

Susan Clark – Switzer Book Publishing Webinar

Overarching comments:

Why write a book?

I wrote my two books because there was something I wanted to say that I felt needed saying, and it wasn't being said. I feel that books are a great paradigm-shift tool – a good way to introduce new ideas society-wide and change the public conversation.

From a purely personal perspective, being an author is also a good profile-raiser. If you want to teach or do public speaking, it can enhance your career. However, as a rule, I wouldn't count on it being a money-maker.

What are some tricks to keep writing when it gets hard?

--Block out special time every day or week to write. Turn off email, phone, etc. and commit yourself to that time.

--Read others' work that is relevant to your topic. I've found that when I read, I often respond with a "yes, but" and I remember what I wanted to add to the conversation.

--Be aware of your biorhythms. Writing is a very personal exercise, and the time you make for it needs to be in sync with your body. Although I've heard many people say they write best in the morning, personally my best time is at night. Experiment.

--If you have trouble making writing happen but you really want to do it, take a look at Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles*. It's a little bit crazy, but it might get you off the dime.

Why did I have a co-author for both of my books, and what are some tricks to making co-authorship work?

I am an extravert, which means I think better out loud and I find energy with other people. My ideas stop developing after a while when I'm in my own head; I'm like a wind-up toy that needs to be re-wound by conversation. For this reason, co-authorship makes sense for me.

Also, I know my limitations, in terms of content and research. In both of my books, I had the concept and the drive to make the books happen, and I approached my co-author. In both cases, they were glad that someone else had done that preliminary work, and were excited to get on board. It was a win-win.

But co-authorship isn't for everybody. Some tips to make it work more smoothly:

--Brainstorm early to be sure you have the same vision.

--Revisit the vision as the book progresses and be prepared to revise it as the project progresses. Keep communication lines open!

--Divide up first-drafting responsibilities (by concept, by chapter, whatever works).

Maybe the first draft is all one person. Just be clear that you're not at cross-purposes.
--Share sources. Be sure you're both going to be comfortable putting your names on the whole document.
--Use "Track Changes" or some other technique to edit each other respectfully. Stick with the process you decide on.
--Be very careful with version control, so that you both know which version of the sections are active and whose court they're in.

How should I find a publisher?

--Go to a bookstore (or a virtual bookstore, or your own bookshelf) and pick up books you admire, emulate, or feel your book will be like. See who published them. Go to their website and check out their specs for manuscript submission (you might have to dig around a bit—they'd rather sell you books than encourage unsolicited manuscripts). You could even contact authors you admire for an informational interview.

--I recommend Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato's *Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—and Get It Published*. It takes you through the whole process of proposal writing, addresses questions about agents, etc.

Other follow-up questions:

What are your thoughts on self-publishing?

My first book was published with a press that was so tiny that it was essentially self-publishing, and it worked well. This is because we had a very specific, targeted audience in mind, and we had the means to reach them personally (existing networks). So this was an ideal circumstance for self publishing. But keep in mind that PR and distribution will be YOUR job if you self publish, and these are huge tasks. (You thought writing a book was hard?) Make a realistic plan.

How available are grants?

My experience is that book-writing grants are rare. If it's a scholarly project you may find fellowships, but in the general world of non-profits, funders don't like funding publications. My first book was made possible partially by a grant, but that was because the workshops that would accompany the book were funded.

Do you have to have a track record of publishing essays or shorter essays elsewhere before trying to pitch a book?

I think this helps a LOT. Publishers know what they're getting if they can see your past work. They also know you have the ability to follow through with what you say you'll do.

From the standpoint of the writing craft, writing is like any form of exercise – you need to do it regularly to stay strong and at the top of your game. I keep a daily journal partly because it's an important way to keep the writing-machine oiled; and I write radio commentaries on a regular basis partly because they have to be short, so it keeps my

editorial discipline sharp.

And from a personal standpoint, writing regularly will help you know whether you actually, on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis, actually *like* writing. You want to be sure of this before you commit to writing a full-length book.

What are the first three steps a Fellow should take to write a book?

--Make an outline of what you want to write about.

--Get a copy of Susan Rabiner's book (or some similar book) to see what a book proposal will involve.

--Make an appointment with a colleague – someone whose opinions you respect and who cares about your book topic -- and bounce your idea off of him/her. If you're still excited about your book idea after it has seen the bright light of day, make a follow-up appointment with your colleague for a month or two away, and commit to making progress to report to him/her by then.