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DEMAN Live: Authors, Publishers & Literary Agents with StudioDuke

00:00 DAVE KARGER

Welcome to DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, Duke alum and host on Turner Classic Movies. DEMAN is the Duke Entertainment, Media and Arts Network. And it's the University's hub for the creative industries. On this show, you'll hear a past episodes of DEMAN live, which includes panels and one on one chats with alumni. Thanks so much for listening and enjoy.

00:55 CHRISTINA

Hello, everyone. I am Christina Baker Kline, I'm a novelist. My son, Eli is a senior at Duke. So we'll be there in May, if anyone wants to get together in person and say hello. Um, I am really lucky that my son Eli went to Duke my son will graduated a couple years ago. So the Duke community is a wonderful place. And I know a lot about it. And my sister Cynthia works for Duke and Amy is a dear friend. And I brought my dear friend Lisa Leslie, who's an amazing literary agent. And I'm also lucky to have Molly Candela, and they're going to introduce themselves, but Molly actually works with my editor, Kate Menzel at HarperCollins. William Morrow, they're all many names, right? Molly? Many names, right? I know, there's a whole new name. But we, but we've worked together to which is just so nice.

Um, I have written a lot of books, I have five nonfiction books, four of which I edited. I have eight novels, I'm writing another one. I'm working on another nonfiction book. So I have a lot of experience on both sides of you know, that world. And I also worked for many years as a freelance editor. And I taught. I also taught for many years at the college level. And I, I'll just tell you very quickly, very early on, I realized I was qualified to do nothing else, but work with words. Perhaps it was a bad math grade in high school that made me realize this.

I actually went to Yale. And I took a class there called Daily Themes where you write 300 words a day for an entire semester. And they're actually super complicated, hard writing prompts. So I really feel I became a writer by taking that class. It was so so intense, I also learned what the word "twee" means, because I had my team, and you all have an individual, you know, grad student, teacher, whatever. And mine happened to be Scottish. And she would write a "twee", whenever I said anything that was a little cringy, I think you would call it cringy. She called it "twee", so that's a very useful word. And then I built a life around writing. And I'll talk more about that later, because I don't want to hog the floor.

But I built a life meaning I knew I wanted to write, I didn't know if I would ever make a living doing it. And so I created a life where I could make a living as a freelance editor, as an editor on public various publications, and as a teacher. And eventually I made I did make a living as a writer, but it took a long time. And so for those of you who are sort of in a wondering about being in a creative space or not,

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and my own children are in this space as well, although they're all musicians, so it's different, but, but I always say to them, it's amazing to have a passion and I fully support your passion, you just have to know that your avocation may not be your vocation, and you have to approach life in that way. You hope that we'll all hit the big time and make, you know, make it big when you're 23. But it doesn't happen to most of us. And it's really a hard slog, but it's also the most exciting thing you can ever do, in my view. So it's really a question of, like making a life where you can create your art. So that's anyway, so there you are. That's my perspective. Lisa, I'll move on to you.

04:37 LISA

Ah, that's a hard act to follow. Um, thank you, Christina. So I grew up outside of Champaign, Illinois, surrounded by cornfields. I was an only child, and I read a lot. My mom was actually a reading teacher. So I grew for elementary school students remedial reading, but I grew up surrounded by books, and I books have always just been a big part of my life. We really didn't travel anywhere when I was growing up. And like I said, I was an only child. So I think, like books were my first friends. And, you know, it's sort of like, you know how I escaped, and I felt like I just, you know, was introduced to a whole world I otherwise wouldn't have had any idea about.

And when it's time for me to go to college, I wanted to travel, I ended up going to UC Santa Barbara. And then after I graduated, I actually ended up I was backpacking through Europe, I thought I was taking a year off before law school, followed a very nontraditional path. And I actually ended up in Prague, Czechoslovakia a few months after the revolution in 89, and I ended up starting a newspaper there, an English language newspaper. So my first job was working for myself as an entrepreneur. And I built this newspaper in Prague. I was there when the country split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. I was there when the USSR split. So I mean, it's sort of interesting watching what's going on today in the world. But I did that for about a decade. And then I came back. And I did an MBA at Harvard Business School, as sort of a way for me to kind of figure out what I wanted to do next. And then I ended up working, I still worked in newspaper publishing, I went to go work for Dow Jones and The Wall Street Journal, also on the publishing side, on the business side, and I work internationally in Europe, in Asia for them. And so I was in the newspaper industry for about 20 years. And towards the end of that I got married, I had two kids.

And then it was time for me to kind of figure out it was a transition point. And I knew I didn't want to go work for another large corporation, and I really wanted to do something where I was controlling my own fate again. Um, and when I thought about all the things I loved, I kept coming back to books. And so I really actually sought out this career as a literary agent about 15 years ago, because I felt like it put together all the things that I love to do. Because there's both the creative side, which is, you know, reading a lot and understanding, you know, what would make a good book and a commercially viable book in the marketplace, and then also helping those authors, you know, sell their work and negotiate

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the very best deal possible for them. Because I think writers are systematically underpaid for their work. And, you know, they deserve to be, you know, to have somebody advocating for them. So I can do that very well. Um, and I love what I do, and it really allows me to, I'm only I mostly specialize in nonfiction. I will say a lot of my clients are journalists, because that, again, was my background working in the newspaper industry. And I'm just really drawn to stories that have a social justice aspect, you know, memoirs that can really, you know, transport people and, you know, books that we can really take away things and learn from that said, I also love a great novel that, you know, also can just transport me and make me feel like I'm in another world. So I love I absolutely love what I do. And I'll kick it over to Molly.

08:28 MOLLY

Thank you. Yeah. Hi, I'm Molly Gendell. I'm an assistant editor at HarperCollins. Specifically working at the Mariner imprint, which is, as Christina was mentioning, publishing is very weird, and that there's all these little imprints within the big publishers, which is sort of just like the department you're in. And often there's a lot of change with them. So I've been with a couple of imprints and starting at HarperCollins. But it's really great. I work with adult fiction and nonfiction and in my role I support to senior editors. So I get to work with them on lots of big best-selling fantastic authors like Christina, and lots of other awesome people. And then I'm also working, I have my own list of books. So it's sort of a, I think, something about publishing and editorial specifically, is that when you're getting started, it's very much a balancing act of you're supporting these more senior editors and kind of learning from them and learning how to edit and how to do everything. And then you also get the opportunity to sort of work on your own and start to learn do your own stuff and buy your own books, which is really great.

Um, and I am a Duke grad, I was class of 2016. And I was an English major and markets and management certificates. So kind of like Lisa was saying, I think that that was a really great background for me because when I was in college and sort of figuring out what I wanted to do, I had always love to read, I'd grown up loving to read, loved my English classes, I love to write, but I kind of knew that wasn't something I wanted to do professionally. And so I sort of stumbled into publishing, found a couple of internships while I was in college. And what I really love about it is that it is like, again, as Lisa was saying, it's a very creative role. But it's also it's a business. So it's kind of like a very great left brain, right brain balance. Because you know, as an editor, part of my job is to buy books and sell books and make them the best that they can be. But also part of it is knowing the market and knowing how to sell a book and how to help it reach its audience and how to promote it. So it's a very cool, I think, unique kind of job where, you know, one day I can be just editing and completely lost her manuscript and figuring out, like, what makes these characters tick? And how do we make this book better. And then the next day, I can be in a meeting with our marketing publicity team, figuring out how to present the book to people, I can be talking to our art team figuring out what the cover should be. So it's a great, I

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think, it's been really, it's really great way to do you wear a lot of hats, I think as an editor, and that's something I really liked about it. Um, yeah, that's, that's kind of it.

11:34 STUDENT

I can start us off. Yeah, thank you all so much for introducing yourselves. It was so exciting to hear about your different paths. I had a question. For Christina, though, I really think Lisa could also probably weigh in in terms of memoirs. But I really loved your novel, Orphan Train. And so I was wondering, when writing a piece of historical fiction, how do you balance exercising your creative license with historical accuracy? And I was wondering about kind of your research process and some of your favorite ways to research for that type of work that kind of combines any type of, of something that actually happened with kind of creativity and your own storytelling?

12:22

That's a good question. And for Lisa, I was thinking is not only memoir, but the nonfiction, but she represents that requires so much research, and fact checking, even after the research is done, you know, I so I think that every book requires research. Or maybe I'm just not quite smart enough. Because even when I read a book set, in the present day, I'm always like, did this really happen? Or is this a thing you know, there's, there's always stuff to research. But of course, when you read a book set in the past, it's a different matter. I so when I wrote the novel Orphan Train, I, I felt this real commitment to the truth because the facts because it was a little-known story in American history that has affected 250,000 children were sent on these orphan trains. And then there are now more than 4 million descendants of those people. So I wanted to make sure that I had it right. And that was a big deal, getting the facts, right. And then within that, creating fictional characters who live out the story, and in some ways become a representative story, even though they're, it's important in a novel that the characters be very, very specific, you know, that they don't feel like a generic kind of representation.

You also want to, I also wanted to do a story that probably would have happened to a number of people, the kind of experience that different people had on the orphan trains. So. So yeah, it was a balancing act. And part of the issue and some of you may have encountered this, even just writing research papers, is when do you start researching and when do you start writing? You know, how do you make that decision? When have you when do you know enough? And the truth is, the wonderful and terrible truth is that those questions are quite porous, meaning you will never you could research forever. You never know enough in your own mind, I think but also like at some point, you have to just start writing. And it doesn't mean that the research stops. So like, for example, in the novel, The Exiles my latest novel, I had the big facts right? I had figured it I had researched for a year and a half or two years, I had 100 page single spaced document of really what happened in this time period. And I knew all of that, but as I was writing, it's a little bit like that children's book, Harold in The Purple Crayon,

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where he has to draw the boat before he can go across the water right because he has to get in the boat and he has to draw the oars. He has to figure his way across the water as he goes, and so there was a scene, for example, where my character is transported to the prison called New Gate, which is in London, this terrible prison. And I didn't have any idea what how she would be transported exactly. I knew it might be a carriage, but I didn't know what kind. So I had to go down this whole rabbit hole of what, in the 18th, you know, in this exact time period in the 1830s, what did the prison carriages look like? And did they have glass in the windows and how many horses pulled them I mean, those kinds of things that you don't, that you're not researching in a macro way, but it's only when you're in the granular moment that you have to do. So there was a lot of that as I went. And of course, the internet is incredible and helped me, especially as I was going, I mean, my only advice would be to those of you undertaking research projects. And again, you may have found this in your own research for papers, is that, for me, the Internet was fantastic. When I was at that level, when I was starting to research the books, just doing deep dives into books and other resources was really helpful. And then there are all kinds of databases like J store and an academia.com, that that are have academic papers that were really helpful to me, too. Alright, that's getting very in the weeds. But um, but the long story, the story short story is just that you never stop. And at some point, you have to just sort of say, Look, I have enough to launch. And in launching, you're going to encounter a million other ways that you need research, but But it's it does have to be when you reach a certain level of confidence about your subject, I think. Lisa, what do you think?

16:49 LISA

Yeah, I mean, I, you know, I echo everything you just said, and I think the most important thing that you want to make sure you get it right. And, you know, especially in nonfiction, I mean, I have authors that have worked in research on their books for years, you know, four or five years, 10 years, you know, even longer in some cases, and you know, this is a life's work. And for every author, their book is important. So, you know, for most nonfiction books, like for example, the book over here, the hot pink cover, is a book called, You Sound Like A White Girl: The Case Against Assimilation. And it's really kind of a political polemic and manifesto, written by an author named Julissa Arce. This is our third book together. She was an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, who became a vice president at Goldman Sachs, all while undocumented. And she's led an incredible life. She's still very young, she's just in her early 30s. And what she really wanted to do with this book was she tells a lot of stories about Latinx history that were not told in schools, and she did a lot of historical research to, you know, uncover these stories to really, you know, talk about, you know, what America was built on and kind of to unravel. What she says is a lie of assimilation. So it's obviously very important for her to get it right. And a book like that is going to have a lot of endnotes, it's going to be fact checked. In most cases, it's the writers responsibility to hire their own fact checker to go through everything, and they need to get their own end notes in order to give to the publisher, and then every book goes through a very intensive legal read. And depending on the topic, I mean, I've done books on, you know, all the sexual

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misconduct by President, former President Trump. I have a book on the Jeffrey Epstein case. And you know, in those cases, you can imagine there was a very heavy legal read. And that's where the publisher will have their own legal team and in some cases, even hire an outside legal team to go through and, you know, really fact check and make sure that there are no situations where, you know, the publisher could get sued for, you know, libel or malice. So there is a lot of pressure on you, as an author and as a writer to get it right. And to do your research, and to keep to keep track. You have to be able to keep good notes. Yeah, I hope that answers your question.

19:43 CHRISTINA

Okay, Molly, did you have any thoughts on that?

19:46 MOLLY

No, you know, I was thinking when you were when you guys were talking, I kind of disagree with everything. I think that it's also interesting, Christina, you were talking about in fiction. I think that that's something I noticed a lot as an editor per se. regularly with historical fiction, because so much research goes into that. And you know, the best books are so heavily researched and the like, it's a very tricky line to walk where you want, it should be clear while reading that you've done your research and things are accurate, and like you have those little historical details that make the story come to life. But then I'll often see authors get a little too bogged down in trying to, like, add in every little bit of research they found or make everything very historically accurate. And it's sort of just, you know, again, you know, better than me how to find that how to walk that line. But I think that's an important line to walk. And

20:42 CHRISTINA

Yeah, I totally agree with you. I, I think, you know, part of the real challenge when you're working with lots of material is to just say, I'm telling a story. Like you, it's kind of like, you know, you guys are all at Duke, you're all good students, you can't be too good a student. If you're a writer, I mean, in other words, I feel like we're all very dutiful, like, we want to show our work. But at some point, you're telling a story, and you have to, you're not going to get credit for all the work you did. It's like you have to throw out a lot of the work. Once you're writing a novel, you have to say the story is more important than showing off that I did all this research. And it may end up it may mean that you have to end up jettisoning all this stuff that you did, you may end up wasting a lot of time. I mean, the thing about being a writer honestly, is that the concept of wasting time is like, you just have to throw it out the window, because you would go crazy, like the amount of time it takes to write and try to get it right. And to revise and to do it over and over again, will drive you absolutely bonkers. If you're not prepared for it totally, you know what I'm talking about. We've been working on a manuscript together, that's fantastic. But like Tenley has totally re envisioned it, you know, over and over again a couple times.

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And, you know, it's like, you might have it all those stripes. And it's still not, right until it's right. And it may just take going back in again and again. And that's, you know, intense.

22:24 LISA

Sometimes you have to write the book to write the book. Yeah, happens a lot.

22:28 CHRISTINA

Right? away in to knowing what you're writing. Yeah. Yeah, I know. That sounds awful. You should all like just leave right now. Sounds horrible.

22:45 STUDENT

Hi, my name is Nia. I'm joining from LA. I'm in the Duke in LA program. So that's why the weather looks so different than what it is. But yeah, my question is for Lisa, but again, I think anyone can answer it. Um, I was just wondering what types of stories or what types of themes within stories? Do you all see, like becoming more popular in the future? Especially I don't know, I always feel like, you know, there are certain moments within history where, like, a certain theme is very popular in like the cultural zeitgeist are in people's minds. So like, what do you see now, like, regarding just everything going on in the world, and how that affects the stories that we see.

23:28 LISA

Yeah, well, I think you almost I mean, you pretty much answered your own question, which is that publishing, you know, they do follow what's going on in the world. And book publishers in Mali can, you know, I'm sure attest to this, are really looking for stories that are of the moment. And, um, you know, we saw this, you know, recently with, like, the Me Too Movement. And so then I think that informed a lot of stories about, you know, sexual harassment, you know, both in nonfiction and fiction, and, you know, setting up plots that, you know, dealt around, you know, those issues. I think publishing right now has taken a very critical look at itself. And they are, you know, really, I think, you know, very genuinely looking for more stories from, you know, authors of color from underrepresented groups. And they're looking for stories around those themes. And I think we're also seeing, and we will continue to see stories built around, you know, refugees and war. I mean, again, I, you know, the Middle East and now, you know, Eastern Europe and Russia, and, you know, so basically anything that's happening in the world, I think is going to be reflected in what writers are writing and what publishers are interested in buying and what people want to read.

Because you know, again, like any historical moment. Once that happens, it, you know, it sets off, you know, a spark and you know, people do want to, you know, delve more deeply into those issues, which is great. You know, so, you know, one thing I will do sometimes very occasionally, but sometimes, you know, I will chase something, like, I'll chase a story. Um, so I mean, you know, for example, there was

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just an article, it was in Bloomberg. And it was from a, sorry, it was in the Wall Street Journal, and it was a Wall Street Journal reporter, this was last week. And she wrote a story about this, like, very poor young girl who was basically a maid cleaning houses in Brazil, who became a chess champion. Like she started she she taught herself chess, and she started winning all these tournaments. And she had no money, she was cleaning rich people's houses, and actually got the money from some of the her, her bosses from the house that she cleaned to enter these tournaments, and even sent her internationally. And I mean, she's still cleaning houses. But I mean, it's just such a wonderful story. And I felt like and I knew this, I reached out to the reporter. We're actually meeting over zoom this week, because I asked her if she'd be interested in writing a book. And I said, I'm sure there's more to the story, but it already appears to me, like, the young ones name is Sybil Savelle. And it's like C-Y-B-E L-E, so I'm not sure I'm pronouncing it right. But I said, I feel like this just touches on, you know, race, class poverty, you know, overcoming, you know, obstacles. It's such an inspirational story. And then she told me that, you know, her the father is, is out of the picture I'm not sure he ever was. And there are lots of younger siblings, and the mother actually is very unsupportive of her. There was a twin sister who died at birth. And she blames Sybil for for the death of this twin, you know, so they're like all these other, you know, you know, strings of the story that weren't even in the article.

So anyway, I guess my point is, sometimes I'll find something like that, that I feel like, wow, there's such, there must be more to this story. And I feel like this is the kind of story that you peel back the layers of the onion. And there are so many themes to be explored here. So again, like I do think publishing follows history and trends and what's going on in the world today. And those are the stories that interests me. So you know, I'm assuming they're going to interest a wider audience, as well.

27:43 CHRISTINA

Definitely, I'll just say quickly that I had lunch with a friend who's an agent last week, and he was telling me about us a memoir that had come in by someone who's like around 40. White, and it's about adultery. And she just said, nobody wants to read that right now. I'm not i It's beautifully written in another time period, it would have sold, I'm not going to be able to sell it. I don't I'm turning it down. You know, I mean, it was just sort of interesting to think she just said, you know, there are there are distinct time periods in publishing. And there are trends, right, Lisa? And, and there's just not a moment that you can do that there's a glut of Memoirs of a certain kind. And, you know, and then there are other things like that story that Lisa was just telling you about that are incredibly feel incredibly of the moment, important, relevant, and fresh. And, and so you're right, it's a good question to ask Molly. What do you think?

28:50 MOLLY

Yeah, I think that the point about diversity is a big one. And you know, publishing has frankly, been a very white and very homogenous in many ways, industry for a while. And it still is, in many ways, but I do think that people are more actively trying to improve that. And one thing that we've seen, so I

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actually 2016, I wrote my senior capstone about this, it was about like diversity and publishing. So it's sort of, I can sort of look back and remember what it was like then and maybe haven't made quite as much progress, as I would like to see. But I think that there's definitely just a lot more willingness and interest in reaching out to people beyond the same, the same people who are been writing books for a couple 100 of years, and bringing in these fresh new voices.

Because frankly, like, publishing has to keep up with the rest of the world. And you know, you want books that are going to speak to as wide of an audience as possible. And I think that that's sort of keeping up with the times. So that's been good to see I also think we're in a very interesting spot right now, because I agree that publishing definitely, like tries to keep up with the news and wants to write about things that are current. But I think that we're in a weird spot with the pandemic, where everyone's trying to figure out both in fiction and nonfiction like, do people actually want pandemic books? Should I write a pandemic book, I think there was just a New York Times article about this, actually. But it's like a big debate, because on the one hand, this is obviously the biggest thing that's happening in our life right now. And it seems crazy not to write about it. But on the other hand, like this is speaking me personally to is like, we're dealing with this all the time, I don't really want to see that when I'm reading. Like, it's kind of nice to whether it's escaping into somewhere else, or even not escapism, you could be reading something perfectly serious. But there is a sense of I think everyone's trying to figure out like, and then another thing is that everything is so uncertain, where we have no idea where things are going to be in a year. And when we're acquiring books and choosing which books to publish, you know, there's a long lead line there. Usually, it'll take at least a year to publish a book, sometimes shorter if you're on a crash schedule. But regardless, it's hard. I think, especially with nonfiction, it's hard to publish a book about something that's happening right now, when in a year, everything could be different, like everything you've written could end up being wrong.

So it's been an interesting thing to watch people navigate I know, but we'll have authors have to navigate it to and agents and publishers. So it'll be interesting to see in the next few years. What will happen there? And I know also people are talking about like, when are we going to get the first great pandemic novel, which is a horrifying phrase that I hate to hear. But I do think that it's the kind of thing that we'll need probably need a few years to get some space there and reflect and look at it, not from inside of it

32:10 LISA

I am already getting pitches for pandemic novels, and can't even look at it.

32:17 CHRISTINA

Molly, I think the New York Times said that there were a few in that list that that were really good are one at least right? And Gary Shteyngart just wrote a pandemic novel. I just was at a thing with him. And

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he was very funny talking about, you know, writing this pandemic novel, but he's like, I'm totally lazy. I wrote about what I was doing what I you know, what, but there was a review of a new movie, Steven Soderbergh, starring Zoe Kravitz coming out in a few days. And the guy, the guy, the reviewer said, I would rather like look at the inside of my eyelids than watch a pandemic movie. But however, this movie is great. He said, I thought it was really funny. I mean, but that, to me, the point of that line, I would rather watch the inside of my eyeballs than, you know, my eyelids and watch a pandemic movie. But this one is great, is that if you pull it off, you pull it off? In other words, like it, we all say, how tiresome and we don't want that. But if if you do, if someone does it, right, it will be great. And, and, you know, I think that's sort of always true in publishing. There are all these trends. And there are all these things that, you know, we talk about that can work, but you can pull off anything if you do it. Right, if you do.

33:38 LISA

And by the way, I just want to add to that, I mean, publishers can get it wrong. And I want to say that, because it's really mind boggling when you realize that it's really a very small group of people who are making decisions about what about, you know, what they think you want to read? Right? So it's like this very, they're the gatekeepers First, there's like the agents, right? Because you kind of have to get an agent who's gonna then pitch it to a publisher, if you want, like one of the big, you know, five major publishers, and then it's like, the small group of editors who are deciding what they think, you know, has commercial value, and they may get it wrong. And then, you know, some book may come in from some indie publisher, some self published book that hits the Zeitgeist and that, you know, everybody falls in love with and it becomes like a viral sensation, like it can still happen. Um, so, you know, there can be some like groupthink around these issues. And it's, it's important, I think, to understand that and kind of know what you're up against.

34:45 MOLLY

And I think that really ties back into the diversity issue two, which is that if you have agents and publishers who are all very homogenous and are the same race and the same sexuality, they're, you know, it's kind of a We all have biases towards stories that relate to us. And when that happens if everyone is the same, and then you're missing out on some really amazing stories, just because you might say, well, I don't relate to this, or I don't like get this. So I think that when you're talking about the question of like, we obviously want to see more diverse authors and diverse books. And I think in a way that really has to start with the workforce and with editors and agents so that you're making space for the authors and for the stories.

35:34 CHRISTINA

So just want to say that Lisa's, right. I mean, we're in a very specific space, we are in the commercial publishing, top five, you know, big book space. And there are lots of other ways to get published,

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actually, in this world. You know, self publishing is at one end, but there are lots of small presses. These days, university presses are publishing many more novels, because just because the Big Five aren't, you know, there's not room for a lot of people. And there are also all kinds of amazing indie, indie presses as well, you won't be getting the big advance, and you have to do more self promotion. But there are a lot of benefits for writers who feel that they don't fit into that, you know, very sort of rigid mainstream in a way. We can talk more about that, and I just wanted to raise it.

36:37 STUDENT

Alright, my name is Sannan, and I, my question was actually kind of related to what we were just talking about publishing trends. And I want to ask, So specifically, like in recent years, with the rise of short form content, and by short form, not just like 20 minutes, like 10 seconds, 15 seconds, and how that's, you know, it's arguable that a lot of that has contributed to, generally people's attention spans are shortening, in terms of the media they consume? Where do you guys see the future of books and long form content like novels? Based on that?

37:20 CHRISTINA

Do you want to start with that, Lisa?

37:23 LISA

Yeah, I mean, my immediate reaction is just that, you know, I do think people's attention spans, you know, have gotten shorter and shorter, and I do see it reflected in publishing. And, you know, when I get a query from someone who, you know, is sending me their 190,000 word, memoir, you know, my first reaction is you need to cut this in half, you know, and it's sad, because it could be the most incredible 190,000 words ever, but it's not going to get published. And I think I'd get laughed out of the room, if I sent, you know, if I picked up the phone and called, you know, Molly, to pitch my, you know, this memoir, and I said, it was 190,000 words, I think I'd hear her grown on the other side. You know, so there's already kind of a bias against something that's super long. I mean, it's probably different, I'm guessing with novels, but I'm guessing, you know, unless you're already an established novelist, where, you know, you look at like, the, you know, let's go back to like JK Rowling, you know, the first Harry Potter books were like this, and they got bigger and bigger. And that was great, because people wanted more and more. And so I think, if you're established, you can do that, and you can get away with it. And personally, you know, if I'm into something, I, you know, I want it to be longer, because I don't want it to end. And sometimes I'll finish a book and then I'll just turn right to page one and start reading again, because I already missed the characters, and I don't want to let them go. But I do feel that publishers are looking for shorter form content, and a big part of my job as an agent, I really am an editor, you know, I will edit a great deal before I will pitch something to to an editor. Because it's sad to say, but a lot of editors, their role now is is really to acquire, first and foremost, and there's very little, you know, this is not every editor, but you know, there are many editors that don't really have time to

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edit, they acquire and they're, you know, that's kind of their main job. So we you know, I do a lot of that and other agents do a lot of that and so a lot of what I will do is tighten, you know, and that's, you know, cutting things and making things more concise. Less is more.

39:46 MOLLY

I agree to an extent Yeah, I mean, definitely that there is a trend away from super long, super weighty books. But I also think that there is something about books that kind of acts as a good kind of counter programming to things like Tic toc. And I think that I'm someone who I feel the same way. Like, I often have a very short attention span and feel like it's hard to get back into reading. But then I think, you know, I'll start reading a book and kind of get out of my slump. And it's just, it's just a great way to great feeling to like spend the afternoon just completely lost in a book. And I think that that's something that still really appeals to people. And, you know, I think I agree that a big part of it is like getting people to pick up books in the first place. And I think that in that sense, you know, there may be a bit of a trend towards shorter books, I also think a big thing in that space is like the copy the selling copy for a book. So like, if you pick up a book, you know, the cover is so important now, because many people will be just kind of flipping through Instagram are flipping through Amazon or walking through a bookstore. And you might not get much farther than looking at the cover, or looking at the very, like, top line flap copy. But I do think that I'm not as worried about publishing kind of losing ground to the more like, concise kind of media. Because I do feel like it's like, it's like movies where, you know, often I'm in the mood to just watch a half hour TV show. And maybe that's more often than I am to watch a two hour movie. But then when you sit down and actually watch a movie, it's just such a great experience. And I think that it's similar with books.

41:56 STUDENT

I have a more procedural question. I am pretty entrenched in the sciences. And so like grant writing, and that review, resubmit process is pretty clear. But like, for submissions to newspapers, or magazines, or even like novels and other works like that, what is generally the process? Like, how many steps does one have to go through? And what do those steps look like?

42:28 LISA

CHRISTINA: Go ahead, go ahead. LISA: Well, I mean, I, I think it's actually different for you know, you mentioned there a few different things in that question. Um, so, you know, for for things like newspapers and magazines, I think, you know, it's, it's best if you are pitching directly. And I mean, usually in the masthead or, you know, inside the magazine, or inside the newspaper, you know, there usually is a, a contact for submissions. And there should, you should be able to find submission guidelines, and, you know, follow them. And like, for example, I know that, you know, the New York Times Modern love column has very specific submission guidelines, and you can find them on the New York Times website, and Dan Jones, who's the editor of that calm, I mean, even, you know, kind of

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writes a whole guide about what goes into a good Modern Love column and gives examples and then gives you an email for where to submit, and I've had authors, you know, who submitted directly to that and gotten their modern loves published, I mean, of course, it always helps. If you do you know, if you know, an agent, or you're working with one or you know, someone, you know, in publicity that has a more direct contact, you know, it does help.

But I guess I would say, like, as with anything, and is with querying an agent to try and get an agent to, you know, to sign you or to take you on, I think the key is to make your pitch personal and to the point. If somebody sends me a pitch that says, do your agent, or if it's just sort of starts out, and it's not personal at all, and then I can see that they've just, you know, I'm on a BCC list, and they probably sent it out to, you know, 50 other agents, I'm not gonna even look at it. If I read the first sentence, and they spelled my name wrong, I'm not going to look at it, honestly. Because if you can't take the time to proofread your work, I mean, this is kind of getting into the weeds. But you know, these are little important things. The pitches that work best for me are ones where I can tell someone's gone to the trouble to like, look at my bio on my website, or they've looked on my LinkedIn and they find some way to connect, like, they'll say, you know, I'm submitting a work, you know, illegal work related, you know, it's, you know, some aspect of constitutional law, and I saw you published the work by Robert Becker's book on the death penalty, and he was head of constitutional law and at New York Law School.

And you know, I think my book would appeal to the same readers because, you know, it's something where I can see they've taken the time to research me and what I do and know my specialty. And I know, they're not just sending this out willy nilly. And I think the same is true, if you're sending something, if you're submitting to a journal, or to a magazine, or a newspaper or website, you want to show that you you're doing it specifically to them, you know, for a reason, and here's why you think your particular piece is most suited to them. And I think that is what will get someone's attention. And I know, it's what gets my attention.

45:46 CHRISTINA

And I will say to you, as the mother of, you know, three kids who've been, who are, you know, Eli's a senior, he's looking for jobs. And one of the things we were talking about is, he's kind of interested in theater or in producing. And he needs to be pretty specific about what he's asking for in a cover letter. But he doesn't know, himself, he would do anything. And he's like, but I would do anything. And I'm like, I know. But you have to be more specific. Because, you know, that's the kind of cover letter that's going to get a response. And, in fact, I was at Duke Family Weekend, last fall, and ran into this guy who's a sports agent, who was has his kids there at Duke. And he was saying, he mentors kids all the time, who want to get into this world. And he said, you know, the biggest mistake they can make is coming to me, and I say, what are you? Why do you want to work for me, and they say, because I love

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sports. He's like, everyone loves sports, I don't care that you love sports, you have to want to work on my marketing team, or on my sales development team. Like, I need to know that you've looked at my website, and I've taken enough time to really think it through.

And the parallel for us for you guys is that it takes work to do what Lisa's talking about, which is to go to her website and look up what she's interested in. And follow that through a couple of books or see, you know, one of one of the ways one of the ways to get started on this, if you want to get an agent, is to look at all the books you have in your possession, or that you have gotten out of the library, and go to the acknowledgments and see who the agent is and start writing this down. And then you can figure out books that you love and who the agents are who represent these books. Yes, it's time consuming. And I think, you know, part of the psychological game is that like, it might not pay off. So it feels like you're wasting your time in a way. But that is the extra step that will really get you over the edge. Like, I get asked to blurb a lot of books, which means writing those quotes on the back of books, and I don't have much time for it. And I get, you know, like three books a day, I got a ton of books. And I got the most amazing letter from a writer who was like, here's why I want you to blur my book. Here are the things that I've that have resonated for me, here's an interview, you did that. I mean, it wasn't even wrote like that. But it was just like, and I read that you said this, and I really felt this way. And it must have taken her an hour or two to write this letter, but it really swayed me. I mean, I didn't know her. I only now mostly blurb books from people, either agents I know or someone has sent it. To me, this was a totally cold call. And it was so heartfelt. I sent it to Kate, Molly, I sent a guy here who's works with Molly, to say like, this is the best blurb letter I request I've ever gotten in my life. And she's like, Oh, my God, that is amazing. But it does make a difference. And I also want to say that you guys are at such a great in my view benefit that you're so young, you have the world ahead of you. And partly, you know, the question we had earlier about like today, short forum, et cetera, et cetera.

49:15 CHRISTINA cont-

Editors are really eager to hear from young people. And I think that's huge, actually, like you're at a tremendous benefit. If you can be professional, even at your age. I mean, I don't think I was I don't think I have the confidence to be but if you can, like really go for it with the cover letter and with your outreach to people and with the subject matter and the seriousness of purpose, the way you take it on for real. It's not a game, it's real life but you are at 22, 21, 22, 23, you have so such a great advantage actually, because everybody wants to hear from people your age. With that in mind, what Lisa was just talking about, which is the Modern Love column. Right now, I actually sent this to you today, they have a college essay contest closes in May, and they want to hear only from college students. So, um, you know, consider writing a piece for Modern Love.

And by the way, the cool thing about writing a piece for Modern Love is that you can almost always sell it somewhere else. Like, if you write to their specifications, and you really pay attention to what they

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want. A lot of people want those kinds of essays. So I have a lot of friends who've written essays, a number of whom got the Modern Love, but if you didn't, there are often other places you can place it. And I want to say one more thing, which is, I actually think, unlike when I was your age, there are such tremendous resources online for how to write the right cover letter, how to do your resume for the arts, you know, I mean, so many good, like, actually follow this advice about how to write assisting what Lisa was saying, a succinct and meaningful cover letter that's really hits the mark. And also take advantage of people like Amy, sorry, Amy, but to you know, to read your cover letter, and to make sure that you have multiple people look at it. And especially if you can get your English professor or Amy or someone in the arts to do it, and to just make sure it's exactly right before you send it off. And one final thing, no typos, if you're applying for anything in English in the arts, you know, just that you will just they'll just toss it. They'll toss it if there's a typo. So you just want to be absolutely meticulous about that. Was that too harsh? Lisa?

51:48 LISA

No. Because we're inundated. I mean, we get, you know, hundreds of queries a week, really. And so it needs to stand out. It needs to end and there are some special, I mean, I do have I mean, I, I have one pile of like the worst ones I've ever gotten. And one pile of the best ones I've ever gotten. But you know, the ones that stand out, they stand out for reason. And you can tell that they're just delivered and thoughtful. And they have that extra special, something that just makes me excited.

52:20 CHRISTINA

It is that thing, too. The people who stand out are the ones who really put in the time. So I know again, it's hard to do that when it feels faceless, and nameless. And it's just, ah, how am I ever going to break through that it makes a huge difference to be really prepared and to put in the time.

52:44 STUDENT

Hi, my name is Greta. Thank you so much for speaking with us tonight. My question is, do you ever read your book reviews? And how do you deal with the good ones and the bad ones?

52:59 CHRISTINA

I guess that's a question for me, although Lisa and Molly I know read read reviews of your writers. Right? Um, yeah, I mean, I have a Google Alert. So you can't really avoid you know, whenever I publish a book I have, there's a Google, my husband sets it up. I don't even know how it works. But, um, but I do get them in. And yeah, I mean, I am always curious about the reception to my books. And I think it's interesting when people say they don't read anything. I mean, obviously, when you finished a book, there's nothing you can do about that book, it's finished. But when you write a lot of books, or not a lot, but whatever, when you write more than two or three, there are things that come up in your work over and over again. And it's useful, I think, to learn what people really respond to and what they

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don't. So I, I do, I don't. So pre-publication, there's a most writers I know, have a sort of love hate relationship with a platform called Goodreads because people can be super harsh there. And also just write things like I'd give this one stars because like, I had one for example, that gave me one star because I had deckle edging on my book, which means the edges are rough. It's on purpose. That's like a thing. And she was like the pages are torn in a weird way. So I'm giving us one star. I mean, there are things like that.

But um, but before publication, and I think we said Molly would both agree everybody's paying a lot of attention to sort of see the reception of the book because people they have readers before the book comes out for what they call advanced reading copies or AR C's or ARs and it kind of matters like if there's momentum building, but once for me once the book is out, other than the kind of Amazon number that you just see, when you look at the book as a whole, I don't really read all those, you know, customer reviews, I feel like I have a pretty strong sense of the reception to book. But I don't know, I, when I, when my first novel came out, I was, I felt like I had been skinned raw, like, I was so terrified of getting reviewed. And eventually, you just are newer to it, you know, it's just like part of the process. But I remember feeling so vulnerable and so scared. When my first book came out, and my first review, thank God was a start pre publication review, and it was like, I just melted into a puddle. You know, and then when you have a bad review, it balances that, but you just have to develop a very thick skin, I think. What do you think, Molly?

56:04 MOLLY

Yeah, it's really interesting. I liked what you said about how it can be helpful, kind of as you're writing from book to book to remember. And I mean, I think good reads specifically, he makes such a good point where, like, I've seen so many reviews, where it'll be a one or two star review. And it'll start off with just, well, I never read this kind of book, this isn't really my genre. Also, I hated it. And it's like, well, those reviews, you have to take with a grain of salt, because they're everywhere. And you know, it's if it's if it's a review by someone who was never gonna like this book anyway, that's something to kind of brush off your shoulders. But I also like, I feel very protective of my authors, like when I see bad reviews, like, I'm like, oh, like, it hurts me. So I'm like, I can imagine how they feel. And it's something that I think working in the industry, you kind of learned to get over. But I also think something that's interesting about how they can help you is, for us from a positioning standpoint, often with these early reviews, it can be a really interesting way to see what parts of the book are really resonating with people. So especially with novels, you know, very often you'll have novels that have all these different angles. So maybe you have something that's a family story. But also there's like a mystery within it, there's a little bit of a thriller element. And there's this in this in this. And when we're pitching the book, you kind of have to figure out what to lead off with and what to really what books to compare it to. So looking at these pre publication, early reviews can be really helpful in that sense, where if you're getting a lot of reviews, and people saying, oh my gosh, the family relationships here, were just so

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beautifully done. And it really reminded me of this book and this book, that can be super helpful, because we know that it's something that we'll want to play up more in our like, copy and our kind of promotion, and also kind of hitting on those comparative titles to really reach out to readers of those books. So yeah, I think that reviews, you know, there's good and bad to them, and part of it is just figuring out how to use them to your benefit.

58:18 CHRISTINA

What about you, Lisa, what do you think?

58:20 LISA

Yeah, I mean, I agree with what you said, you definitely need to have a thick skin. And I think it's harder today, you know, than it was for authors 20 3040 years ago, and there was no social media. And, you know, there are platforms where people you know, will just, you know, tweet or get into conversations about you know, books and maybe, you know, especially things like memoir, which are very personal. And I think, you know, authors will, it's hard not to take it personally, if if somebody is critiquing, you know, your work, your writing, your style. But, you know, I just, you know, some authors, I will say, you know, I will advise them, you know, maybe you should just not read them, if you don't have that thick skin, because what good is it going to do? Right? You know, if it's just gonna send you into, you know, an anxiety driven panic. And, you know, I think other writers are perfectly happy, you know, to get on and engage with with their constituents, whether there are people who loved or hated their work. So I really think it's a very individual decision on your part as an artist or writer, it doesn't matter. You know, you could be a musician, you could be an actor. You know, anything that I guess is up for public. You know, display and critique is you're putting yourself in a position and you have to decide, you know, how you want to engage with that or not, but I think a thick skin isn't And I'll say that you know, the same thing Molly said, I feel extremely protective of, you know, all my writers, all my authors, they're their family to me. So when they bleed, I bleed, you know, but but I also have been in the business long enough to take a professional view of it and know that everybody has an opinion. And ultimately, the work will stand on its own legs.

1:00:26 CHRISTINA

So I know we have to go, I just want to say one thing that I think will be helpful to you that this raises for me that that's not at all about reviews, exactly. But I think so Amazon, as you know, is super controversial in the writing world, because it's the big conglomerate. We believe in independent bookstores, we want to support independent bookstores, it's this big monster. With that said, it is the most useful resource on the planet. And it will be very useful to you guys entering the marketplace just in terms of being able to quickly look at other books that are similar to your own. Tenley and I have talked about this. And in terms of reviews of other books, I mean, Amazon does what no other places done others are now aggregating that information somewhat like bookshop.dot.org is the independent

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version of it, it still doesn't have the algorithms so that you can look at Amazon and see books that are similar to yours, or books that agents you like published or editors you like and get so much information about them. You can also learn how to pitch your own book by looking at the descriptions of other books. So I just think there are a million ways that you can take advantage of that as emerging authors that will be helpful to you just think of it as a resource as a giant library in the sky that you can, you know, sort of figure out how to place your own career and books in in terms of feedback reviews, descriptions, blurbs, all of that stuff.

1:02:37 CHRISTINA & ALL

Thanks, everybody. Good luck with your turn. And thank you, everyone.

57:28 DAVE KARGER

That's it for this episode of DEMAN Live. I'm DAVE KARGER, DEMAN is a signature program of Duke Arts and Duke Alumni Engagement and Development. Follow DEMAN on social and stay updated at DukeDEMAN.com, that's d e m a n.com where you can find our full archive of episodes. Thanks so much for joining us. See you next time.

This episode was produced by me, Lilly Clark, in collaboration with Hear at Duke, Duke's student run podcast hub. Our theme song is "Carolina" by Cameron Tompkins.

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