



Nikki Christer

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CHERYL AKLE: Do you dream of writing a novel? Or do you just like listening to authors talk. I'm Cheryl Akle from the Better reading *Stories Behind the Story* podcast.

This new podcast springs from many requests we've had from listeners to do more episodes on how to write. We've produced a six-part series where we discuss the craft of writing with some of Australia's top authors and industry professionals. Welcome to *Better Reading On Writing*.

Alice Clark-Platts

CHERYL: What career, I mean, you can't, you can't be prepared for that. Can you?

ALICE: No you got to be pretty –

CHERYL: I mean, I guess maybe acting, you would have that many rejections. But there's not a lot of careers out there where your work is being knocked back.

ALICE: I guess. But I suppose you I sort of saw it as being a bit of an entrepreneur, like you can have your own business. And I think, you know, there must be hundreds of startup businesses or entrepreneurs, you know, who do get knocked back all the time? Yeah. And I mean, yes, we I suppose you could just say, Well, that's it, then I'm going to give up but if you really know that that's what you want to do, then you keep battling on.

Nikki Christer

CHERYL: That was *The Flower Girls* author Alice Clark-Platts, talking about how she sees herself as an entrepreneur. She approaches being an author as a business. So how do you shift from the creative process to the business of writing? You finally finished your novel, what next? How do you approach an agent or a publisher? What are they looking for in a submission? What are they looking for in an author? And for those who find themselves signing that elusive publishing contract, what happens after the ink dries? Joining us for all the insider information we have Nikki Christer, group publishing director at Penguin Random House, Australia. Welcome, Nikki.

NIKKI: Thank you, Cheryl. Nice to be here.

CHERYL: So there are there are some big questions there aren't there?

NIKKI: There are about what happens after you've, you've written your book.

CHERYL: That's right. So firstly, Nikki, explain to me the difference between an agent and a publisher. And do you need both?

NIKKI: An agent is, in a sense, sort of the author's manager, the agent is often the first port of call for an author. An author will write their manuscripts and go to the agent who they rely on to basically select the right publisher for that book. And the agent will act as their sort of go between, the buffer invariably between the the publisher and the author. The publisher is in the business of actually editing and publishing that novel, that book. So it comes from the agent. Often agents send out wide submissions to publishers. And you can find yourself as a publisher in an auction situation, where you're all clamoring for this particular book, and the agent fields offers and makes sure that the author that they're representing is actually going to the right house for that book. But of course, not every author chooses to have an agent. And they don't always need an agent.

CHERYL: Like if you take Trent Dalton, for example. I mean, his publisher just approached him direct it. Didn't she?

NIKKI: Yeah, I mean, that's, that happens a lot. Publishers do approach authors direct a lot. You know, you see something on television, you hear an author, you hear someone being interviewed you meet someone, somewhere, and, and it can lead to all sorts of possibilities. So you don't always need that person, the agent in between when you've actually got a direct line to the to the author. Having said that, you can often be at a place where an author comes up to you and of course, everyone knows that sort of horror of having been at a party or something, and an author comes up and says, "I understand you're a publisher. So, you know, I've got this amazing story. I've been writing it for 20 years, I think you'll love it, it's fabulous." I've got to the point now, where I

just tell people that I'm actually in accounts, rather than a publisher. It just makes my life a bit easier.

CHERYL: I mean, I should be doing the same, because I get it all the time as well.

NIKKI: I can imagine.

CHERYL: People just don't understand what we do. Tell me, do you think everyone has a book in them?

NIKKI: I think everyone potentially has a story in them. But I don't necessarily think that they are the person to write that book. I think a writer is not the same as someone who's got a good story, a writer has usually honed their craft. It sort of diminishes writers to assume that everyone who thinks they've got a good story can write that story. So no, I don't think everyone's got a book in them. I think everyone's potentially got a good story. But whether that translates to a book, I'm not completely convinced.

CHERYL: I guess it goes the other way too. You could be a writer but not have a story in you.

NIKKI: You could and often writers are given commissions. Sometimes the publishers will approach writers and ask them to write a specific book, usually non-fiction. It's quite rare - in fact, I can't think of an example, certainly I've never done it, where I've approached a writer and asked them to write a novel. And here's what the novel should be. I mean that would be something quite unique. But for non-fiction, absolutely. Many writers are waiting to be commissioned. And some of our best books are our ideas that we have gone to writers with.

CHERYL: What are you looking for when you're looking? Tell me how the process works at Penguin Random House? How do you acquire books?

NIKKI: First, what I'm looking for, is I want something that's actually going to make me feel something, I want to feel that I haven't read it before. I want to feel moved or amused or entertained or enraged, or whatever that emotion might be. It's really got to do something, it's got to stir me in a way, because as you can imagine, we get hundreds of submissions every month. So for you to want to actually take that book on, you've really got to have this sort of this kind of visceral reaction to it. That's what I'm looking for. That's the emotion that I want to feel when I'm when I'm looking for a manuscript when I'm reading a manuscript, then I feel this is probably for me.

CHERYL: We have spoken to so many authors here and authors of different, you know, popularity or caliber or whatever word you'd like to use. So we've had Tim Winton in, we've had Richard Flanagan, we've had commercial, Belinda Alexandra, you know, Melina Marchetta. But what I'm often surprised about, and particularly with Tim Winton, I was surprised at how much work went into his novel. The writing, the rewriting, he was very frank about how much he rewrites his first go, and then his second go, third go and

fourth go. But for me, as a reader, it feels like it has just come out just the way it is. That's how it reads. It is absolutely seamless.

NIKKI: Well, there you have it. I mean, there's the measure of brilliant writer who makes it look absolutely seamless and effortless. But in actual fact, it's far from that. And that just tells you everything you need to know. Someone like Tim has honed his craft to such a degree that he makes it seem as if everyone could do it. But no one can do it. –

CHERYL: No one can do Tim Winton.

NIKKI: No, no one can do Tim Winton, no one can do Peter Carey. No one can do Richard Flanagan, no one can do any of these, these major writers whose work we just adore, that's why they're them.

CHERYL: That's why that is them. And I think sometimes in, correct me if I'm wrong, you've got the story and then you've got the craft. And I think sometimes when those two come together, that's the magic.

NIKKI: It is, that's when alchemy happens. When you've got a brilliant story, actually, it really is the most wonderful thing when you've got a fantastic story, beautifully told, and you've got a wonderful author, who is able to promote that story, and actually live that story and engage with their readers. That is when true alchemy happens and we see it we see it with a number of authors, where they just they tick - I hate to use the expression ticking boxes, but they do tick every box. We ask a lot of our writers actually these days, we ask too much. We expect them to be stand-up comedians, we expect them to be actors. We expect them to be psychologists. Plus, we expect them to be brilliant writers, and just sort of great people. It's an awful lot to expect it. Years ago we wouldn't expect... our writers wrote and it was our job as the publisher to get the book out there and to sell the book. Now we ask so much of the writer. So it's a partnership more in a sense now, which is a good thing. But it does, it does demand, it takes a lot out of the writers.

CHERYL: I heard this year that the Vogel prize wasn't going to be announced because they didn't there wasn't an entrant that they liked. And that surprised me. Do you think there's ebbs and flows in writing and trends? Or did people just not know about the prize to enter it? Like do you find that there's either a plethora of writers or plethora of manuscripts, or not? Does it come in waves?

NIKKI: In my experience, it doesn't come in waves. We have manuscripts coming to us all the time.

CHERYL: Right.

NIKKI: So I'm not aware, it doesn't feel as if, you know, certain months of the year we get more. We seem to just have a steady sort of flow of manuscripts coming to us. Yeah, it was interesting that they didn't want to award the prize this year for the Vogel? I

don't really know what to say about that. I mean, it's their prerogative not to if they don't feel that they have a-

CHERYL: Oh sure. Yeah, sure. I was just wondering whether, you know, books like say, for instance, Jane Harper. Would that kind of bring out all the crime writers and copycat crime? And, you know, was it that there wasn't enough stimulation out there to draw enough entrants or quality entrants?

NIKKI: I wonder whether it's not necessarily that they didn't have enough entrants, that they just didn't consider that they had one that was strong enough. But I could be wrong. I'm not privy to that sort of information. And yeah, you're right about manuscripts like, you know, Jane Harper. Or any crime writers, there is a sense that as soon as there is a success in one genre. And I'm guilty of doing this, there's that bandwagon publishing, we all jump on it, we all try to sort of find the next thing. I mean, 50 Shades was a classic example of that. The number of those erotic novels that publishers were putting out after 50 Shades. It's same as it ever was, we've always done that, you're always hoping that you can get a little bit of that.

CHERYL: It seems to me, and from where I sit at Better Reading, that the reader really drives the trends. Do you think the reader sets of trends in terms of consumption? Or is it -

NIKKI: I think they must do because if they didn't, if it were the publisher driving the trends, we would be laughing. Because we'd be constantly setting the trends. I mean, the readers know what they want.

CHERYL: They really do.

NIKKI: And as long as publishers are being innovative enough in their publishing, and pulling out a wide range of material, of books that the readers can come to, then they're doing their job. But we always rely on - I mean the readers are everything. The authors are everything, the books are everything. And then the readers, the audience. A writer's not a writer unless he or she has a reader. So readers are everything.

CHERYL: So Nikki, let's say I've been writing... I've had a hundred rejections, but I finally nailed it. You've read it, because I guess I've posted it. Is that how I do that? I send it to you.?

NIKKI: Ah well you'd probably send it to the company, and if you're not agented it would find its way to me eventually.

CHERYL: So you've read it, and you like it. Where to from there?

NIKKI: Well, first, I have to love it. So what happens to -

CHERYL: So it has to invoke all those feelings you talked about earlier?

NIKKI: It has to do all of that, you know. I read so many manuscripts, my default is usually going to be no. So it's very important that this one jostles for attention and is actually –

CHERYL: A masterpiece.

NIKKI: Of course, well, of course, because you've written it. So what would happen? I would approach... now I'm being a little bit picky here. Does it come through an agent or are you directly sending it me?

CHERYL: I'm sending it to you.

NIKKI: Okay.

CHERYL: Because somebody told me you're a really good publisher.

NIKKI: Right.

CHERYL: At a dinner party.

NIKKI: That's very nice. So I love this manuscript, I want to publish it. I approach you, I contact you, and I make you an offer. And you either accept, you haggle, we negotiate. And then eventually you do accept and I draw a contract up, which you then sign. You have someone check over the contract for you, and then you sign. And then we start the sort of editorial process, because chances are the book's going to need some work. Most manuscripts do. There are no perfect books in my world even when published and edited.

CHERYL: Talk to me about that. Because I've often heard people say, "Well, no one's going to touch my book." And then those people usually don't get published. And then you meet people like Dervla McTiernan, who we've had on this podcast, and she values that process tremendously. Talk to me a little bit about the editorial process.

NIKKI: You know, in my experience, most really great writers love that collaboration with their publisher. I mean, I would have thought as a writer, it would be a real honor to have someone look at your work as forensically as you have, when you've created that work, to actually get the honor of going through that work so carefully, and so lovingly, to make sure it is absolutely the best it can be. I can't see how that isn't a delightful thing, actually. But some authors, there's no denying it. Some authors don't enjoy that process, they consider that what they've sent in, is how it should be published. You know, and then that's an interesting dynamic when that happens, because I don't think I've ever seen a manuscript that needs nothing, I really haven't in my 30 years of publishing, I've never seen that manuscript. So you know, there has to be some negotiation, because you have to respect also the fact that this is someone's life's work, possibly. And you can't just go in there with your boots and your scissors and machete or whatever it is, and chop that work to pieces. You can't do that. You have to be

respectful, and you have to gain the author's trust. It's actually a relationship of trust. That is actually the most important thing between a publisher and a writer, is trust.

Mary-Anne O'Connor

MARY-ANNE: I just wrote his story. That's what I wanted to do. I always wanted to do it. I don't even know why. And it just came out. And then I sent it to every publisher in Australia, and it took three years to get published. And I had four major edits.

CHERYL: Did you find an agent or you did it yourself?

MARY-ANNE: I did it myself. I had some terrible moments.

CHERYL: Yeah.

MARY-ANNE: Anybody out there who's an aspiring author, I feel your pain.

CHERYL: Can you talk about that? Because we do have a lot of aspiring authors. And, you know, by the time we get to speak to a writer, they're elated, you know, they're published, for you it's your fourth book, but nobody sees the pain that comes with it. So talk to me a little bit about that, like the continuous rejection.

MARY-ANNE: It was so hard. I mean, three years was a very long time. It's probably more like three and a half years.

CHERYL: Right. And you kept at it though.

MARY-ANNE: I am very stubborn.

CHERYL: Yeah.

NIKKI: If I can give anyone a piece of advice about getting published, be stubborn. Don't take no for an answer. Because you will get no for an answer many, many times. You know, and I certainly did.

Nikki Christer

CHERYL: So that's Mary-Anne O'Connor, saying, "Don't take no for an answer." Do you think that's good advice for everyone?

NIKKI: Gosh. I don't think everyone has a book in them. I think a blog and a tweet is not the same as a novel. People think they should not have the same weight. People think that because they write great blogs, or they're really active on social media, that they're a writer, and that they can therefore produce the next best novel. And they're not the same thing at all. A wonderful novel is not the same as a fabulous tweet, even though actually, they can, in many ways, evoke the same power. But they are not the same thing and shouldn't be treated as the same thing.

CHERYL: I agree with that. Stephen King said, "By the time I was 14, the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips I impaled upon it, I replaced the nail with a spike and went on writing." There is a learning process, though, isn't there?

NIKKI: There is. You have to be a good writer, I would say you have to write, and you have to keep writing. And you also have to read.

CHERYL: Yes.

NIKKI: I come across a lot of writers who aren't huge readers, and I find that extraordinary. Because it is all about learning. It's about absorbing how other people might come to that situation. And while we're not talking about plagiarizing in any way, we're talking about just riffing or basically just sort of getting ideas and thinking, how would that writer handle this situation? You know, I can, I can probably learn something from them. So I think the most important things are keep, to keep writing and to keep reading.

CHERYL: So there's a lot of resilience and a lot of practice. But I guess at the end of the day, that's it. You got to give up.

NIKKI: Well, it comes a point where you just think how much more can some people take? No one likes to be rejected. After a while it's it's going to start playing with your head.

CHERYL: Yeah, I mean, I couldn't take one actually.

NIKKI: No, but I mean, a hundred you, you mentioned someone-

CHERYL: Josephine...

NIKKI: Jo Moon? Who had a hundred rejections? I mean, that's she's a strong woman to keep coming back after a hundred rejections, but then now look at her. For Joe it's paid off.

CHERYL: Well, the way that she presented it to me was that she was practicing. And that's another thing. Like, if you compare writing to music, for instance, I mean, hours and hours of practice, go into it before you perform. And I think sometimes people think, well, a book is just something that I sit there and, you know, type away. And that's it. It's

done and dusted. And they don't really have the craft of writing, because they haven't learned that.

NIKKI: I think, yes, I totally agree with you. I think one of the things about continuing to write and writing and writing and writing and writing is to actually know that sometimes you are just writing to... this is the sort of precursor to the to the book, to the novel that you're going to write. It's also knowing when to put something away. When to actually decide, "I love this." But I know that it's overworked. I know that it's overwrote. I know that actually I've destroyed what it was about this the essence of this book, because I have worked on it so much. I think there's an art to actually putting the book down.

CHERYL: So you can over practice in a way.

NIKKI: Well, after a while you over polish to the point where it doesn't feel fresh or new. People- authors do that. I mean, we all do that. Sometimes you have to be careful not to do that, not to actually in any way destroy what it was. The essence of that novel that made that novel so special, when you as the publisher read it for the first time. You can over polish something to the degree that it's almost unrecognizable. And it does not have that sort of gem, it doesn't glisten in the way that it did when you first read it.

CHERYL: That glisten, I like that. It's kind of like luminous that needs to shine, doesn't it?

NIKKI: Well, it does need to shine, it does. And that's so important that it stands out and shines.

CHERYL: I've often spoken to authors that have had a very successful first fiction book, like a debut fiction, and it's gone out to the world and the world has loved it. The readers have loved it. And we've had quite a few of those from Australia recently. But then when it comes to the second, that's a totally different story, isn't it? It's entirely-

NIKKI: It can be. And actually, that's a that's a quite a humbling experience often for everyone. I've been in a situation where I've had a published a book that was a huge. It was a first novel... huge bestseller. And you know, I like to think we did a great job. It was massively hyped. A lot of people were talking about it. I can honestly say not a lot of people loved it. But it became one of those books that was the water cooler book, and "Have you read this? Have you-?" you know, and people would want to discuss it. The problem is, they didn't come back for the second book.

CHERYL: Why?

NIKKI: Because they actually didn't love the first book. They bought it because it was it was a it was hype, actually. And really what it boiled down to, was this a good book? Was this the sort of book I really want to read, I really enjoy? They didn't. I think you can only fool the readers, maybe once. They're a discerning bunch of people and they're not going to come back.

CHERYL: They really are. Yeah, they're not going to come back.

NIKKI: So you just it's a bit. It's a cynical exercise, actually to think you can just apply that same sort of cookie cutter pipe around a second novel, when really the feeling is that the first novel didn't live up to it.

CHERYL: Do you think some people only have one book in them?

NIKKI: Yeah, Yeah, I do. Actually, I do. I think some people, yeah, probably do only have one book in them. And maybe one is a dangerous thing is to think that there are more and that there are different stories. Often you do read a second book from an author that's essentially the same story. But you know, told a bit slant. Whether or not I mean, that's a tough one to argue, really. But yeah, I think I think you should sort of know when to fold.

CHERYL: We like labels, everybody seems to like labels. And you know, the book industry itself loves them. So we often you know, people say, "What kind of book is it?" You know, particularly in the fiction genre. Is it commercial fiction? Is it literary fiction? Is it crime? Is it rural romance, whatever. Essentially, what is the difference between literary fiction and commercial fiction? And do you use those titles, or names?

NIKKI: We do, we do use those titles and names because we all understand that's the shorthand that we use. But a literary novel is not necessarily not commercial. Literary novels are often very commercial. Commercial fiction is really ruled by a great story, great storytelling, perfect, brilliantly written. Where it's an absolute, you can't put it down. It's having said that literary fiction is that too, of course, but often it is in the language, the style of writing, the fact that it can cross genres. We use terms like commercial fiction and literary fiction purely because we know what that means in-house. But there's nothing to say that they can't it sort of all meld into one actually, because some of our best literary writers are very commercial, as in they sell in those huge commercial numbers, which would make any commercial fiction writer jealous. So the boundaries are very blurred, actually.

CHERYL: I agree. I noticed with our readers on Better Reading in the comments on Facebook, they just like a good story and they don't think about genre, not at all. So you could present a Peter Carey, a Tim Winton, Fiona McIntosh, Monica McInerney. And they're going to enjoy each one on the value, on the face value of that book.

NIKKI: Exactly.

CHERYL: That's what they do.

NIKKI: And that's what readers do. I mean, readers actually, they're picking up that book for a specific need. And they want a great story. And they want it well told, whether that's a little more upmarket, if you like, or if it's a more sort of commercial, "I'm going to read this quickly. This is a great beach read, I'm on a plane, I want something really quick." It's, essentially it boils down to great storytelling.

CHERYL: There's also something else I've noticed with readers. Sometimes when we put a book out there and we suggest something and Fiona McIntosh was one of those recently, where the first comment will be all, several of the comments will be, "This is the best one, you know, this is nailed it for me, this is the best story, this is-" So you get, you know, peaks and troughs, I guess with the books that you put out. And the reader picks up on that very, very quickly.

NIKKI: Yeah, readers will often you know, they'll follow an author, but they'll know that that book may not be that author's best.

CHERYL: They do know.

NIKKI: I mean, I know. And I'm it's always a mystery to me how many books they will allow that aren't in their eyes are sub par from that author, if they're a huge fan of that author, whoever that is. And the author seems to be off their game, how many books will the audience allow them before they actually decide, I'm not going to read your books anymore.

CHERYL: I just want to talk to you about trends as well. Like, you know, in my lifetime, I've seen so many. But let's say the most recent trend was rural romance. And I've seen that peak and I've seen that peak fall away now, do you look for work that is peaking, you know, that the that the readers are looking to read?

NIKKI: In my opinion, you should never as a writer, you should never write for the market. I think that, I think to write for this sort of, to the vagaries of fashion is a mistake. And that you have to be true to your own craft and you have to actually, you have to believe in the story that you want to tell and not think okay, "I'll, I know this, this genre is popular right now, so I'll write one of those," because it's not authentic, often it doesn't feel right. You're probably doomed to failure if you do that. So I would recommend people don't just look at the trends and think "I can jump on that."

J.R. Lonie

CHERYL: I think it's really important for any potential author to understand that rejection is part of the process. And no isn't always final. Here's what all the J.R. Lonie has to say about that.

J.R. LONIE: So there's another lesson for writers: No is really good. At most of the time that people say no, it often means not yet. Don't feel disheartened, because you can do better.

Nikki Christer

CHERYL: So Nikki, what do you think has contributed to your success in the industry?

NIKKI: Well, we're making an assumption there that I'm successful.

CHERYL: Yeah. But let me assume that you are.

NIKKI: Well, let's, let's pray and, you know, we should hope that I am. A curiosity, I love books, I love working with other people's words. A lot of the time people ask me, well, you're a publisher, you work with books and authors, and words all the time, you must be able to create your own. I don't think I can actually. I think that's why I'm a publisher. Because I'm better with other people's words. I don't think I would have the ability, I don't think I have the story or the power actually to write my own book. But I do love working with others and bringing, help them bring their books to an audience. I like finding an audience for a writer.

CHERYL: So you've had huge success with some of your authors. For instance, you've had a Booker Prize winner, tell me how that feels, like it's so magnificent for Richard Flanagan. I mean, it is, you know, a massive accolade. But how does a publisher feel about that?

NIKKI: Immense pride. I mean, I've worked with Richard for two decades. And to have that honour bestowed on him was... I can't even explain. I can't describe it. It was amazing. That book was, is a masterpiece. So in my world, it's only right that it should have been awarded the Booker. But it's sort of surreal, because it's the pinnacle, in a way. But you can't dine out on that forever, much as I'd love to. I mean, I don't say to people... it would be insane. I'd lose my mind if I started walking around saying, "I'm the publisher." You just wouldn't. But it was—

CHERYL: Maybe I would.

NIKKI: But it was a wonderful experience. It's not something I can imagine ever living through again. I hope I do. But it feels a bit like it's just a once in a lifetime event.

CHERYL: Well, only three. I think only three writers have won the Booker, Australian writers.

NIKKI: Australian writers.

CHERYL: So Tom Keneally-

NIKKI: Tom, Peter Carey and Richard. It depends whether you include DBC Pierre who had that Australian background.

CHERYL: Right.

NIKKI: And actually we published them all. So pretty proud about that.

CHERYL: A big career. Yeah, you should be proud Nikki Christer. Huge career. I think you've had a lot of influence over what people are reading and it's been in a really positive way. Thank you so much for your time today.

NIKKI: Thank you for having me.

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