Switzer Writing/Publishing Webinar
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Though I've long had an interest in writing, the bulk of my training and professional background lies in science and conservation. Through those experiences, however, I've become a firm believer that scientists need to become better storytellers, so that everyone can better understand and treasure the wonders of the natural world. Too many fascinating discoveries and ideas never make it beyond the rather limited audience of peer review and scientific journals. Those are essential parts of science, of course, but there are times we need to take the stories farther. It's particularly vital for those of us interested in the conservation of the natural world -- after all, how can we expect people to care about and protect things that we haven't even told them about? So, I believe strongly in the importance of the *storytelling* of science, and that belief led me to start writing books.

My first two books, *The Impenetrable Forest* and *Feathers*, have both been well received, allowing me to work full time on a new volume about the evolution and natural history of seeds. In general, I recommend using an agent and putting a lot of effort into developing a good book proposal. It's also important to save some time and energy for public speaking and promoting your book once it is released. This helps build an audience for your work, and the speaking fees can be an important source of income in between advances.

1. How do you come up with ideas for books?

- As a scientist with insatiable curiosity about the natural world, I have no trouble coming up with ideas. The challenge lies in narrowing them down, distinguishing between ideas and books. That process involves research, discussions with my agent, and ultimately the preparation of a detailed book proposal. By the end of it, I'll have a clear notion of whether the topic will make a compelling book, and whether or not it's something I want to devote my time and energy to!

2. Do you need to get an agent? If so, when should you get one, after you have written and entire draft or before?

- I highly recommend an agent – their expertise and their contacts make the commission (usually 15%) a very worthwhile investment. One suggestion: make sure that your agent is familiar with your genre. If you're writing about natural history, don't get an agent who specializes in cookbooks, or science fiction! To do this, simply look in the acknowledgements of books similar to what you'll be writing and make up a list of agents working in that field. You can then approach them with your idea and find out whether or not they are taking new clients.

- For non-fiction, the general rule is to secure an agent before writing the book. The agent will then try and sell your book proposal and secure an advance. (That proposal may be quite a significant document, with a detailed outline and sample chapters).

3. Follow-up: But what is the advantage of getting an agent before you finish your book? If you are a first time writer you are not to get a upfront payment for a contract are you? or is it that they will find a publisher for you before you have finished the manuscript?

- See above. It's not unusual even for first-time authors to get an advance in non-fiction.

4. I don't believe there were many (if any?) references to self publishing. This seems to be extremely popular right now. Any thoughts on the pros/cons on that, or any other advice to this end?

- I think self-publishing is particularly effective for niche markets. I know several authors who have had great success with self-publishing that targets a very specific audience – either topically or regionally. One note, however, is that you need to be prepared to invest considerable time and money into promotion, getting your book into stores or on websites or in e-book catalogs to make sure it is available to the right audience. Promotion is part of any author's job, but particularly if you are publishing it yourself.

5. Is there anything you would do differently in publishing with e-books?

- The e-book phenomenon is a rapidly growing segment of the book market, and one that most publishers and authors are still trying to figure out. While my books are available as e-books, I've done nothing specifically geared towards this market. I think there is a great opportunity, particularly in non-fiction, to add images, video and interactive content to an e-book. That may become the norm, but it means added time and expense so for most titles the publishers seem to be holding back to see who will be the first to take the plunge.

6. How available are grants (government or foundation) to cover your expenses while researching and writing your book? Are there any issues with ownership, income, or publishing with receiving grant support while you are writing the book, or to help cover expenses of publishing a book?

- In the science and natural history genre, there isn't a great deal of money available for this. If you are in academia, there can be some institutional support or research grants that apply, but these are hard to access from outside that system. Also, science writing generally doesn't

appeal to those making grants to artists, so you're something of an ugly stepchild. Best to get that advance and live frugally, or, as Eric D. suggests, be born rich!

7. Did you have a track record of publishing essays or shorter pieces elsewhere before trying to pitch a book? How important were those past publications to your success?

- I've published a wide range of academic and popular articles – everywhere from *Audubon* and *The Huffington Post* to *Molecular Ecology*. I suspect that having that track record helps your proposal to get a second glance, but just as importantly it hones your writing craft. I definitely recommend working on shorter pieces, even as you work on a book. (In fact, I'm working on one right now!)

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

- Read a lot.
- Write a lot.
- Hone your idea into a strong proposal.
- Get a good agent.

   (I know that's four.)