Jane Friedman - Interview Transcript

(Unedited)

Parul - LWS: [00:00:00] Hello writers and welcome to the London Writer Salon podcast. I'm Parl. I'm your host and the co-founder of the London Writer Salon. And our salon on interviews are chance for us to go behind the scenes of a writer's journey, an editor's journey, and dig into the stories behind the stories. And each week we invite a creator or a writer that we admire to join us at the salon to explore the craft of writing, the art, of building a writing career, and the reality of navigating the creative world.

Who better to talk on that subject than Jane Friedman and Jane has spent? If you don't know who Jane is you're in for a treat. Jane has been working in the publishing industry for 25 years. She's written several books publishing 1 0 1, a first time author's guide. She's contributed to a number of anthologies.

Her latest book, the Business of Being a Writer, is used in a classroom text by many writing organizations and publishing degree programs. And a second edition is coming out this spring, this year. She has two newsletters reaching over 40,000 writers and industry professionals. [00:01:00] There's the bottom line, which is I've just subscribed to actually nuanced market intelligence to thousands of authors and indu industry professionals.

Jane goes, really deep on some of the subjects that many of us really care about. And then her second newsletter, electric speed, is for creative people. And in each of those issues, she sh shares four digital tools plus curated reader recommendations. We're so excited to have Jane in the house today.

We're gonna be talking about what it means to be human in the publishing world today, what she thinks an author brand is all about and what's changed, if anything, about what publishers are looking for across the years. We'll also dive. Behind the scenes of how Jane thinks about writing and publishing.

So I have some questions for Jane, but in around an hour or so, I'll open it up to all of you for any questions that you might have. So do chime in on the chat if you have any questions, and we'll try and circle around to it at the end. Without further ado, welcome to the London Writer Salon Jaden.

Jane Friedman: Thank you so much for having me.

Parul - LWS: [00:02:00] You are so welcome.

It's so pleased to have you here and a big thank you to Deborah Drake for making this happen. I'd like to start a little bit a little bit back in time when you decided to take a, I think it's a Bachelor of Fine Arts at BFA at the University of Evansville, and I read somewhere that you'd wanted to pursue some kind of writing editing or even publishing job, and also curious about what you were dreaming of back then.

What did you hope for in your career?

Jane Friedman: Oh, I think I had the same dream as every student who gets a creative writing degree, whether it's, a bachelor's or a master's. I thought I was gonna write the next Great American novel. I don't know, is there a great British novel idea in the uk? I don't know. But here it's the great American novel that you're gonna write. And it's a funny thing because so many other writers, I think, I grew up falling in love

with certain books and certain authors as a kid, there's nothing more [00:03:00] romantic than the idea of becoming one of those people. But the truth is you actually have to enjoy. fiction in order to write the Great American novel. And I know that's a funny thing to say, but the more I got into writing and publishing and, the larger community the more I realized I enjoyed things. I actually didn't enjoy writing fiction even though that's what my creative writing program focused on.

Fiction is where a lot of the prestige is, at least in the United States and I think globally, frankly. but I actually fell in love more with journalism, nonfiction and editing. The first job that just I fell in love with, in fact was being copy editor for the college newspaper. So all of those activities were outside the purview of my formal program. And it didn't take long before, the initial motivations of going into creative writing to write that novel I realized I don't actually don't wanna [00:04:00] write a novel. It's not as fun as these other activities that I'm doing.

Parul - LWS: And so then you went on to, to work for Readers Digest. You're a pub publisher and editorial director there. You're, you've also been an assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati where you taught writing and storytelling. Also, university of Virginia. I. We were taught classes in publishing.

I'm curious about what joy you found from those roles, like what was the next phase, the evolution for you as you moved into the business side of publishing?

Jane Friedman: So when I started working in traditional publishing, I. started off on the editorial side and really from day one there were things that I was discovering that had never entered my head, certainly that had never been introduced in my undergraduate. I. Degree training or even internships. And that was things like profit and loss statements evidence of need in the marketplace. [00:05:00] Having to convince a board of sales and marketing people that the idea I had, actually could be successful in the marketplace. And trying to help authors who clearly had excellent creative work or had a vision for their book, and trying to translate that into a set of bullet points essentially that would convince executives that this book should come to life. So I, initially it was intimidating, but I found that I actually really enjoyed that part of the job. and. The longer I stuck with it, the more I was tasked with putting together strategic plans and visions for how the publishing program would grow and evolve, especially given some of the pressures that I went through early in my career with with eBooks, the internet, the digitization of information and what all publishing companies had to, undergo, which was moving from this very bricks and mortar world into, [00:06:00] where people find out a book's online, they purchase online. And you're competing with a lot of online media. So when I started out, it was very bookstore focused or bricks and mortar focused. And by the end I was overseeing a very multifaceted business that was primarily online driven that was active on social media, that depended on email newsletters for marketing and promotion. And I, in those early days and the end of my traditional publishing experience corporately was around 2010. Towards the end of that, I was still very much what I would call a techno optimist. I really enjoyed social media. It was more unicorns and rainbows at that time. And so it feels like another era compared to today.

Sadly, have gotten much darker that really, I would say those, that transition or that transformative time really helped me see that I had. I [00:07:00] had both an interest and a knack for the digital side and the business side. And then I, as I moved into my other roles teaching joining a literary journal and then launching my own business, I realized that was my niche.

It was to help educate and explain the business to writers and to other professionals.

Parul - LWS: And what made you decide to go full-time as a freelancer?

Jane Friedman: I was gonna get fired if, if I didn't resign first. So I stepped into a job at a literary journal. It lasted two years. I was tasked with relaunching the journals online presence bringing out a digital edition, and I did those things, but it was not a good fit. There's, for those who are very familiar with the literary publishing community, and by that the people who care deeply about literature, the sorts of literature that rarely turns a profit it's not as market oriented.

There's so much concern with prestige [00:08:00] status maintaining a certain type of image. And my whole perspective on the business is I feel like those things get in the way of doing innovative work or engaging with Readerships. So it, it shouldn't have surprised me, although it did that it was not a great fit.

And so I, rather than get fired, I checked out and said just freelance for a while until something else comes up. And it turned out I happened to be a pretty good business person. Surprise, and I've never looked back. I.

Parul - LWS: And fast forward your as someone, as Lindsay said to me today, part of our team, you're publishing business royalty. It's very hard to find someone. I had to find it very hard to find someone who doesn't know who you are. And that's because you've written so extensively around the business of publishing.

If anyone types in something like how to find a literary agent, how do I write a nonfiction book, proposal, contracts, copyright, all that, things that are likely to be taken to your website.

Jane Friedman: right.

Parul - LWS: you've got a subscribe, a subscriber base [00:09:00] of over 40,002 newsletters. You've published multiple books. So it's so interesting to me that turn has worked out so well for the followers, the people who get to read your work.

But I guess so much must have changed since you started. To now,

Jane Friedman: yeah,

Parul - LWS: has your relationship to the different forms of writing that you do evolved over the years, your blog newsletter?

Jane Friedman: Yeah. Most of my early career was spent focused on books and book publishing, of course I thought I would probably spend a lot more time on the book part of my mission or career or what have you. But I've found that not only is that not something I like to spend a lot of time on, it's very time intensive. The books go out of date quickly. that's why I just had a second edition come out because the first one had gone out of date. I find that I don't. N I don't enjoy it as much working on these long, intensive [00:10:00] projects and that really echoes what I said earlier about liking the newspaper and journalism. And I found, into my business, I did have a newsletter electric Speed, the Free digital Tools newsletter, although I wasn't necessarily that invested in it, which might seem a strange thing to say, but, for me it was just like a backup. It was something to fall back on or to mention a new class in to make sure I got people in the class or, whatever my most immediate goal was. And once I started taking it more seriously and actually treating it as valuable writing work, like just as valuable as writing a book. The rewards were just immeasurable and. Even to this day, and not that it's that much longer, but let's say 10 years. I feel like whatever happens in my career, whatever things I have to drop because I don't have time for, or who knows what the reason might be, I feel like I'm [00:11:00] still gonna be doing that newsletter.

It's such a valuable piece of community work and engagement. I enjoy it. Surprising things come out of it. And of course I have this other newsletter, I do the paid newsletter. And I'm not saying that's less valuable. That's what earns me a good portion of my living. But I find that electric speed has more of my heart in it, and the paid newsletter has more of my brain in it. So I do doing them both. but in any event, to kinda get back to the original question, I think that I. I today, I place just so much more value on things that, especially given the changing nature of the industry, I like shorter forms of communication, quicker forms of publishing, things that allow me to meet people where they are at that particular moment or at this particular moment because it is a pretty chaotic chaotic environment right now, just not in publishing, but also [00:12:00] sociopolitically. And so people are looking for community and they're looking for some engagement at this moment. I'm not saying that the book doesn't have value, it absolutely does. But events like this and in-person events and the newsletters, I think are serve my mission better than doing the books.

Parul - LWS: If someone here is working on the newsletter, what advice would you give them based on what you've learned as to how to make this a sustainable practice or how to reach the right audience?

Jane Friedman: Yeah, so I would say, don't make the mistake that I made initially, which is to treat it as an afterthought or as lesser than, or something that is throwaway, because that's how your readers will treat it. Also is very reflective of what I care about and my sense of service to the community, and I think people sense that when they receive it and it's very tied into just [00:13:00] it let me back up. I've built it over time, very organically through people who've generally have found me through my website, like all of the content that's on my website. So I'm always trying to further that relationship. And so when you're thinking about what to put in your newsletter, what's going to further or deepen the relationship and keep bringing people something of how you see the world.

There's something if you're an author or a writer of any kind, there's some perspective or lens that you bring on the world that is attracting people to you. So you want the newsletter to reflect that in some way. There's so many ways to do that. I don't like to tell people explicitly what to put in their newsletter.

'cause it's like telling them what to, what should your book be about? I don't know. You're the writer so you have to decide. would say. If I wanna get really pragmatic for a moment are newsletters that exist that I would call like the old school type of [00:14:00] newsletter, which is you the writer, connecting with people who are invested in the work that you do because they've read a book, an article, whatever it happens to be.

Maybe they saw you at an event and they're invested in how you see the world and in your expression. And so they're gonna follow you or they want to follow what you're doing, whatever shape that takes. And so your newsletter is that form of connection. That stand usually stands the test of time, whether that's every month, every couple months, could be every week.

I don't know that frequency is that important as long as it's consistent. So there's that old school form of the newsletter, and that's really what I'm talking about here. I think with the introduction of Substack into the environment I. Where they, that company really wants you to charge for a newsletter, have people pay you for your writing. I'm not saying that's wrong, but that is a very different sort of promise. That's a very different sort of relationship than what I've been talking about with kind of the old school free newsletter where you're in communication with people [00:15:00] who wanna support your work or are interested in it. Once you get into Substack land, it's much more transactional, I find. and if you're not delivering the value, or if you're not doing things that can spread or that people wanna share or that would be essentially popular on social media, you might not gain the traction. And it's harder to get people to pay. In other words, Substack having a paid newsletter through Substack or through any platform, it's like deciding

you're gonna start up a publication, a magazine, or any or something else where people pay on a regular basis for this piece of value you're offering them. So I just wanna be clear that everything I'm talking about in regards to newsletter is not really about the transactional piece of this, where you're trying to get people to pay. certainly we could talk about that and what it requires, but the community and engagement I enjoy is very much connected to that free old school style.

Parul - LWS: And maybe, this actually ties in a lot to some of the questions I have for you around [00:16:00] building a platform. And we, there's so many topics to discuss in this interview. I definitely wanna talk about the landscape of publishing and ai, but maybe we just go down to this idea of a platform.

'cause you talk about this and you say, you talk about, in fact the exact phrase you say, which made me laugh, was a reliable way to upset a room full of writers is to promote the idea of brand building. And I thought, I agree.

Jane Friedman: Yeah

Parul - LWS: and I definitely noticed that concept of that sort of emotional reaction to the idea of brand more in a literary room than amongst nonfiction writers.

Jane Friedman: yeah.

Parul - LWS: And so first, second we just step out and look at this idea of brand building and the newsletters part of that. Why is that good? Why is it good to have a platform to have a brand as a writer, I.

Jane Friedman: It insulates you from changes in the market. It insulates you, or it helps you be less dependent on a particular publisher, a particular agent, a [00:17:00] particular media outlet or retailer like Amazon to make your work visible or available. So by having that direct relationship or connection or visible brand, and I really like the newsletter for this, but it can be done in other ways. It insulates you from people saying, we don't. We don't think your work is marketable anymore, or we don't know how to reach your readership, but if you know how to reach your readership and you can do so reliably, that gives you so much power and leverage to steer your career however you like. this really, it's an old concept now, and I think it's been debunked, probably rightly about having your thousand true fans. This comes from Kevin Kelly, that if you have a thousand true fans, you can probably make a living doing whatever you like. I don't know if the number is a thousand, the spirit of it I think is accurate.

That if you have this number of people who will basically follow you [00:18:00] anywhere or do or buy, do what you ask or buy, whatever it is that you ask, that I think that is better in the end than having a single editor say, yes, I wanna publish your book. I am not discounting the power of those partnerships, and certainly in.

When I talk about platform in the book or elsewhere, I talk about how too often platform gets conflated with social media or with the online following when what I think is far more important for platform growth is the relationships and the partnerships that you're cultivating over time. the communities that are invested or that have similar missions to you. So I wouldn't reach half the people I do if I didn't have really strong relationships in the community, whether that's with individuals, organizations, influencers, that's very important to me. So I would say that's what I, when you think about your brand, think about the expectation that you're building in other [00:19:00] people and in other organizations. In, what you decide to publish, who you decide to partner with is also an expression of your brand. All of those things start to

add up to you standing for something or people expecting something of you? I would say for those who discount the power of brand I would ask, do you care who publishes you?

What outlet publishes you? Do you care whether it's I don't know the Wall Street Journal versus the New York Times or the Paris Review versus a little a little journal that nobody's heard of, that has a readership of two. You care about these things, because you care about being aligned or being you care about the perception of them in relationship to how your writing might be seen.

Parul - LWS: And do you think there's a difference in how a fiction writer might approach this versus nonfiction and do you have any good examples of fiction writers who do this very well?

Jane Friedman: I think for nonfiction [00:20:00] authors, it can be more straightforward, especially when you get outside of the book. There's so many different ways to share a message and to be known outside of publishing a book or being associated with publishers or publications with fiction. I find that sometimes there's a bigger challenge there.

Especially if you're writing novels. What is it? What else is this thing that you're doing that people will be interested in? Some are very talented at doing serializations or doing other types of storytelling work writing stories for tv or movies or comic book series. This has happened a lot interestingly, in the literary community in the US where you had like Roxanne Gay writing for a comic book series.

I've forgotten now which one. Maybe someone in the chat will remember. Chuck Wendi, I too think is another novelist who's done this. But I think when you look at it, it's easy to see on the commercial fiction side. If you, Brandon Sanderson does a lot of cons and he has merchandise that [00:21:00] go, goes along with his books.

Colleen Hoover has a merchandising arrangement with Target. I think she sells I wanna say it's nail polish or press on nails or an assortment of things. And she also did a huge book festival in Texas for years, sadly now ended called Book Bonanza. So you can see these like offshoots, like these expressions of who they are and what they do in the activities that they pursue or the things that they invest in. Even, I'm choosing really big names here. The James Patterson started a series of grants for libraries and booksellers and now authors. And of course in addition to bolster his brand, he partners with really famous people to write his books like. President Bill Clinton. I want to, is Oprah next?

I don't know, but it's all these people like, wow, they really wanna partner with James Patterson. That's cool. To go to a lesser well-known example though. The example that's in the book and the one that I bring out frequently is a literary novelist, [00:22:00] Monica Byrne. And the reason I bring her up so often is because she's been so consistent. Over the last 10 years of getting people to support her through Patreon. 'cause she's unlike some of these other authors I've mentioned, she's not prolific, she's not coming out with commercial fiction every year or multiple times a year, like many literary novelists. Her production level is, human paced, say.

She spends a lot of work, a lot of time on each book. And so she knows she's never gonna have the sales or the productivity that's going to earn a living for her. So when her first literary novel released, she started a Patreon, which where people can pledge to support her on a monthly basis. And that's been going now for 10 years.

And she says upfront, look, I need you. To support me in this effort if I'm going to continue it. Because our current environment, she's in the us I believe, or she's [00:23:00] American, she might live in another

country. she's our current environment doesn't necessarily support a living wage for a literary novelist. So the book and in everything I do, I try to help people see there's this brand that you're building that is meant to attract the readers who will appreciate what you're doing. It's not meant to sell anyone on something they don't want. It's to make it clear what you stand for or what you wanna be known for.

And I think Monica would probably tell you, she, she doesn't even like what I've said, that she's not a brand. But I think to me, that's what I would call it. That's the best word that I have for it. That, that I think we can talk about it in terms of a business strategy.

Parul - LWS: And I guess underneath that is, is just how do you find a way to connect? To readers and how is that portrayed? How is that packaged?

Jane Friedman: Exactly.

Parul - LWS: We have so many topics we can dive into. It's been really nice hearing your thoughts on brand. I'd love to [00:24:00] go zoom out a little bit and talk a little bit about the landscape of publishing. And I know we have some calls for the chat about talking about pitching. We'll get to hopefully a whole bunch of other questions.

But I wanna just zoom out to this idea of doom and gloom in publishing. 'cause we're hearing a lot of that with what's happening in the world. And you have a quote in your book from a famous author who says, the profession of book writing makes horse racing seem like a solid, stable business. But this is Steinbeck in the sixties, so 60 years ago, right?

So people think that today's publishing era is difficult but you are making the case that actually it's always been perceived as difficult. I wonder if you could just talk about this a little bit.

Jane Friedman: So the, this kind of goes back to what it, phenomenon where everyone thinks they're living at a time when the golden era was, what, 20 years before? 40 years before. Like you've always just missed it somehow. Things were always better off [00:25:00] except for the time you're now in. And it's the same as true of writing and publishing.

I, I read a New York Times article that was published, I wanna say in the year 1990. No, it was 2000, 2001, which is just a couple years after I started working in corporate publishing. This is before Amazon had really done anything. I think it was still in existence, but, no one was thinking about Amazon as a game changer yet. And the Kindle wasn't out. You didn't have social media. People were barely buying plane tickets online. It was just such a different environment. Okay, so 2001, the New York Times publishes an article where someone says that book publishing is dying because of the internet. It's just what? You haven't seen nothing yet. It's something that's been complained about every decade. [00:26:00] Every decade thinks that things are running off the rails. and there's so many funny examples of this. I'm, it was, I'm trying to think of. Specific, oh, Thomas Jefferson was another one I saw recently where he thought that the advent of novels, like they were becoming quite popular to read.

And he is this is going to rot people's brains. How can we allow this to happen? And it, after the invention of the printing press where it was more common that you could read something other than a classic because now you had the ability to print off things that didn't need to be preserved. People were saying, no, what are we gonna do now that people aren't reading the classics?

This is a terrible state of affairs. Change is hard. That's one of the messages here. But also writing is like any other creative endeavor. There is no formula for success. There's no formula I can give you [00:27:00] for producing a work of art and making money off of it. There's always an element of serendipity.

And at least since literacy grew, which this happened in the 18 hundreds for the Western world when literacy skyrocketed, we've had bifurcation in the market where you have the very commercial works that tend to sell well, like ghost stories and mysteries and romance. And then you have the other side of the market, which is more literary, prestigious that doesn't sell as well because people like entertainment. This is. Been true since the 18 hundreds. So sometimes I think what people are worried about is this sense that what they love is going to die or be taken away from them. But it has always been hard to earn a living off writing, just what you want to write. Have to give some attention to the market and what will succeed with readers if you want to earn a living off of book sales. [00:28:00] So there are generally compromises that have to be made? I,

Parul - LWS: I guess something else that is. Pervaded through the years is this tension between art and business.

Jane Friedman: yeah.

Parul - LWS: We want to make art, as you say, we want to write exactly what we want to write, but we also need to make money. Maybe we take on projects that are adjacent, the kind of shadow work around the art.

In your experience, what is helps writers balance the art and the business of writing?

Jane Friedman: I would almost reject the idea that there is a balance, which sounds awful. There, there are compromises that you make at particular moments in time. So the way that I explain it in the book and elsewhere is that there are usually three things that you're thinking about. Is this gonna earn me money? Does this satisfy my creative goals? [00:29:00] and then does this bring me a new readership? Does this make me visible? Does this build my platform? Is this an alignment with how I, what direction I want my career to grow in? And I find that it's rare that you're gonna find a project. That's gonna meet all three of those equally, they do come along, but I wouldn't bet on it at least earlier in your career. So there may be things that you're doing just for the money, 'cause it's gonna pay the bills and you can put day jobs into there. There are day jobs you're gonna do that, take up your time and they're not gonna meet any of your creative goals. And you might do a lot of projects just to fulfill this creative need that you have and they're not gonna make you any money whatsoever. And then there are things that I do and I think that all writers do for platform building purposes that they might not pay at all or they pay very little, but you do them for the visibility and or in service to the community that [00:30:00] for whatever reason they're important to you. So if there is a balance, I think it's, in thinking about these factors when you're deciding on a project or committing your time and resource and making sure that you're not getting so weighted in one area that you start to burn out, that you lose, the creative spark that you somehow have stopped fulfilling.

You stopped meeting the goals that got you into this to begin with.

Parul - LWS: And actually speaking of goals you talk about this or writers should think about their larger goals with their writing. How does this apply to. You? What kind of question? What kind of goals have you been working towards? I'd be curious to see how you think about it, and then what you then spend your time on.

Jane Friedman: When I first started full-time independent work, was doing a lot of one-on-one consulting and editing. So being a service provider for writers and some other. let's say. that's really a time for money [00:31:00] equation. And there's only so many hours you have in the day. And of course it took time away from the creative projects I wanted to pursue, but it was really, it was easy money for me because I did have a name and people trusted me when they hired me.

So it wasn't that hard to build up that side of my business. But what I wanted to do was spend more time writing. So over the last 10 years, that's what you will see. I think if you were following me every year you'll see this slow movement towards less one-on-one work, focus on other people's creative work and more focus on the things that I want to write.

My newsletters, for example, lot. I spend a lot more time on those today than I did 10 years ago. I would like to develop more curriculum, do more of my own teaching and helping people and spend less time hosting other people's classes. And I'm sure my instructors don't want to hear that, but they already know it. So that's where I've been moving to ha to be able to focus just [00:32:00] on my own work and my own engagement with the community, whether that's in person, online, in a newsletter, in a book, et cetera.

Parul - LWS: And just a slightly geeky question here, how do you review your writing goals? Do you do this like once a quarter? Does it just come up when you feel a bit of tension around the work you're doing? Because this is something I'm noticing happening amongst all creatives I know, is that, we have day jobs, we have creative ambitions, we know our goals, but then there will come moments where things feel a bit of friction.

Jane Friedman: Yeah, I am not who has like a five-year plan or puts my goals on a list or has a mood board showing my dream. I don't do any of that. but I do pay attention when I'm feeling misalignment, when I'm feeling like I am not enthusiastic about this. Why is that? Why do I not wanna go through the motions of this particular project today? Something like that happened to me over the last few years with [00:33:00] my paid newsletter. So I've got my paid newsletter, the bottom line that just went through a major Reba rebrand and relaunch. This was just a couple months ago, I explained to people, my subscribers, why, and it was because it was under a brand that was launched with a business partner that's no longer in the picture. It was separate from my website, so it was not at. Jane friedman.com. It was elsewhere. A lot of people didn't know it existed. I didn't really like the branding generally around it. I felt like it was the satellite that, I almost didn't want to talk about because it didn't feel aligned with everything else that I was doing. So I decided, I can't keep going like this. Not even wanting to talk about it. I need to bring it into the mainstream of what I do at my own site. And so there was both a technical component to that. There was a branding component to that, but it was also just a reenvisioning [00:34:00] of, this is important to me, but I have to reconfigure it so that I'm more enthusiastic about it.

Parul - LWS: I like that it's following the energy.

Jane Friedman: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: Yeah, I feel like we could all stand to do that. I'd love to now turn to getting published. I'm pretty sure this is some, this comes to the questions you're asked the most. You probably write about the most extensively, but I suspect it maybe tweaks a little bit as time goes by, maybe.

So let's go straight into pitching. What makes a successful pitch, nonfiction or fiction? And you might break it down as for each one.

Jane Friedman: Yeah. The first thing I'll say before I get into the mechanics of each is confidence and charm. Do a lot of the work. not something anyone wants to hear because it's subjective. But I find that a lot of writers come into this process with insecurity. Not really understanding how to present themselves or the project, feeling like they're gonna mess [00:35:00] up that they're gonna get rejected for life, that they're gonna get blackballed.

There's so many fears and insecurities that come to the surface in this process, and they are so significant that I think it damages a lot of pitching efforts and people don't even realize it. It just leads to so many weaknesses. It leads to over-explaining your project. It leads to focusing on what you don't want people to know about it because you're nervous they're gonna see it.

And so then you feel like you have to explain it.

Parul - LWS: Talking about just in the query letter or the proposals,

Jane Friedman: yeah. Yeah. So

Parul - LWS: how are you getting people to overcome that?

Jane Friedman: Yeah, exactly right. It's really hard, but I just wanna put it out there that people end up sabotaging themselves because of insecurities and fears about rejection. Okay. So at least you know it's there and maybe you can adjust for it. [00:36:00] So let's talk about fiction. So with fiction, the query, you're really just giving the story premise, and that's really what everything boils down to. I know there's some other things in the query I'll mention them, but it's really the story premise. That's where the decision gets made. And after that, if they get the manuscript, if they read the manuscript, they're making a decision based on the quality of that manuscript, if it meets the expectations of the market or the genre or whatever it is that editor thinks will sell. So the premise is really who? Who is the story about? Who's who are the main characters I. What conflict or challenge are they facing? And then hopefully some sort of twist or, what are the stakes? What are they gonna lose if this doesn't, if they don't get what they want? What's being risked or what relation, what's the relationship tension? I like to think about relationship tension with this because we need someone else in the query usually other than the main character. Who's standing in the way [00:37:00] or who's the main love interest or who, who is it that's to provide the fireworks? What relationship provides the fireworks?

Where we're worried about the progression of that relationship?

Parul - LWS: So we're talking here about the hook, like similar to what's on a the cover of a the back cover of a book.

Jane Friedman: exactly. Yes. So that's it. And I think, a really good one is somewhere between a hundred to 300 words. I, you would be on the longer end of that if it's, let's say an epic fantasy or some sort of family saga or where you have to do, or a historical, or you have to have a little bit more context or a tiny bit of world building in that query, just so the conflict or the characters make sense, their situation makes sense. And then the other pieces of the query around that are, we need some of the basic housekeeping information like title, word, count. What category or genre do you think this is in? if you're at all. Insecure about [00:38:00] that, especially the category or genre. Actually, that's really the only thing I think you would be insecure about. Try to use comparable titles rather than giving it a specific name. So if you're not sure whether or not to call it book club fiction or upmarket fiction, or a romantic whatever, use comparable titles to help show. Who your readership is. 'cause that's what's most important here. Who's gonna really

love this book and talk about it to their friends and family. There's also a lot of anxiety around choosing those comp titles, I find because agents and some publishers too. And of course the agents are paying attention to the publishers. They put you in such a box when it comes to choosing the comps. You can't choose a really big bestseller, which I understand. can't choose a book that's too old. I've heard agents like even specify how many reviews it should have on Amazon, or what its [00:39:00] rating should be, or how many awards it should have won, et cetera, et cetera. I think you've I understand that they're trying to be helpful, but I also think too much anxiety and people in fact, choosing the wrong book when they would've chosen a better comp if they had just relaxed a little bit and chosen something a little bit outside the boundary of what some agent said was appropriate. one agent who I'll name because I think this is really good advice, and she's not trying to scare you. McKean, she writes a substack called Agents and Books. She has said, consider the vibes of the comp title that you're choosing. Does your book have the same vibes as the comp?

So in other words. You and your comp book may both be set in Baltimore, but that doesn't mean they're comparable titles. They have to have you have to have the same vibes that the reader would be attracted to, or they might both be about weddings, but that doesn't mean they're comps. So you have to think about it in [00:40:00] terms of readerships. So let's move over to nonfiction. This gets a little bit squishier because it depends on what sort of nonfiction we're talking about.

Parul - LWS: And just, sorry, just to interrupt you quickly, on the, on a comp being too old, I've had agents say anything sort of seven to 10 year, like up to seven to 10 years is the max. Is that the kind of age you are hearing?

Jane Friedman: Right now I consider that so generous. If an agent says that, what I've been hearing recently is two to three years, I think that's too restrictive.

Parul - LWS: I

Jane Friedman: I agree. I agree. So you can satisfy that, I do think the more recent comps probably serve you better, generally speaking. But if you can't come up with a comp in the last two to three years, I think it's absolutely fine to reach back seven years, even 10 years.

But so much that's dependent on what category we're talking about.

Parul - LWS: also what agent and there's also the [00:41:00] reality that an agent will look at it and yeah, they might think, oh, it's an old, the comp isn't right. But they get the sense of what you're trying to, how you're trying to position it.

Jane Friedman: Yes. Thank you. That actually brings up a really excellent point. This is I complain a little bit about agents when it comes to comps, because. Part of their job actually is to help you find the right comps based on some initial ideas that you have. They're probably gonna have a much deeper understanding of what your comps should be when you go to a publisher that is part of their job.

I don't understand

Parul - LWS: But I think there's a difference between when they do their job at their desk, and if they see a query letter that comes through, they're not gonna go back and say I don't like your book because the comp is too old. But when they come to a, like we do Agent Q and As and we, or when we ask for advice, they're gonna give you their perfect template.

But the truth is no one ever hits that perfect template.

So we actually have more wiggle room than we think

Jane Friedman: yes.

Parul - LWS: my take on.

Jane Friedman: I agree with you. I [00:42:00] agree. Nonfiction, it depends on if you're selling a narrative nonfiction sort of book. So that could be memoir, it could be history, biography, and so on. I wanna start with the easier type of nonfiction query, which is the more like self-help prescriptive.

This is improving your life sort of book. How to, so with those books you, the query usually focuses on what is the reader's problem or what is the challenge they're trying to meet. And you express that right away in the query, whatever that is. And then you position your book as the solution or the answer to that, or whatever that explores that challenge for the reader. So there's some urge that the reader has that they're motivated to address that. Some need, your book meets that need. And you have to give something of your platform usually in these queries unless you're sending the proposal along with it, that explains your platform. [00:43:00] So in the query, unlike with novels with a. Nonfiction book like this, you have to explain how you're the authority or a credible voice. This can include degrees. Research previously published writing. It can include online following. There are lots of different ways to show your authoritative, but you also have to show how you're visible to the readership.

If we're talking about trying to get an agent, 'cause they want authors in nonfiction who have this platform on the narrative side. If it's a memoir, I usually suggest Memoirists look for what I call the cocktail party anecdote. That little anecdote that you tell that gets people super fascinated in your life story. It's the one that, the story that you tell that gets you all the questions where people tell you at the end of the conversation. That should be a book. That's the sort of little anecdote you wanna start the query off with. That sort of encapsulates it's that grain [00:44:00] of sand that really gives us what the memoir is dealing with the questions that it's dealing with. In that the memoir query has a lot in common with the novel query ultimately. And that there is some sort of premise there, there's some sort of challenge that the memoir is addressing. And so we need to have a sense of that the query letter. You may or may not give away the ending.

The fact that you're querying it gives away the ending regardless. If it's a battle for your life we probably know you lived. So I wouldn't worry about, are you giving away the ending or not? But we need to have the sense of how did you get here? Like how, like we are fascinated how you survived this or how did you get through this?

We need to know the in-between parts. For other types of narrative nonfiction, like biography or if you're reporting on something like the people's places and things, narrative nonfiction, you may start off with a story. But often these [00:45:00] books to sell, they have to be dealing with an issue that's in the zeitgeist, zeitgeist, something that people are talking about and dealing with that they're worried about and they're looking, for, the deep dive into this particular issue. there's also similar books, what I would call the big idea books like Malcolm Gladwell sorts of books where you definitely have to show how this issue is resonating today, and you're probably pointing at news or things that people said that hit the news in a really big way. And you can use that as a jumping off point for why this book is needed and why people will buy it.

Parul - LWS: Now, I'm sure there's so much more you could say on both these topics. You have great resources. On your website. So

Jane Friedman: I

Parul - LWS: we'll drop a link in a moment or at some point during this interview to where you can find the resources. I'd love to talk a little bit about actually before we get onto self-publishing, I wonder if there's anything else you think writers still misunderstand about the pitching process.[00:46:00]

Is there anything else that you haven't mentioned as well?

Jane Friedman: On the novel side, I think there's a real temptation to explain the story in some way. Like I. like a mechanic, like getting really into how many points of view or how it's structured, or the lessons or morals that, or themes that are being taught where you get either abstract or too technical.

Both, I think are deadly. So be very story oriented. In other words, in a novel query, we w we're gonna, the agent or publisher w wants to be entertained by the story. They wanna see something in the story. they don't necess, I do, you probably do wanna indicate briefly oh, this is a braided timeline, or this is a first person, POV, but do not make the whole query about how the book is structured please, or what its themes are, which is boring. And then. on the novel side, I will see authors spend too much time, like on the bio. It's not that you shouldn't [00:47:00] put in a bio, but you really only need about 50 words. Might go a little bit longer if you've been well published for, and, and you're like back out on the market looking for an agent or a publisher. usually you don't have to prove your platform for the most part, especially if you're a debut novelist. So with children's writers, always warn against talking too much about how your kids love the book or your classroom of students really love the book or what, whatever it is. I hope that your family loves your book, but it doesn't necessarily mean anything to a publishing professional that the people who love you love your book.

Parul - LWS: Thank you.

Jane Friedman: Oh, the, I'll just mention one other quick thing because it comes up frequently. People often say that their book has been professionally edited or they'll include nice things that hired editors have said in the query. often this is just neutral. If you've had [00:48:00] someone who's already willing to blurb the book, meaning say Advance praise, certainly you can mention that, but the name needs to mean something to whoever's receiving that submission. So make sure that it does, and if it's a really like a-list sort of person who has their own agent and publisher house, if they really believe in your project and wanna support you, I hope that they will give you a referral. Meaning they'll make an introduction for you so that you don't have to send in a cold query.

Parul - LWS: Thank you. Now, on the other side, the self-publishing side we don't need query letters or non-fiction proposals. There's so much at our disposal. I'm curious about the percentage of writers that you see come through the events you do, or even the audience, your readership. What percentage of self-publish versus traditionally published, do you have a sense.

Jane Friedman: for me it's always been a pretty even mix. And in fact, a lot of authors have done both at this [00:49:00] point. But if I, if I had to give an edge to one side or the other, I'd say the slight edge to traditionally published. Because that's because so much of the materials on my site are for people who are trying to get traditionally published. Once you get to the marketing and promotion side of it, I would say it edges into the self-publishing. So it depends on the topic.

Parul - LWS: Yeah. And you've got some really great infographics for anyone who has any sort of broader questions around the different publishing paths. I've dropped the links in the chat. Is there anything that you think writers misunderstand about the alternative publishing paths? Could you talk about this quite extensively?

Jane Friedman: I do. So there's a category called hybrid publishing where I think most of the confusion exists as of today, and there are so many reasons for this, but I'll try to keep this brief. So hybrid publishing is essentially an arrangement where the author pays to publish [00:50:00] as a business model. It's really no different than what used to be called Vanity publishing. And in fact, if you're someone who doesn't like hybrid publishers or hybrid publishing, there could be a lot of reasons you don't like them. if you don't like them, you will find that. Vanity Publishing is still a term that's used with them. Of course, hybrid publishers do not wanna be called that. Some might say they, vanity publishers have rebranded themselves as hybrid publishers. I don't like the term vanity period. I don't think it helps anyone make a better decision. I think it's a term that's used to mainly to insult rather than bring clarity. There are many reasons an author might wanna pay a publishing house to bring their book out onto the market rather than just self-publishing. But if you are using a hybrid publisher that actually is a hybrid publisher, they are gonna publish your book [00:51:00] under their company name. You're gonna sign a contract that looks. Much more like a traditional publishing contract than a service agreement. They are responsible for that book not just after it's published, but for some time thereafter.

Although you may have to pay to maintain that relationship on some basis. And if you want all of the advantages that a hybrid offers, you're probably looking at a print run, meaning you're gonna print off hundreds of books, if not more than a thousand. They're gonna have a distributor that will help distribute those books to bookstores, libraries, and so on. And that means you need to invest in marketing and promotion to support that book. given all of those costs I've just described, is very unlikely, especially if you're a novelist or a memoirist, that you're gonna make that money back through book sales alone. I always caution people. Hybrid publishing might be an appropriate path for [00:52:00] what you wanna accomplish, but I would never choose it thinking, you're gonna make that money back.

Please do not spend money you do not have. And moreover, understand that even if the hybrid publisher has like a list price of $10,000 on their website, is almost never the final cost. I would double it, maybe triple it, even more because there are so many costs that they're not telling you about upfront that come into play.

Parul - LWS: Are you seeing, and this has evolved over the years, are you seeing one type, are you seeing success in self-publishing focused on certain genres? Typically it's been focused on thrillers, romance nonfiction,

Jane Friedman: Yes.

Parul - LWS: one that business related.

Jane Friedman: So the vast majority of self-publishing success, which I want to be clear, has nothing in common with hybrid publishing, which I just [00:53:00] described. So the vast majority of self-publishing success stories are commercial fiction. So that's romance, romantic mystery, suspense and thrillers, science fiction and fantasy and so on. commercial genres. There's also some nonfiction authors who do really well, self-publishing. They usually have businesses established already. They have authority already. Meaning like they're, they didn't decide one day out of the blue they're going to write this nonfiction book that bears no relationship to their careers. It's somehow is tied into what they've been doing for a very long time. So

those people can do very well. And I actually find that like business authors, thought leaders, people who have really significant platforms, if they can't find a traditional publisher, I find that those are the folks most likely to use a hybrid, and they are more likely to see their money come back to them through speaking, consulting, teaching, and other opportunities that [00:54:00] arise because they have this book.

Parul - LWS: Yeah, that fits in very much with the conversations we've had in the community. I'd love to talk about the really tamed subjects of ai. You've had your name fraudulently used and yet you are not pessimistic about the changes on the horizon in regards to ai. Why? Why is that? Why are you not pessimistic?

Why are you optimistic?

Jane Friedman: Optimistic might be too optimistic to say I lean more in that direction. I think that's fair. A little bit part of what we talked about earlier when I said how everyone thinks publishing has been deteriorating or that writers' conditions have been deteriorating. Every time there's a new tech lot technology, we think that. The end is near or that it's going to be a net negative. For example, when word processors started to become adopted, like Microsoft Word, or it was word perfect or whatever, but back in the early eighties there was a New York Times columnist who [00:55:00] said this was gonna be the end of women's careers. 'cause they would no longer be able to type up men's documents. just thought, wow, we had really big dreams then, didn't we? so there's always this moment, I think, this dark moment where we think the awful are coming Now. I don't want to portray this as all positive. It is not.

Parul - LWS: But from your perspective, when you think about what's coming, and we'll talk more specifically about the writer's protest, so I'd love your take on it. What are you hopeful that AI might bring to your life as a writer? I.

Jane Friedman: I already use it and have been using it for a couple years and it, people often joke if I could clone myself, I'd get so much more done. It's I wouldn't say it's like having a clone, but it's like having really smart intern. You still have to check their work.

You still have to offer really good guidance. And there are some things you're not gonna hand over. it does allow me [00:56:00] to do good brainstorming and outlining better titling. It helps me do lots of summarization that used to take hours. and just in like day-to-day life, like my mother was recently admitted to the hospital.

She's out now. She's fine. But there's all of this medical jargon that comes out of those sorts of situations. I just feed it into the AI so that I can understand what's happening. When there is no doctor or nurse available to help me, and it gives me questions that I should be asking. So there's some like really super practical applications like that. Now, if I look at the industry specifically, synthetic audio is going to be a really significant use of AI. This year, it's already starting to hit Audible Spotify and the distributors. It's a way for publishers to do audio books for backlist that it wouldn't [00:57:00] otherwise be economical to bring those titles into audio.

I don't think human narrators are gonna be out of work, at least not yet, not as of today. Because you can tell the difference between a dynamic human. Narration and AI narration. But not every book needs a dynamic human narration or a cast of characters. For the audio book translation is another area where there's already very specific things happening.

There's a European firm called Nuanced that's already using AI for the first pass of a translation, and I'm sure this is only going to increase and spread across all publishers and translation firms rather, again, rather than putting human translators out of work, I think at least in the short term, gonna bring more work to humans because you can't let those translations go if you're a publisher without human involvement and human a human polishing it and collaborating with the author to make sure that it's. It's has the [00:58:00] intended meaning. Obviously there are lots of levels of translation. Literary translation may never go to ai. But there are other types of translation like for academic and scholarly texts where I'm sure it's absolutely accept acceptable and a translation wouldn't happen otherwise if it weren't for the economics of ai. those are some of the more positive aspects, I think on the marketing and promotion end where publishers are already understaffed, it has a lot of potential there to help to help automate certain types of advertising campaigns. It's gonna help with metadata and discoverability, there's some negative things that can and will happen, not least of which is all of the AI pollution that we've already experienced and will continue to experience the lack of transparency around where some of things come from.

Is it ai, is it human? No one's saying. so there's this lack of trust that enters into the market. And there was another piece, what was it? I've [00:59:00] lost it for the moment, but it may come back.

Parul - LWS: And talking about some of the transparency that's needed in yeah. Honest conversation or, safeguarding the authors. I know on both sides of the pond, both the authors Guild and Society of Authors have been working really hard to, represent the writers. Do you have a sense on what they're hoping?

Would you have a sense on how successful they might be in their push to protect author's rights?

Jane Friedman: Yeah, so I've totally sidestepped the legal issues inherent here, which is that all of the models were trained without permission and without payment to the copyright holders. And there are lawsuits now working their way through the US system. In fact a number of them were consolidated into one case. The author's Guild and the New York Times are involved in one of the most important cases that was just consolidated. So think what's going to happen is there's going to be payment or there's going to be some sort of restitution for this [01:00:00] training that happened without permission, I don't think the training will stop.

I think it's going to happen legally under license. And authors will have the ability to say, yes, you can train my work. No, I don't offer permission. And there will be different types of licensing. So there'll be licensing for just training the models, which is a very kind of simple, straightforward licensing.

And if there's a new model. another license to train that model. There'll be based licensing. That means retrieval information systems. So like when the AI models are referencing specific information and they link to it or they have a footnote, that's a very specific type of licensing case. Where you could say yes or no. It's obviously of high interest to anyone writing nonfiction, anyone at newspapers and magazines. And that's why you see so many magazines and big media brands doing these licensing deals. Often it's for this rag based training. And then the third type, which is still very emergent. I don't [01:01:00] know that I've seen a deal necessarily for this is transformative use where let's say got a book that you've written and a company wants to buy a license to create a chatbot that people can talk to about your book and gain. Knowledge or therapy or whatever from it or maybe from your whole backlist or maybe this company wants to license all of the books on parenting. Children ages three to six, they're building a chat bot on that and they want your book as part of the corpus. So that, and I, again, I really do believe once we get through this legal nightmare that we are currently in, that authors will have the ability to say yes or no. We can't turn back the clock on what's already been done. But the courts, as I said will, we'll figure that out.

Parul - LWS: And just to peel this back a bit in researching. For this interview I ended up reading a lot about ai and actually you were the best source that I could find online that explained it in a way that [01:02:00] made sense to me. So what happened was there's a a company called Lib Gen, I believe, and they're the ones who originally illegally took the information from authors.

Can you talk just a little bit about what this is? I think it might be interesting for writers who know that something bad has happened, but they're not quite sure what specifically happened.

Jane Friedman: So there is a network brand, I don't know exactly what to call it, called lib gen, where bad actors, not in the US but somewhere else, to pirate as many books as possible. And generally these books are in PDF form my books. I knew that my books were part of this.

I've known for years. It's a very notorious pirate system. There's like even a Wikipedia entry on it.

Parul - LWS: People have been trying to take them down for ages. It's just not possible 'cause they're decentralized.

Jane Friedman: Exactly. So what are you gonna do about it? There's really not much you can do, unfortunately. But what happened is open, I don't [01:03:00] know if it was open a ai, I think that's a still a question whether or not they used this database of pirated work. meta definitely used it. And if anyone saw the Atlantic article where you could type your name and see if your book was used to train these models, it was pulling from the lib gen one of the lib gen databases, or like one iteration of that database. So meta, like knowingly, like they knew what lib gen was and they had internal conversations about should we do this?

It's pirated. And they just decided to do it. So it's like clearly questionable behavior and they're being. They're getting really bad PR as a result. How much they will be made to pay? I have no idea. And there are, I should say, there are some people, lawyers and public intellectuals who know copyright law, who argue, even if models were trained on pirated [01:04:00] material, it's still fair use, which means no one needs to pay for training on books. I don't know that argument's gonna hold up, but people should know that argument is out there.

Parul - LWS: Thank you, that's really helpful. And as you said, there are lawsuits going on at the moment. We'll see what happens. But maybe that'll, that, maybe there'll be some kind of a result. That means that there'll be retro, some kind of pa payment for writers going forward. There's actually a community member Eric, who runs something called cred tent.org, which I believe is possibly similar to Created by Human, which you referenced.

Jane Friedman: yes.

Parul - LWS: Which is around create licensing creative work. Can you tell us about that agency and

Jane Friedman: by humans. Yeah.

Parul - LWS: And why agencies like that are helpful for us going forward? You touched upon it earlier, but you mentioned.

Jane Friedman: So in the US the one licensing firm that's most well known because of its partnership with the Authors Guild is created by humans. It was founded by someone who founded Scribd or ever, and

that's the ebook subscription [01:05:00] service or the digital subscription service in the us. And they're trying to create a marketplace that the AI companies can go to, to license works legally. And so far they, there haven't been any deals facilitated, but the author's guild's position as well as the position of created by humans and other organizations is we have to give the companies. pathway to doing this in a protected way, in a legal way. We just can't put up a wall and say no, because there are going to be these workarounds that are ultimately not good for anybody, least of all authors. so it remains to be seen if the AI companies, what will they take advantage of it while these lawsuits are still going on? I don't know. They've certainly made licensing agreements with big media companies, including Harper Collins, one of the New York houses. It's, some authors say I'm not, [01:06:00] they will have AI companies will have to come and do a deal with me, but not gonna do that.

They need, in order to train their models, they need to have millions of works, not just a few works unless it's a specialized model.

Parul - LWS: So I'll need to go by an agency.

Jane Friedman: Yeah.

Parul - LWS: Just a bit of a time check, maybe a few more questions for me, and then we will hand it over to you. So if you have any questions, put them in the chat and I'll try my best to get around to all of them. You've mentioned pseudo write in your list of resources. Some writers feel strongly about not using generative AI

Jane Friedman: Yeah,

Parul - LWS: in their writing.

What's your take on this and where's the line?

Jane Friedman: I think the first principle is transparency. So with your readers, with your business partners like publishers, whomever they might be, principle is transparency. That if you're gonna use these tools, be clear about how you're using them. That can be done, in your own communications with readers.

If you [01:07:00] self-publish, it can be done on the copyright page in an author's note. Be clear. There are already, frankly, literary works that are out there that are upfront about use of ai, although I think it's done as more of a meta fiction thing. Like it's part of the plot or it's somehow part of I don't wanna say the gimmick, but the hook of the book is that part of it was written by ai.

So that makes it super transparent. And also it's a marketing angle. but I'm talking about more books where the authors are using AI to help generate some amount of the wordage, whether that's paragraphs or entire scenes. In my. Paid newsletter. I actually showcased what this looks like. 'cause I sometimes think it's hard for writers to grasp, especially if you haven't been using the tools. What does it look like when you have the AI write for you? What sort of prompting does it take? How much is the author involved? What does it look like over time? And so Elizabeth Ann West is one author who uses these tools extensively to write the [01:08:00] books. And so there is an example at my for the subscribers of that newsletter where you see the prompts.

She started with what was generated as a next step from the ai, she told the AI to expand, revise, or cut, and then adjustments she made after that point. Now, in my opinion, I don't, this isn't the genre that I read

in, so I don't feel like I'm a good judge. But for me it's like any, everything I read there was not particularly special. Like I didn't necessarily detect a voice. But it's really all in the skill of the person prompting and then making changes what the quality of the output is. And I do not want to insult anyone here or make people upset, but one of the analogies that I sometimes draw to try and get people over, like the ethical hesitancy, because I do think we're heading toward a world where this is more common and accepted, [01:09:00] think about how upset people were at photography. In the 18 hundreds, people said this is going to ruin painting. And photographs initially did not get copyright protection because it wasn't, 'cause it was made by a machine and not by a human. And we look back at that now and think how could we could how could we have done that? Of course, photographs deserve copyright protection. And I, obviously these tools can also be used in deeply unsettling and unethical ways, but I think there are ways to use them that still respect human creativity. Humans are still involved. There's transparency in how the thing came together. So I, again, I do think there's something of an inevitability with this, and I do worry that people who remain stridently ai, like they won't touch it.

They won't have anything to do with it. They'll just get left behind because others will be using these tools and being creative and being human while using them.

Parul - LWS: Love that the [01:10:00] human is curator. Makes sense. What practical steps can writers do from today onwards to protect their work while still engaging with new technologies? I.

Jane Friedman: If you're gonna use the AI tools to do anything, make sure that you get a paid plan. That way you have more control over how the information you're putting into the model is used. If you don't want the information you input to be trained on, you can adjust the toggle accordingly. But it requires you to have a paid plan to do that in, like with open ai at the very least. So make sure that you pay for your use. if you're dealing with publishers, it's not in their interest to trick or surprise you, but look for clarity in their AI policies. Make sure that the contract doesn't take the decision making away from you in regards to AI training. you have an agent, they're definitely gonna be looking out for this, but if you don't have one, make sure that you're looking for those [01:11:00] clauses and adjusting. and any, anyone that you are working with try to find out what is their policy not to judge them or to point a finger, but to understand what it is they're doing or not doing. How they use these tools in their own publishing workflow because many places are using them, but they're not saying anything because they don't want to make people angry.

They don't wanna get the finger pointing. So we have to be willing to talk about this without blowing up or doing the shame and blame game.

Parul - LWS: Great. Thank you. The final question for me is, what's next for you, Jane? What's what do you, you've got the book the second edition of the book is coming out, so the business of being a writer, really looking forward to seeing what updates you've made, you're gonna be promoting that.

What else, what's next for you?

Jane Friedman: Getting this book done was such a relief that I have, I've hardly thought about what's next. But I'm ramping up my in-person speaking again, so I [01:12:00] really took a good year off of a lot of travel or engagement in that way. But this year I'm back and I'm looking forward to being at more shows and also doing maybe some more private workshops in person, which I haven't had time to do.

Parul - LWS: Great. We look forward to seeing. Yeah. Hope, hope to see you at a conference, actually. But let's go to audience questions now. So I invite you all to start your video and we will get round to as many questions as we can. I start with some of the questions that were submitted earlier. Kelly Turner asks

if you can discuss the difference between a formal pitch and how to answer the question, what's your book about in an informal setting.

So make sure you don't miss the casual chance to interest someone in your book.

Jane Friedman: So you should have a 20 to 25 word, one sentence description, and you absolutely must stop after that one sentence or after those 20 words to see if it actually sparks any [01:13:00] further questions or to even test market yourself to see after you give your one sentence. what is it that people tend to follow up on?

What is it about it that interests them or do they quickly move on to talking about the weather, because that's a sign of something too. So one sentence for casual situations. And you should also be able to, when it comes time to market and promote, you also need something similar to be able to quickly convey especially to people who might not be your audience.

Who is it for? Sometimes you have to include that in the 20 to 25 words.

Parul - LWS: Great. Thank you. Thanks for the question, Kelly. Pat asks, how do you refine a list of agents to contact based on your book? So maybe an expansion of that is how do you make sure you're contacting the right agents? What criteria should we be using?

Jane Friedman: So I often tell people to look up that agent's deals on publisher's marketplace, if they can, if the agent is in fact [01:14:00] reporting their deals to publisher's marketplace. This would be more for us authors. I don't, is there something comparable in the UK where deals get reported other than the bookseller? I'm not

Parul - LWS: It's mostly book brunch and book seller.

Jane Friedman: Okay. if you can't find their deal reports through one of these industry sources, often their website is gonna have a list of clients or books that are coming out. You wanna make sure that the agent is representing books that are comparable to yours because agents tend to specialize in certain categories or genres and represent authors who are comparable. If that doesn't make sense in your situation, then look at the publishers that they're selling to. So it's uncommon that. An agent's going to break new ground with your book and sell to a totally new publisher they have never before sold to. Or if you're for an agent to represent your children's middle grade, and that agent doesn't seem to have [01:15:00] any children's middle grade clients, that to me means they're not a great fit.

Even if they say they accept that type of work. It just seems, it's, to me, it sounds like, or it would look like they're less likely to sell that work.

Parul - LWS: Thank you. Thanks for the question, pat. Next up there's a anonymous question around word count for a first time writer. The book I'm about to start drafting is liter literary fiction. I've heard different word count limits by genre. Do you have a sense on what the word count should be for literary fiction?

Jane Friedman: The average word count for any novel, I think is around 80,000 words. Books are getting shorter, generally speaking, so I think you can, dip down to say 50,000 May, depending on the publisher, maybe even a little shorter than that. Once you get beyond a hundred thousand, I think you're starting to court more rejections based on the length alone and less, it appears there's some justification for it the [01:16:00] family saga sort of story.

Something that requires a lot of world building. If you get up into the 120,000 ballpark, now you're like double the length, and that's more expense, that's more time, that's more risk. And I would say if it's your first book, if you're a debut, can you find anything possible to cut to get you down below one 20, preferably below a hundred?

You're just making it harder for them to say yes when you get beyond a hundred thousand words.

Parul - LWS: That's great. Thank you. And thanks for the question. Jody asks, as a picture book writer pre-published with the current situation with tariffs and knowing that most multicolor books are printed in China, what is your take on the picture book market? Do you have any suggestions for those of us querying them?

I.

Jane Friedman: Don't worry about it. I know that's a terrible answer, but you can't, I think we all know we can't control what's about to happen with tariffs. You [01:17:00] can't predict publishers don't know what's gonna happen and so we will muddle through picture books will still be published. I do feel confident about that. There will just be a lot of uncertainty surrounding how they're gonna get manufactured. I do think there's the possibility that more digital printing will become acceptable or used, and I don't mean print on demand. Short run digital printing, which is of higher quality. And so if things were to get really bad, I think we might see publishers switch to those methods of printing.

But there are other options for printing than China that, you know, publishers. They I'm not gonna say they knew what was coming Exactly. 'cause I don't think anyone knew 245% tariffs on China. but they have been looking at their options for a long time, so I, they're gonna figure it out and I wouldn't let it affect your pitch planning.

Parul - LWS: Great. Thanks for the question and Thanks Jane. [01:18:00] Next question on protecting our name online. What are your thoughts on protecting your writing and content from being used without your consent for AI training on the very platforms we use to create community and a following for our writing. Is there anything you've done to help to protect Jane Friedman?

Jane Friedman: I have filed and received a trademark on my name, but it's not necessarily to protect my writing, it's to protect my reputation because there are service companies that will use my name to imply an endorsement where none exists. And the easiest way to get them to stop them from doing that is to have a trademark on my name. So I'm not advocating that authors do that. But if you do a lot of work online where your name carries weight in a particular community, you might wanna consider it. And I did just run a guest post at my site about trademarking your name for us people that you might find useful. It's expensive to do it with lawyers, but you might be able to do it on your own and just pay hundreds [01:19:00] of dollars if you feel like it's necessary.

It certainly won't hurt you, it's just the time and the expense. But to address the larger question here of training on your work AI training. I'll be upfront. I have no I have no qualms about AI training on this stuff at my site. I have not included robots text explaining, don't train on my work, which for those who are like in the know, you can actually put some instructions on your site that say, do not train on this.

Whether they follow that, who knows? But I find it much more valuable to me in the long run to have these tools know my name, to reference me in the answers to link to my site. When people ask about writing and publishing, I do not wanna be excluded from that. So while I can understand some people's

concerns about this training happening without compensation I feel like I have more to lose by being hidden from these systems than from them training [01:20:00] on the work.

Parul - LWS: Great. Thank you. Thanks for the question, Deborah. On the same topic, what about submitting to agents? Should we worry about putting a, giving a chunk of information of our book to a literary agent? Do we worry about our work being used in any way?

Jane Friedman: Yeah, so this is becoming a bigger and bigger concern that if you submit a manuscript of any link to an agent or publisher, that they're gonna feed it into some sort of AI system in order to get an analysis back or feedback or whatever. The honest truth is you're not gonna know what they're doing. And it, especially if you submit it electronically, it's nothing at all to click a couple times and have it fed into an ai. The one thing that does protect you, if anything, is that these, a most basic models cannot comprehend book length material and sufficiently analyze it in a way that makes sense and would actually be valuable to an agent. The other thing that [01:21:00] protects you is that agents tend to prioritize their own judgment and capacity to look at something and understand than it would take an AI to judge whether this is something that they're interested in. So these judgments happen, I think, seconds. I know writers don't like to hear that, but it's like how a real estate agent can stand outside of a house. Knowing what neighborhood and city and state they're in, and be able to say, that house is worth X amount, I know what every other house around here sold for and I know what the market is like at this moment in time. So that's the instinct that agents and publishers have when they're looking at submissions materials. And I think as of today this will certainly change. As of today. I think them feeding it into these systems isn't telling them anything that they don't already know or would know better. I could see it being used in the future once these, like there are, for those who don't know, there are startup companies right [01:22:00] now that are specializing in this software that will help agents and publishers sift through submissions piles. I haven't seen anyone adopt it yet or willing to say they've adopted it. But when the time comes that these are used. I think what's gonna happen is it's gonna serve as a pre-filter or some sort of a mechanism to winnow down what agents and editors ultimately look at. And these tools might even be used to send feedback to the author about their submission was rejected from the first screening. Which could be helpful maybe, but like I said, there's so many unknowns, but that's what I see so far.

Parul - LWS: Great. Maybe just two more questions and then we will have to wrap 'cause we're nearly at time. Kate asks, what's your advice in pitching a book that has been published using a hybrid publisher, which has sold a thousand copies in hardback in five years, hindered by the pandemic and some Kindle copies. I have a Christian poetry book and would like to offer it to a mainstream publisher.

Jane Friedman: So let me [01:23:00] save you a lot of time. No one's gonna take that book if it's already published. I'm sorry to say that, but I'm just trying to save you the frustration of going to publishers or agents, either one with a book that's already been on the market. the general rule of thumb here is that if the book is already published, no one wants to republish it unless it's having astronomical success. So if that were to happen, like if you were to start making waves with this book, whether it's self-published or hybrid published, are gonna come to you and say, we would love to partner with you on blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You are not gonna have to approach them. So I would ask yourself why?

What do you think a big publisher is gonna do that you don't already have the power to do Now? What was missing from the launch? What didn't the hybrid accomplish? Are there ways that you can. Fill in those gaps in other ways. I would, sometimes, I think people imagine these publishers will do something that aren't going to [01:24:00] do.

Like there, there's some, especially with poetry, I don't know that there's anything that they could do unless they were actually the number one poetry publisher for your readership that everyone knew about. It would have to be such a perfect match. And sometimes I think big publishers actually aren't moving the needle for people in ways that they imagine.

Parul - LWS: And when you say astronomical success, what kind of numbers are you talking?

Jane Friedman: Some of this is category dependent. But. Let's say at least the five figures. And this has to happen in a short timeframe. Like this can't be drips and drabs over five years. We're talking like 10,000 copies within the first few months of release, so that you're hitting Amazon bestseller lists or ingram's self-published bestseller lists.

You're appearing on the bestseller lists that I do for self-published work. If you aren't hitting those lists, you're not selling enough copies.

Parul - LWS: Alright. Final question is, what advice would you give all of us as we, if we're gonna go off into our [01:25:00] week and the month we're all here to write, we have some kind of dreams to hit. Any sort of parting advice for us as we continue the hard graft of writing? I.

Jane Friedman: Yes, be patient with yourself every step of the way. I find that people sometimes expect too much of themselves and too much of the industry as far as how quickly progress is gonna be made on any front. I think writing and publishing generally is a, especially in book publishing, it's a slow business.

Even with ai, even with the technologies that have been introduced. And it takes time for good work to be noticed, for good work to be marketed and promoted. And so give yourself the time. Give publishers the time. Give readers the time to discover what you're doing.

Parul - LWS: Thank you, Jane. This has been such a pleasure to talk to you. I feel like we could chat forever, but the great thing is your website contains so much great information. I'm so glad that I've [01:26:00] subscribed to your newsletter as well. Because I think you are at the forefront of all the latest innovations happening in publishing.

I feel like you're a really wonderful voice of reason, so thank you so much. It's been

Jane Friedman: you. It's

Parul - LWS: pleasure.

Jane Friedman: pleasure.

Parul - LWS: And your book the business of being a writer is being updated. Is it out now or is it out in next month?

Jane Friedman: Technically it comes out April 18 it's actually been available before that but Amazon ships on the 18th.

Parul - LWS: Amazing. We'll be sharing links to that after this interview. But writers, thank you for being here. Please unmute yourself. Let's give Jane a round of applause. Thank you so much, Jane. This has been fabulous.

Jane Friedman: Thank you. Thank you so much everyone. This has been a great interview. I really appreciate it.

Parul - LWS: Yeah, once again, we're huge fans. Jane, we hope to do more with you. Definitely hope to catch you at a conference sometime. Thank you so much. And writers, thank you for being here. Thank you for the energy. Thank you for the love. Thank you for the questions. Maybe I'll see you at writers hour. It starts in just under half an hour, but maybe I'll see you at another interview.

Thanks so much friends.

Jane Friedman: Bye [01:27:00] bye.

Parul - LWS: See you later. Bye.