



WEBSTER BULL

F: Well, I think we're ready to get started.

(overlapping conversations; inaudible)

F: Well, first I just want to say welcome everyone to Barnes & Noble at Boston University. We're very pleased that you all came out tonight. We're also very happy to have the National Writer's meeting here with (inaudible) from Commonwealth Editions. It's a great honor. So I just want to say thanks again to everyone I've worked with on getting this organized, and welcome. And now I'm going to turn it over to Chris and we'll get started. So thanks. And enjoy.

CK: Well, I'll just say welcome and introduce myself. My name is Chris Kenneally. I'm on the steering committee for the Boston chapter of the National Writers Union. I'm pleased to welcome you (inaudible) chapter. I should declare an interest right away, which is that I know this man reasonably well, Webster Bull. He published my book (inaudible). But that having been said, he didn't publish it instantly. I had to talk him into it. I got to know him a little bit by doing that.

And when we got together to do what I like to call witness preparation, (inaudible) talked about, we really focused on the business side. I think that what Webster can offer this audience is some insight into book publishing in 2007, not just about what makes for an interesting book. We all have our opinions on that. But he has some real expertise by wearing out a lot of shoe leather on actually what makes a book sell. And for any author, that's a really critical thing.

So we'll have a dialogue for about a half an hour. And after that, any questions that you have, you're that welcome. And we are recording this – I'll tell you more about it later. But with any luck if we get the recording done well, we'll be able to Podcast it shortly.

So Webster, let's start with (inaudible), and then maybe we can work to an upbeat ending. The book publishing business really isn't for the faint of heart at all. And everything you read (inaudible) it's really impossible to make money. I was reading a piece by Chris Anderson, the author of *The Long Tail*. He talked about

the very small percentage of books that actually make money. Now, I suppose making money for Commonwealth Editions is a bit different than making money for Random House. But nevertheless, making money is what you both have in common. Given all of that, how do you face the challenge as a publisher and an editor in a world where (inaudible) thing to do?

WB: Well, first of all, thank you all for coming out on this cold February night. And book publishing is something that I came to rather late in life. After the age of 45, I founded Commonwealth Editions. It's been in business for nine years now. I'm entirely self-taught as a publisher, so I don't bring you the wisdom of years in the New York trenches. We literally began selling books out of the back of our car, my wife and I.

But speaking to the difficulty of being a publisher in this environment, I like to say that there's good news and bad news about book publishing. The good news is that there are no barriers to entry. Anyone can get into the business. The bad news is there are no barriers to entry. Anyone can get into the business. And if you've every had the experience, as I have, of going to the National Book Show, as I call it, or BEA, or Book Expo America, as a publisher, like us, with a little ten-by-ten foot booth with our 100 titles hopefully displayed face-out. And then you walk the aisles. And then walk more aisles. And then walk more aisles. And see literally hundreds of thousands of books competing with our 100 books. I think there are something like 300,000 English-language books published in each new year, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, England. That's a lot of competition for any publisher. And so it is a very difficult business.

CK: Can I just add, I believe the number is (inaudible) for the whole world, 200,000 in the United States. And to put it all in perspective, some numbers that, again, Chris Anderson from *The Long Tail* published in *Publishers Weekly* some time ago. This goes back to 2004, so that means the situation has only gotten worse, right? Nielsen, which operates BookScan, which tracks book sales across the country in this store and every other store – tracks about 1.2 million books. Or tracked 1.2 million in 2004. 950,000 – in other words, just under 80% of those books – we'll make this an interactive session – sold fewer than how many copies? 80% sold fewer than how many copies?

F: 5000.

M: Ten.

CK: Fewer than ten? Well, it's somewhere between ten and 5000.

F: 1000.

F: Fewer than 7000.

CK: It's fewer than three figures. It's fewer 99 copies. So 80% of the books that are tracked by BookScan sold fewer than 100 copies. Another 200,000 – now we're up to 95% of all books – sold fewer than 1000 copies. And only 25,000 – that's about 2% of total sales – 25,000 titles, now – sold more than 5000 copies.

WB: If I may just interject, I think of 3000 as our break-even number.

CK: Well, I was going to ask you, yes. When you talk about what's the sweet spot for Commonwealth Editions, you start with that number, 3000 copies. Go into that for people, what does that mean, really, and how do you get to 3000 copies?

WB: Well, of course there are economics of printing, but you have to begin with all the work that happens before the book is printed, which of course is editorial to begin with. And whether I'm paying myself and feeding my family, or paying freelancers, I'm paying someone to edit the book and copyedit the book, to design the cover hopefully in a very, very appealing way, to design the interior layout – the interior, to proofread that interior. To index it, usually, if it's a text that needs to be indexed. And only then to prepare the files and send it out to print.

The prepress costs – that is, before you even print the books – for such as us, which is a very small company, can run anywhere from \$3000 to \$15,000. And you have to spread that cost over your first printing.

CK: And you haven't even talked about the advance (inaudible).

WB: That's right. And I understand that the people here and authors everywhere want and deserve to be paid. It's very difficult to pay anyone – for a small, regional publisher, certainly – but for any publisher.

CK: I think of an event – I went to a writer's event (inaudible), I was telling you about this, where the first session of a week (inaudible) program was how to make six figures as an author. So I showed up and I thought that'd be a great thing to go to. I can just leave after that. And the formula was have a great idea and get lucky.

WB: What did they charge for that seminar?

CK: It was an expensive seminar for a weekend. And I thought, well, that's good except that that's like saying, OK, I'll get struck by lightning this year, and I hope I can struck by lightning every year for the next, I don't know, 30, 40 years, whatever a career is. How do you – I really want to stick to this point – how do you face that? You've got, tell us, how many titles in the list, how many titles come out every year? Some of them you have a real strong feeling will do very well. Some of them you don't know. Some of them you cross your fingers, I suppose.

WB: Well, first of all we began in 1998 with one book. It was a book about the area that we live in, the North Shore of Boston. It was called *The North Shore*. And for the next three years we published books only about the North Shore. In fact we styled ourselves the publisher of Boston's North Shore. Which is called being a big fish in a very small pond.

CK: Niche publishing.

WB: Niche – very niche. We've expanded. We now do approximately 20 books a year. We have about 100 to 110 active titles in print. And we also distribute now the books of other New England regional publishers. So we have about 150 books in our catalogue.

CK: Those are smaller publishers who you roll up into your titles?

WB: One of the truly difficult things about either being an author or publishing – and I think by the time we're done tonight, we'll understand that you as authors really ought to think of yourself not as somehow antagonistic to publishers, but as potentially in partnership with the publisher – what was I saying? I'm sorry, I lost my thread.

CK: The whole idea of the partnership is really about the notion that any book project is ultimately a business project, right?

WB: Well, it is a business project. And I guess what I want to get to is to understand that we as the publisher can only be successful if we understand exactly what we need to be publishing each year, each season. We need to stick to a specific kind of book. And you as authors need to understand what particular kind of book it is that you're publishing – or writing – and understand what publishers will be able to appreciate that and to compensate you appropriately for that.

We get – probably half the proposals that we get don't belong in our publishing house. But the author sees our books on the shelf, and the books look good. And they think I'd like to be published by that publishing house. But they then send us novels or they send us poetry or they send us cookbooks or they send us children's books, which, interestingly enough, even though we have a best-selling "children's series," we're not really a children's publisher. So you need to understand what niche any given publisher is in.

CK: The way we're talking about writing is about the business side, and then I suppose a lot of people here are thinking, well, where does that leave the creative side? And as I was thinking about talking to you this evening I thought, well, there's a false dichotomy if there ever was one – that somehow it's a choice between being creative and being commerce-oriented. And when you're writing a book, or even writing a book proposal, where can an author demonstrate to you an awareness of the business potential of a book? And you brought some proposals with you, so

maybe you can talk about that. But it seems to me you want to demonstrate you can write well, obviously, it's a good idea, it's going to be interesting to people. But somewhere in the proposal there has to be something about the market for this book is.

WB: Let me discuss the proposal in a minute. But you said something really interesting that to me is at the heart of why publishing is interesting to me. And that is because it is precisely on the line between art and commerce. There are undoubtedly publishers out there – just as there are authors out there – who can afford to be pure artists. There is a publisher in the Boston area who's famed for his beautiful books. And I am not impugning him as a businessman in any way, but David Godine is known for producing absolutely gorgeous, beautifully designed books with wonderful typography. He has a beautiful sense of style, and the people that work for him.

But for me, I come out of a business background, actually. Both my parents' families had small businesses. And I have business in my blood. But I love books, too. And for me the real excitement in publishing is working with books, which is such a wonderful thing to do, and at the same time finding a way, somehow, by hook or by crook, to make them profitable. Now, you as authors through your proposals need to understand that you're approaching publishers who actually want to sell. They actually want to sell books. In fact publishing – it's not about publishing literature. It's not about making the books beautiful. All of that is in the service of selling books, the more the better.

CK: I was think that when you were selling books out of the trunk and all the rest of it, you were selling to booksellers, to the people who are manning those counters, to the Barnes & Nobles of the world and to the small store in Grafton, Vermont, or wherever it was. And you must have learned a lot about bookselling by talking to all those booksellers. And as authors, we rarely think about that part of the transaction. We're aware of the transaction with the publisher. OK, this is in the contract and now how much do I get and what do I give and so forth. But the bookselling piece of it is usually forgotten.

WB: That's right. I have a story I'd like to tell about a photographer who came to us with an absolutely unpublishable book that we published. He was – if you look it up, his name is Michael Hintlian (sp?), and he's a brilliant black-and-white documentary photographer who has spent three or four years – it's not in our catalogue anymore, by the way – there's a reason behind that, too, and I'll tell you – (inaudible) the catalogue. He had spent literally three or four years underground photographing the workers of the Big Dig day by day – gritty, muscular men heaving slabs of concrete, with great shafts of sunlight beaming down through dust and just an absolutely artistic but absolutely unpublishable set of photographs.

F: Because?

WB: Well, let me just give you the survey, the poll numbers. So we published it because – and I'm going to come back to your question – we published it because he had pre-sold 2750 copies. He had signed up members of the building trades in Boston – the unions, the construction companies – all that had been involved in the Big Dig. This one took 100, this one took 150. He had the cash in his pocket. And I agreed to publish it.

So we then printed – remember now, he had pre-sold 2750 copies. We printed 3500 copies, which left 750 copies for trade sale. After a year and a half, we still had 450 of those. We sold 300 copies through bookstores like Barnes & Noble. We shipped probably 600 or 700 and got 400 back in the form of returns, which of course is one of the unfortunate little facts of the book business. Basically all books sold at the book trade are sold on what amounts to consignment and can be returned and are returned if they're not sold within a certain period of time. That's just the rule of the game.

But we published that book. And it's a beautiful book. But Michael (inaudible) understood that he had done his book with a very specific market in mind that was a very specific market that would buy that book. He found it and brought it to us. And he was published.

CK: So he had the photography expertise, you had the publishing expertise, and so you came together in that partnership.

WB: Yeah, but it was not just his art but it was his art plus his recognition that he had to sell it somewhere, and he found his buyers.

F: Yeah, he had essentially done the marketing.

WB: But I took that book – and this is why we only printed 3500 copies – I took the roughs of that book out to three or four booksellers who I rely on for their input and said what do you think of that? And to a man or woman they said, I can't sell that.

F: How much had he sold it for?

WB: It sold for \$35.

F: So he had collected the \$35 from –

WB: \$35 times – had a discount but for 2750 copies, and that paid for the printing, made for a little something for him, and I do mean a little something, and it paid for some sort of return on our investment.

CK: There's another story like that but a far more encouraging one, and you can tell as many of the details as you want to, but the book's behind me here – *Boston's Family Portrait*. Phil Brett (sp?), Boston photographer, *Boston Globe*

photographer for many, many years – the world knows him – he's got a great smile and he does a great job. And he photographs Bostonians of all stripes and (inaudible) you put out that book and – did you expect it to take off the way it did, and where is Phil's role in making that happen?

WB: Well, this is a wonderful story because Phil Brett was the society photographer for the *Globe* for 30 years and is retired now but still takes the Monday morning Party Line pictures, decided out about three years ago that he wanted to spread his wings a little bit and catch notable Bostonians in candid portraits in their workplaces, in their homes, and to call Boston all one family. And he had an editor at Houghton-Mifflin all set to publish it, but for some reason Houghton-Mifflin didn't come across with a contract. And it was a matter of red tape, it was a matter of hierarchy, it was a matter of bureaucracy, it was a matter of time.

And he got impatient and he called Michael Hintlian, the photographer of the Big Dig. He said, Michael, I am having the hardest time with Houghton-Mifflin with this book. Michael said called Webster Bull. So all that effort, from my point of view, with Michael Hintlian, which really resulted in us selling 300 book copies to bookstores ended up bringing us Philip Brett because we did a nice job on his book.

So Phil Brett's book sold more copies for us in its first season than any book had ever sold. But it wasn't because – although he claimed that he could sell it to people in the book, he didn't have any orders in his pocket – I knew that was going to sell. And I sat him down and within a week I'd paid him a bigger advance than I'd paid anybody before, and hopefully ever again. Sorry, authors. But I just knew it. It was just obvious. It screamed this book is going to be successful. And not only was it successful, but the sequel is due out in the fall of 2007 called *Boston: An Extended Family*. And instead of the three living mayors of Boston on the cover, as the first volume has, the second volume will present the six living governors of Massachusetts coming down the front of the Statehouse.

CK: And to draw the curtain back a little bit, Webster said to me when he told me that earlier, so who are they? And I had a hard time going through it all, didn't I?

WB: I think I can do it very quickly. Our present, Deval Patrick – everyone forgets the previous governor, Mitt Romney. Cellucci, Swift, Dukakis, and Weld.

CK: And nobody deserves that success more I think than Phil Brett. It's really (inaudible)

WB: One of the nicest people I've ever met.

CK: Absolutely.

WB: We had an opening at the MFA in the Grand Gallery of the MFA with \$2 billion worth of classic paintings surrounding us. A thousand people were invited to help

launch Phil's book and 700 came. And at 8:30, half an hour after everyone was supposed to leave, the security guards were still shoeing people out because Phil Brett is such a wonderful human being and they just wanted to come out and support him.

CK: So we've emphasized how much a book has to sell, and you brought some proposals with you. Can you identify some pieces in the proposal that really sold you on (inaudible)?

WB: Absolutely. The proposal I have in front of me is for a book that we're publishing in the fall of 2007, and it's by a woman named Diane Rappaport and it has a wonderful title: *The Naked Quaker*. And the subtitle is *True Crimes and Controversies from the Courts of Colonial New England*. And the title is from an instance in a Quaker meetinghouse in the 1660s when a woman literally walked in Sunday morning and dropped her dress to protest the activities of the elders or whoever it was in the meetinghouse.

So the title was a good thing. A great title is a good thing. And it opens the imagination to a wonderful cover design, which I wish I could show you, but we don't have it yet. But there are many more elements to this proposal that I want to bring out that I think are really important. First of all, this is a series of short 3000-word historical vignettes meticulously researched of true crimes and controversies from the first 150 years of settlement here throughout New England. She did her homework. She did a lot of research.

But more importantly, she published these individually as articles in a monthly magazine for the New England Historic Genealogical Society, which is right down here on Newbury Street. And she – it's called – I forget what she called it – *Tales From the Courthouse* or something like that. But it became a popular feature column in a monthly or a quarterly journal that demonstrated a) that she could write the stuff, and b) that people would read it.

CK: And probably with a group like that, that it had some kind of muster regarding its veracity and accuracy and all the rest of it.

WB: Exactly. Exactly. And then in her proposal she is very careful to point out not only that this had been prepublished or that pieces of it had been published before – but that she is an active lecturer on colonial topics. That she speaks once a month at Harvard University, at the Boston Public Library, at the New England Regional Genealogical Conference in Hartford, Connecticut. (inaudible) an author who can deliver the goods and who has, essentially, a pre-made market for the book.

If nothing else, she's going to go out once a month and talk about her book and sell it at the back of the hall. Now, we don't build our books or our marketing plans or our book successes on author appearances. Author appearances are very hard to make successful. But I saw that here was one author who could deliver some sales

for us. I think – this is a three-page proposal, and the first paragraph is (inaudible) convincing me that she can do the writing and that she has done the writing. The rest of the proposal is about her marketing plan for the book. How she, if we just the books in her hand, herself, would market the book. Very important.

Publishers sees, a-ha, I can sell this book. And for a small publisher in particular, the greatest, absolutely bar none, the greatest resource for selling and marketing the book is the author themselves. Because we have a marketing budget that is pathetic. Let's just say it's somewhere between \$1000 and \$1500 per book, OK? Well, you can't even buy an ad in the *Boston Globe* for that. And that's to say also that probably on two of our 20 books we'll spend about 90% of our budget because we believe that those are the ones that really warrant the expenditure.

We're not spending any money on our books. We have excellent salespeople. We have one marketing person in-house who is the sole person in charge of getting books reviewed, with getting any kind of notice in any kind of media, with writing press releases. So we have, as a small publisher, almost no resources to market your books. We have great resources for selling. We have tremendous distribution, and I can talk about that – getting books not only to bookstores, but into gift shops and so on. But the author has to demonstrate that he or she is going to be a partner in selling and marketing in the book. And that's critical.

CK: Well, I started by saying (inaudible) begin in pessimism and end hopefully in optimism, and people are hearing about the real challenges. But I wonder whether there is somebody here who might be thinking about a book that would be suitable for your list but they're not sure yet whether they can do all the things you've talked about. Nevertheless, does that mean if they don't think a book will sell, they shouldn't write it? Is it a kind of end of the line if they don't have an immediate sales plan for you?

WB: Well, there's a vast range of people here tonight, as we know. But the person who impressed me the most was the youngest guest here, a young woman named Josephine, who told me 45 minutes ago or an hour ago that she writes every day. And I told her immediately that's my dream. I don't have time in my day as a publisher to write. But what I really want to do is to be able to offload some of my publishing chores so that I have time every day to write. It doesn't matter if you're going to be published or not. You should write every day.

CK: Well, now let's reveal something. You are a writer as well.

WB: Well, I'm a good writer. I started out – actually this was going to be my stump speech, but I'll end with it. I started out in magic and theater. Some of you may know that there's a magic show up in Beverly called Le Grand David and His Own Spectacular Magic Company and in fact my family, including my daughter, who is also here tonight, has been involved with that for 30 years. I started out as the publicity writer for that show. I found I loved writing, which I'd hated in college.

Got married and started a business helping people write their memoirs and family histories and business histories. And for about ten years I worked on 45 to 50 privately-produced memoirs in which I served as a writer and principal editor.

And then had an opportunity to publish one trade book, got bitten by the bug, the tail wagged the dog, and now Commonwealth Editions is my primary source of income and it's a business that has really grown. But someday I'm going to get back to writing.

My favorite writer in the whole world is an old man now gone named Norman Maclean who wrote only two books. And he wrote them after he was 70. One was called *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*, which most people know. Another one's called – the other one is called *Young Men and Fire*, which is a story that obsessed him all his life about a forest fire in Montana in the late 1940s. And it's one of the most moving books I've ever read. And my dream is to turn 70 and begin writing another book like that.

CK: Well, the group of books on the list that attracted my attention, because I remember they were in my father's library when I was a boy, and I loved them, and probably what got me fascinated by Massachusetts history, and it's the Edward Rowe Snow books, which some people here may have read. And you've republished them over the last several years. There are, I imagine, especially in a niche like this one, the New England history, other books, other possible series like that – not all of them for you, necessarily. But are you looking for projects like that? Journalists come across those kinds of things, and if they presented in to you in a proposal, what would be the elements that would attract you for that sort of thing?

WB: For a series of reprints, essentially?

CK: Yes, right. For bringing back to print something that has gone out of print.

WB: Well, Edward Rowe Snow was unique because by some estimates he wrote 100 books and died about 25 years ago leaving a real legacy and legend behind him. And we contacted his daughter, Dorothy Snow Bicknell, who lives in Marshfield – wonderful lady – and made an arrangement with her to quickly republish his books, which we've done successfully. We tried it with another author, Everett S. Allen, who wrote *A Wind to Shake the World, Martha's Vineyard: An Elegy, The Black Ships: Rumrunners of Prohibition* and found that there was only one Edward Rowe Snow.

My personal inclination is to do new books in general. I've had a lot of reprint ideas thrown at me. I would prefer to be involved in the creative process of bringing out a new book. But I think that people should look at us and recognize that we are like every publisher dedicated to a very specific niche, and that is nonfiction about the history, traditions, and beauty of places in New England. And

there was a time – and the time is almost still here – when I was not publishing books unless it had a place name in the title.

The beautiful thing about having a place name in the title is you know where to sell it. If you publish a book called *The North Shore* you should not be selling it in the Berkshires. And it's really quite simple. So it was really a very simple business model for us, and the first books we published were called *The North Shore, Salem, Marblehead, Hidden Treasure on Boston's North Shore, The Port of Gloucester*, and so on. And still that's true of most of the books that we publish.

CK: And if I may, since I have a book in that series, that the title is important (inaudible) Massachusetts 101. I'll tell a hint for any author here who may have a great title, and titles really are important. If you think of a great title, the first thing you do, I would say, even before you send that proposal out, is go to register.com and try to grab that URL online. Because we had our luncheon discussion some years ago about Massachusetts 101 and that's just what I did. And it helped enormously, I think. I support the Commonwealth Edition sales through the website and all the rest of it. It helps to drive the searches. Would you agree?

WB: I would agree. I also realize, just to totally go off on another tangent, that I would be utterly remiss if I didn't recognize one other person in the room tonight. And that's this gentleman here, Dr. Joseph Andrews, also known as Joel Andrews. Joel came to us about five years ago with a book that he had self-published. And he had sold the daylights out of it. He introduced himself to every possible outlet for that book, and there it is. And that is an early edition. That is correct. That's not our edition.

(overlapping conversations; inaudible)

WB: Is that ours?

M: No, no, that's mine.

WB: But he published two previous editions himself and worn out shoe leather –

M: What's the title?

WB: *Revolutionary Boston, Lexington and Concord: The Shot Heard Round the World.* If I don't get the subtitle in, Joel's going to (inaudible) –

Q: (inaudible) –

M: Third edition, now third printing.

WB: Third printing. And it's because this man worked so hard to market and sell the book that our attention was drawn to it. And that has been successful. And I know

that Joel sometimes looked at us and said, you know, I could sell that book better than they're selling it. The only problem is we've got 100 other books in our list and we've got to give them all some attention as well. So sometimes the solution is self-publishing and selling it yourself. And there's no shame in that. *The Education of Henry Adams* was self-published, and a lot of other great books were self-published. And if you can determine the market for your book and no one else will publish it, well, go out and sell it to that market.

CK: Before we turn it over for some questions from the audience, you did bring another proposal with you that you might to talk about there?

WB: Well, this is another book we're publishing this fall. And this is a unique opportunity. Some of you have lived in Boston longer than, say, Josephine or my daughter Martha, will remember a fellow named Jerry Williams who was a talk show host on WRKO and before that WMEX. In fact he started on WMEX in 1956. We're publishing *Burning Up the Air: Jerry Williams, Talk Radio and the Life In Between*, which is a new biography of Jerry Williams written by two of his producers. And it's beautifully written. It's one of the finest crafted manuscripts we've ever received. But the proposal is 100% a promotion plan for *Burning Up the Air* and here the hook is very simple. These guys got Rush Limbaugh and Larry King onboard to help promote this thing. The ones that aren't going to give blurbs are going to interview them. Everyone in talk radio in some respect owes Jerry Williams because he virtually invented the format. And they have a list of five pages long of people who are ready to interview them and promote the book. How could I say no to that?

F: Why do you think they came to you instead of going to Houghton-Mifflin?

WB: Well, no they did to go to Houghton-Mifflin. They went to Random House. They went to Simon & Schuster. They went to everybody they could possibly think of before Commonwealth Editions. We are a regional publisher. We do not have the national scope that many publishers have. But we have – I like to say that if Random House could have us sell their books for them in New England, they would. But they have a sales staff and they have a sales organization that they have to keep whole. We have better on-the-ground distribution store to store, despite what Joel Andrews may have found, then any publisher in the world here in New England.

F: You know where every book store is?

WB: Not just book stores.

CK: That's a critical element, I think.

WB: Gift shops.

CK: Not just books. Museum shops. Farm stands.

WB: Our biggest account in Beverly, Massachusetts is Henry's Market, which is a local supermarket. But they have now got a display of our books at the cash register. We will sell books anywhere.

CK: And there's a difference there, too, because you talked about the bane of every book publisher's existence, which is that booksellers large and small get the books on consignment. But if it's not a bookseller per se, different arrangement.

WB: Gift shops are not usually returning merchandise. They discount it at the end of the season if it doesn't sell, but they don't send it back to us. They get a little bit higher discount from us than independent bookstores do because they take them nonreturnable. But they're a huge part of our market. In fact we sell more books to gift shops and museum shops than we do to independent bookstores. Barnes & Noble remains our largest customer and Borders is behind but not way behind. I think we sell more books to the chains than we sell anywhere but gift shops are our second biggest channel.

CK: Well, I bring that up only because for the kinds of books you do particularly, the Freedom Trail Gift Shop or whatever it might be is going to be a critical piece of that. It's important be here at Barnes & Noble, but you want to be down at the shop around the corner from Paul Revere's house.

WB: Correct.

F: Why do you think, though, that this book, the Jerry Williams book, Simon & Schuster and Random House and so forth denied them and they came to you – do you think was it they offered them a deal that was not as good as the deal you were giving them?

WB: No, they didn't offer them any deal. They thought it was too local, too regional. They are looking for a book that can sell as well in California as New England. In fact the New England market is considered a backwater in terms of scope and volume. And we are still a big fish in a small pond. We focus on New England, which is considered probably the weakest environment.

F: Can I ask how many books you're going to publish? Do you know that already?

WB: How copies of the Jerry Williams book?

F: Yes.

WB: We did advance orders from our list – the fall catalogue will come out in June and we will ship the book in August. By the end of July when we print the books we will have a much better idea of how many we should print. Once again, I don't like

to acquire a book unless I think I'm going to sell at least 3000 copies because that really is our break-even. There's no point in doing it if we can't. So I envision printing more than that in this case.

CK: Before we continue with questions, and I do want to encourage anybody in the audience to ask questions on whatever you'd like, we are trying to record this for a special podcast presented by Danvers-based Copyright Clearance Center. I am the director of author relations for CCC, and we have a podcast called Beyond the Book. If you want to know more about it, come up to me afterwards, and I'll give you the details and my e-mail address.

But if you can, please come forward and grab the microphone that Caroline has and ask your question there, and that will ensure that anyone who listens to the podcast will hear it clearly. So I don't know if anyone does any questions from the audience here.

WB: While we're waiting for a question, and I think that we have at least one, let me just tell you one other success story.

CK: Sure.

WB: We have another book that was shopped to every New York publisher conceivable. And they should have bought it. But we bought it. It was a book called (inaudible), and it's a memoir written by a wonderful woman named Kate Whouley (sp?) about her experience taking a tiny one-room cottage and moving it 25 miles and attaching it to her house in Barnstable, greater Barnstable. And I don't know why Random House and Simon & Schuster passed on it. But we bought it because I recognized that it was a book that could be sold, if nowhere else, on Cape Cod.

And that, secondly – and this is part of the marketing of it – is Kate Whouley is a consultant to independent bookstores. She had worked for every independent bookstore in New England in one way or another, helping them design their inventory, whatever, computer programs, their shop, and so on. So there were a couple of reasons why we acquired it. We subsequently sold the paperback rights to this to Ballantine, which is an imprint of Random House, for six figures. So it was a victory for the little guy. We didn't keep all that – we share that with the author. But nevertheless, it was a wonderful vindication at least one time of thinking local, thinking regional, and then taking that from the regional to the national.

CK: Right. And I just think that that's a book that's just an absolute perfect summer book. And for years to come – not just this summer.

WB: Well, I'm also proud to say that in the end we sold more hardcovers than Ballantine sold paperbacks. Isn't that ironic?

CK: Why do you think that?

WB: Because of our distribution. Because Kate was working every single bookstore in New England, but our salespeople were selling them in bookstores, selling them in gift shops. And we sold 7000 copies, and Ballantine sold 7000 copies.

CK: Can I ask you a question – it's a big question – it's on everyone's mind in publishing – is how long before there are no more books? And I say that facetiously, but you know what I mean by that.

WB: I got a great answer to that question from bookseller, a very wise bookseller named Bob Hugo (sp?), who lives on the North Shore, has five independent bookstores. And he said to me five years ago when everyone was worried about the death of the book, he said, 20 years from now I am convinced that 80% of what we know as books today will be available through other media – downloadable, whatever it might be. However there will be 20% of all the existing books that people will absolutely want and have to own as physical objects.

And the classic example is the family bible, which may not be so classic anymore, but in the 19th century every Christian family had a bible that was the family bible. And it was a physical object in the home that told them who they are. Our books in some respects are like that. They tell people who they are. They say I'm from the North Shore, I'm from Boston, my children live on Cape Cod, I want them to have this Cape Cod children's book. The books speak to our identity. And so I was really encourage five years ago to keep publishing these books that speak to regional identity.

CK: Do we have a question from the audience?

M: We do. It's great to hear you. Just a couple of thoughts, and I'll take my answer off the air. It's great to hear you talk about 3000 as the break-even point because I think it's interesting to note that 3000 or even 5000 is considered a failure at Random House – because it doesn't earn out of its advance in most cases.

CK: Bear in mind just how hard it is, given those numbers that I quoted earlier, (inaudible).

M: Absolutely. And so for independent authors, independent publishers, I think it's really good to hear about 3000 being your threshold, your break-even point. And I'm curious generally what's the size of your first printing with books where you don't have somebody with a platform?

And before you answer that, I just – the other thing I want to throw out there to you is just that three of the success stories that you mentioned, Kate Whouley, Phil Brett, one of the others, are all situations where the author in some way had a platform – oh, it was the Jerry Williams. And even though Phil's no longer with

the *Globe* full-time, all three of those people had selling networks, had marketing and promotion networks. And I guess I'd like to hear you talk about that as part of your calculus. And also the question of what's the usual first printing for you. Thank you.

CK: (inaudible) I like that last question, but you can address the question about the numbers first. But the way I heard that question from Steve was how necessary is the platform, and if you don't have a platform, again, are you knocked out?

WB: Well, no you're not knocked out. We publish 20 books a year, and there's probably platforms with six or seven or eight of them. We had a crisis in our business a year and a half ago when our largest customer went bankrupt, Cohen (sp?) Book Distributors. And we lost a lot of money. And I had to make some dramatic changes. I had to let an important person go, and I had to cut my list back for the coming year. I was planning on publishing 24 books, and I immediately cut back to 12.

And I realized that I could do that because there were really only 12 of the 24 I was going to publish that I deeply believed that I could not live without. When a publisher gets a program going where, OK, we do 20 books a year, we do 24 books a year, and you've got to fill your catalogue, and your customers begin to expect a certain number and a certain quality and a certain type of book from you every season, and if you don't have those new products for them you lose all your forward momentum as a publisher. So there are many things in our catalogue that don't have that platform. And that doesn't disqualify them or make them poor choices.

To answer the question, typical first printing, 3001. No, but that's only really a joke. We print anywhere from – I would say – well we're going to print a couple of 2000s this year because as you go through the process of preparing the books and starting to get advance orders, you say wait a minute, no one's saluting this flag. And you're best off printing a small number, writing it off, and then if it catches fire you can always reprint. Because the fact is you're making money on the reprint. We will print probably 10,000 upfront of Phil Brett's second book because we'll probably have advance sales on 7000 or 8000. And the biggest mistake I almost made in my entire career was printing 15,000 copies of my second book because I thought, well, it's a lower unit cost. It took me six years to sell them, but we sold them, so we survived.

F: Can I ask a related question to that? If there's a pie chart of your costs, what portion is – can you divide it out by – what portion is the printing – and do you use more than one printer?

WB: We use several printers, depending on whether the book's color or black and white. Color books are printed overseas. Black and white are printed domestically. And

we probably have three vendors domestically and three vendors overseas that we'd choose from. They have to bid against each other, basically.

The pie chart is a little bit harder to come up with because some books take a lot of prepress effort. We have the Jerry Williams book – no, we have a book coming out this fall called *Picturing Rhode Island: Images from Everyday Life, 1850-2006*. 225 black and white photographs researched, scanned, designed in a complex, filtrated format. Extensive text, copyedited, proofed, beautiful cover design, indexed. Our prepress cost on that is probably \$10,000, which is almost prohibitive for us. We really almost shouldn't be doing that. But I fell in love with the book. And that's a mistake a publisher makes once in a while. But it really depends on how much editorial work needs to be done beforehand – it could be 50/50, it could be 40/60, it could be 70/30. You have to look at it book-by-book.

F: This is really very, very interesting. I'm a photographer working on a book that has nothing to do with the North Shore. And I would like to find where I could find a niche publisher that would be interested.

WB: All right, define the book. What are the photographs?

F: It's Havana, Cuba. I have old picture postcards from 100 years ago and I have rephotographed in the same locations.

WB: I would go on Amazon. I would look up every book that has the name Havana in it. I would get a list of publishers that have done books on Havana. And I would see if I could find some that had some hook with Cuba, Latin culture, the immigrant culture in Miami. There may be a local publisher in Miami where there's a huge immigrant population. It's just a question of being resourceful, I think.

F: So you think going to Amazon and seeing who's published similar books or books on similar topics?

WB: Yeah. You don't want to come to me. Unless you have a book like other books that I've published. So your book is like something. Find publishers who publish stuff like that. Even if they published another book just like yours, you don't know, they might have sold 20,000 copies and be looking for a sequel..

F: Great. Thank you very much.

CK: Anyone else? (inaudible) come to the microphone.

M: Yeah, I just want to thank Webster for taking on my book. It's one of the first non-mature books. And everything that (inaudible) wants but failing twice with an additional edition. So I think they do a great job for anybody listening here of any publisher.

But I just wanted to add a postscript from a writer from my town of Concord, whose name is Henry David Thoreau. He was born David Henry Thoreau and he wanted to change it around, which he did. But he was not very well-read in his lifetime. As a matter of fact, only one book came out, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, when he was alive. And somebody once asked Henry, do you have a sizeable library? He said yes. He said I have about 900 books. 700 of them are mine.

WB: Well, I can only say that I wish Henry David Thoreau – I wish I had been alive and published him (inaudible) because all four or five of his books would have been published by Commonwealth Editions, because they're ideally suited. There's one named – there's a book of the Maine Woods, right? The Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden Pond, Cape Cod, and has essays on the White Mountains. Now, these are all places in New England, and we would have published those books. So he and I were just born in the wrong century.

F: I have two questions.

WB: This is my new friend Josephine.

F: Hello. I guess the first one is – I'm wondering because I'm starting out in my life how you go from working in magic to starting a publishing company from the trunk of your car. What is the sort of progression in your life that made you decide to choose this field?

The second one has more to do with putting together a first book. What – for somebody who has no knowledge of layout and editing and designing them, what do you – especially particularly with regard to self-publishing – to gather knowledge on how to pull that off.

WB: Well, you talked about the first question first, so let me answer the second question first. I think the critical elements for a self-published book are a copy editor and a cover designer. If you're going to spend any money on anything, spend it on a copy editor. Get a professional copy editor. Not a friend. Not even a friend who works at the newspaper. But a professional copyeditor who doesn't know you, who doesn't want to be your friend, just wants to get paid, and will do an extraordinarily competent and professional job asking all the hard questions, correcting all the things that really should be corrected that your friend wouldn't correct. And then put a great cover on the book because covers do sell books.

And I think that a self-published author can put a book in print for \$5000. Paperback book. There is a wonderful printing company in Illinois, Versa Press, V-E-R-S-A Press, and they are our vendor of choice for paperback, black and white (inaudible) great, great, great pricing. And if you wanted to use my name, if I can (inaudible) our company, I'll do it for you. But they will print a paperback book of

200 pages, 2000 copies for like \$1.40 or \$1.50 per book. That's \$3000. Spend another \$1000 on the cover and another \$1000 on the copyedit.

Anybody can lay out a book in Quark or Pagemaker or whatever (inaudible) design (inaudible) the publishing (inaudible) that anybody can get into, if you can. (inaudible) \$5000 first printing of 2000 books.

The other question is much (inaudible) how I went not just from magic but from wanting to play Hamlet when I was in college and doing summer stock to owning my own publishing company which I started when I was 46-years old, and I truly believe it took me until age 46 to finally discover what I really should be doing. I believe in detours. I believe that (inaudible) detour, take it. I also believe that it's ultimately important, the most important thing of all is who you surround yourself with. What people you hang out with. I was very fortunate when I was in college to meet a mentor, who (inaudible) had a stroke two years ago and he's somewhat incapacitated. But he's been my mentor since I was 19-years old. And he led me to a lot of other people. And I have been very fortunate to be surrounded with high quality people. If you find yourself hanging out with bad quality people, leave

F: Thank you.

WB: You're welcome.

CK: That was a wonderful way, I think, to end the program. On behalf of the National Writer's Union and the local chapter here, the steering committee, (inaudible) I don't think it's any (inaudible) that you were named the New England Bookseller's Association Publisher of the Year in 2006. Thank you very much for coming. Thank you all.

(applause)

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