exactly for those kind of things.

KENNEALLY: Ray, you moved from Creators to syndicating your own work. Tell us about that experience.

HANANIA: First of all, Rich Newcombe was a great guy. What he saw was an unusual new voice and he reached out to me and he said, Ray, I saw that your column is being picked up by a small, medium-sized paper north of Chicago. Would you be interested in syndicating? I remember I signed this 10-year contract going, oh, my God. Do I really want to lock myself in for 10 years? Two years into it, he said the demand for Arab columns is very low.

What he did was so nice. He said, look, here are the papers that are interested. He allowed me to self-syndicate.

But I don't think it's easy for anybody just to syndicate. I think you have to establish a track record. You have to explain why your voice is different, especially with humor, because there are –

And I see this with standup comedy. There are so many people out there doing standup comedy that are really cookie cutters of things that have already been done. The hardest challenge, I think – and I think this is true in some aspects in journalism. How do you take something that has been done a million times and make it look fresh and new and add a new perspective to it?

For me, it was easy, being one of the few Arab American journalists in the country. I don't consider myself the best comedian or even the best journalist.

But because of what I am and what I write about, I think it compensates a little bit for that in terms of what my interest is.

So it is very hard to break into syndication. But self-syndication, thanks to the Internet, is very successful. My entire living today is based on freelancing columns, and I can't believe I actually make a living from selling columns, and from doing standup comedy.

KENNEALLY: That's just great. And nice for people to hear because a lot of what you hear about the business today is sadly on a downbeat note.

Operator, do we have any other calls? Questions, rather, from the callers?

OPERATOR: Yes, we do have one from Bob Haut (sp?). Your line is open.

KENNEALLY: Welcome, Bob. How are you?

HAUT: I'm just fine, Chris. I don't have a question, but I have a comment about Suzette's book.

KENNEALLY: All right. Tell us where you're calling from.

HAUT: I'm calling from Madison, Virginia.

KENNEALLY: Madison, Virginia.

HAUT: Yeah, the beautiful Blue Ridge country.

KENNEALLY: It sounds like it. Great. What's your question for Suzette?

HAUT: I just want to say I'm an old timer. I've been writing a newspaper column now for over 18 years, and yet I found in Suzette's book a number of things that I didn't know and I just think – one of the chapters that I learned part of it from was yours, Chris, the one on copyright.

KENNEALLY: Thank you.

HAUT: I've always been a little confused about copyright and trademark, and I think that's especially important to writers who are not salaried, who are associated with a particular newspaper. Freelancers, as just indicated, some people say, well, I'm an independent writer, which I think really means that they're not dependent on writing for income.

But it's very helpful to know some of the nuts and bolts of writing. You're either a writer or you're not and you can learn an awful lot from Suzette's book about writing and all the parts that go with the composition of your column. But if

you're on your own, if you're not working as a staff person on a newspaper, then it's important to also have some guidance on how to conduct your own business.

KENNEALLY: I think that's a really good point and frankly, that's the point of so much of what we do here at Beyond the Book. We're not trying to tell you all that much about the craft per se, but about the business, and to be successful as anyone in the publishing world today, whether you're a writer or creator of any kind or editor or whatever, you really do need to understand the business circumstances we live in. So answering questions about syndication, about copyright, who owns what and what you can do with it and where, these are all things that I would absolutely agree with you, Bob, are essential for everybody to know about and to understand as best they can. So thank you for that call.

We have just about time for one more call, one more question if there is one, operator.

OPERATOR: We have no further questions. Again, to ask a question, press star, one.

KENNEALLY: We'll see if anybody does want to raise their hand for a last question. We've had a number come in on e-mails. You can continue to e-mail even after the call at beyondthebook@copyright.com and we'll address the questions there.

Just to remind you that the program you're listening to, Beyond the Book, will be available for downloading as a podcast. We currently have that scheduled for release on Monday, February, 18, and as a very special companion podcast to that program, the following week we are going to do an excerpt from a conference that we organized for the National Society of Newspaper Columnists. We had the agent Noah Lukeman talking about how columnists can turn their work into books and he had some surprising and counterintuitive advice on that, and that special program excerpted from a full-length program will be available on February 25.

So unless there are any more further questions, operator?

OPERATOR: We have no further questions.

KENNEALLY: Great. Well, we're very glad to have had everybody on the call. I want to thank Suzette Standring, the author of *The Art of Column Writing* from Marion Street Press. Thank you very much for joining us today, Suzette.

STANDRING: Thank you. It's been wonderful.

KENNEALLY: And Keith Woods from the Poynter Institute who has had the experience of being a judge for the Pulitzer in column writing and other topics. Thank you, Keith, for joining us.

WOODS: My pleasure.

KENNEALLY: Ray Hanania coming to us from Chicago today. His work is visible at hanania.com. That's H-A-N-A-N-I-A .com. Ray, thank you very much for sharing your insights with us.

HANANIA: You're welcome. Thank you all very much. I appreciate it.

KENNEALLY: And likewise, thank you Terri Marotta, who is the author of a book called *Still Following the Trail of Breadcrumbs*, which addresses the whole topic of not kicking the journaling habit but really kick-starting the journaling habit and using your journal as a way to gather your ideas for all kinds of stories. Terri, thank you for joining us.

MAROTTA: Oh, it was a pleasure. Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And on that note, I want to wish everybody a very good day and be sure, if you will, to check us out at beyondthebook.com. You can subscribe to the podcast by e-mail or you can do so for free at iTunes. Again, it's www.beyondthebook.com. My name is Chris Kenneally for Copyright Clearance Center. Thank you very much for joining us.

END OF CONFERENCE