

Transcript

00:00

You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 205.

00:08

Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogevac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey.

00:36

This is my simplified life. Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Gluckowack. Today, if you are an author, if you are in the publishing industry, if you wanna know anything there is about writing, I have a treat for you. My guest is Jane Friedman. She has 25 years of experience in the publishing industry with expertise in business strategy for authors and publishers.

01:05

I subscribe to her newsletter, The Hot Sheet, which is a paid subscription, but she also has Electric Speed, which is the free subscription. And it is just a plethora of knowledge about everything that's going on right now in the publishing industry with who, with what, with where. And Jane is just...

01:26

The wealth of knowledge that comes from her is extraordinary. I will sing her praises to the end of the day because I could just listen to all of the updates she knows about where publishing has been, where it's going. And in our conversation, we are talking about the history of traditional publishing, the difference between traditional, hybrid, and self-publishing, her thoughts around that, and we're diving into AI and how that's affecting authors.

01:55

and how it affected her personally. You are going to love hearing all of the information that Jane has to share. I can't speak highly enough of her. So grab your cup of coffee and grab your pen and paper to take some notes because you're gonna wanna jot some of this stuff down. Hi, Jane. Hello, Michelle. I am so excited. I was just gushing over you before we hit record.

02:21

because I feel like I know you, and yet this is the first time we have ever gotten to see each other and talk to each other. So can you take a moment to introduce yourself to everyone? Sure, my name is Jane Friedman. I've spent about 25 years in the publishing industry. I started off on the traditional book publishing side in the late 90s. I transitioned to full-time writing, consulting, and teaching in 2014, so I've been totally independent.

02:51

since then. Most people know me for my business education on the publishing industry. So I have a lot of free content at my website that helps people with submissions, with marketing, and so on. And I also have a paid newsletter that helps people keep up with trends in the publishing industry and, and again, the business side. I was blown away because Lee Stein interviewed me for her newsletter.

03:17

and you picked it up and she forwarded it to me and I was like, oh my goodness, this is such a big deal. And it truly is because there's certain people that when you connect with them and when they give you kind of like their blessing on what you're doing, all of a sudden you see followers, you see subscribers coming to your own stuff. And I was like, oh my goodness, this is a big deal. Jane is amazing. Yes, you are good. I appreciate that.

03:47

Let's talk about what was your journey like? Take us back to school. What did you want to do? What influenced you to the point of where you are today? Well, I grew up in the very rural Midwest. So frankly, there wasn't a whole lot to do where I grew up. You could go to school. You could go to the library. You could cruise around in a car in a one-mile circle.

04:16

around town. And my mom was a librarian and a teacher. And so I, you know, I grew up reading books and I excelled in English. I really liked literature and writing classes. And so when I went to college, I majored in creative writing and I was fortunate enough to get a publishing internship at a midsize publisher while I was still in college. And when I graduated the person who

04:45

was my boss during my internship hired me. And I stayed at that company for 12 years, which is still, I find even remarkable to myself that like just at that age to have that kind of consistency, which is what I kind of credit with, you know, how my whole career trajectory, the sort of focus that I took, because when I worked at this midsize publisher,

05:12

lots of change was happening. So we had the explosion of the internet. We had Amazon starting its dominance of book sales. We had social media, the Kindle, eBooks. And so like all of these things started layering and I saw a lot of anxiety among authors and among publishers too. And so I really, I always had a more optimistic take of all of that. I wasn't scared of it. I wasn't trying to go back to the way things were.

05:41

And so I ultimately kind of ended up as this reassuring guide, let's say, as well with a dose of tough love to the changes happening in publishing and how people could navigate it successfully and have the career that they wanted. Now that I'm knee deep in seeing what

actually goes into the publishing world, it seems like there's always changes happening. Yes. It's really been nonstop change.

06:11

since the early 2000s. And I know it can be tough because the buttons you pushed or the levers you pulled several years ago aren't the same today. And this has personally affected me with the decline of Twitter or X or whatever, which has always been my go-to for so many things, whether it's reporting or building relationships or spreading the word. And now I don't use it.

06:40

at all. So yeah, that's just like a small, small example of the changes we all have to deal with. And then we should also talk about AI because not only is it in the news, but you've been in the news because of it. That's right. Yes. I, you know, I noticed some of the interesting things happening with AI a couple years ago, because there's a colleague of mine.

07:07

Jason Boog, he used to write for Publishers Weekly really frequently. I don't know that he does anymore, but I remember him experimenting with really, really early AI models, generative AI models. And it was really clear to him, and thus it was really clear to me that this was going to be a huge, tremendous, transformative technology, but it hadn't hit.

07:33

the consumer market yet, you know, is only for really techie, nerdy people who knew how to build these models themselves. And so when I first read his materials, this is going back quite a few years, I was just, you know, I wasn't following the companies, I wasn't trying to build it myself, but I was like, this is going to, this is going to pop. And then it did about one year ago with the release of chat GPT to the general public. And of course,

08:01

I think everyone knows is that that area has just exploded over the last year. So the way it affected me for those who are to wear was in August, I received an email from a reader saying that she was thinking about taking one of my classes, but first wanted to check out what books I had. I think she was maybe thinking, maybe I can get the same information in a book. So I'm just going to go to Amazon and see. And she stumbled on a number of titles that

08:29

I had never mentioned before and she's like, I wonder if Jane is conducting a strange marketing experience of publishing books that she never talks about. And so she realized pretty quickly that these were probably not legitimate books. And she wrote to inform me that these were out there. And thus began this odyssey of trying to get them taken down and meeting some resistance from Amazon who at first refused. But they are taken down now. I hope.

08:58

they're still down, like you can't buy them. But it did, a lot of people in the media paid attention, I think, because they could see themselves in my position. I think a lot of other authors could easily imagine the same thing happening to them, where someone just releases a host of titles with your name on them that have been generated in the style of your work, but they're not anything that you would have written.

09:23

and that you didn't consent to. And now I think someone's starting to call this reputation theft, which is a pretty good phrase for it. It sounds scary. And I know that we're seeing it in contracts. There's now clauses around AI and the publisher using your words, your voice, and being able to create future novels, future books around all of that, really doing whatever they want. And it's really frightening.

09:49

There's so much in AI that I find simply disturbing and inaccurate. And that's probably the most frightening part is that it's garbage going in, garbage coming out in so many cases, and yet people are taking it as if it's the Bible.

10:05

Yes. Yes. I'll never forget an exchange I had early on with someone, this was on LinkedIn, where he's saying, well, I was able to get chat GPT to give me the sales figures of all these books. And I'm like, no, no, you didn't. I think those weren't real sales figures. And he like pushed back. He's like, well, it had to come from somewhere. Like it was basing its, you know, its statements on something real. And I'm like, no, it wasn't.

10:34

I don't understand how people use it and then think that this must be okay because I've tested it for myself. I wanted to know what does it do? And so I actually have seen other agencies who promote that we use AI for writing pitches. And I thought, you know what, I'm going to use it to write a pitch to myself on myself. And I entered in, you know, write a podcast pitch. The guest is Michelle Glogevac.

11:01

and it came back saying that I had been featured in all of these places that I had never even heard of. It was completely inaccurate. And so I wanted to know how great is it? So I asked ChatGPT how accurate it is in producing the content that it does, and it actually came back saying that they weren't. There are errors, humans need to come and fix it. So even ChatGPT says that they need help.

11:31

So why would you use it? Yes. I mean, I will admit to using these tools to help come up with some boilerplate copy that's a starting point. So I'm not beginning with the blank page, the blank page paralysis. I really like editing things. I don't necessarily like coming up with things from

scratch. So I like it for those reasons. And I do think it's like very, obviously, it's very early days and there's going to be improvement.

11:59

And there are different models that will actually cite sources. So I think we're going to see a lot of different flavors of this technology. I'm not saying that it's all going to be great. There are going to be a lot of problems. But I do think we're definitely in the growing pains phase of this technology. Yeah, I agree. I do like using it to create titles, speaking titles, where I'm not really feeling creative.

12:27

And, you know, I want to put something in and make people like it and want to hear more about it. And it'll spit something out. And that's not too shabby. But it's totally different when you feed the information to it versus just letting it spit out whatever it is. Yeah. Yeah. So I want to ask you, how do people work with you? What is it that you do besides books and courses that people can come to you? How do they work with you? What does that all look like?

12:57

Well, a couple years ago, I actually stopped taking on one-on-one clients. So for a while, I did do one-on-one consulting where if people had a business challenge, they could pay me for my time and we would work through that challenge. And there were also quite a number of people who came to me for submissions help. So I would help them with their queries, synopsis, book proposals in particular was an area of specialization.

13:27

I haven't been doing that for the last couple years. It's possible I may go back to it. So now if people want to work with me directly, it almost always has to be through some sort of event or long-term course. So for example, next year I'm gonna be on like a cruise ship retreat. I read about that. Yes. I don't know about the cruise ship stuff though. I'm a little leery.

13:51

You are out on the water on the Atlantic for like seven days straight with no stops. So you have to be comfortable with that part. But that is those are the sorts of opportunities right now for people to work with me directly. And is it just traditional publishing or self publishing to. Oh, no, it's it's everyone. So my consulting has always been an open door, regardless of your publishing path. And a lot of people would consult with me on like choice of service provider. Should I?

14:20

go with a hybrid, should I set up an imprint? Like all of the questions that come into play when you self publish. And what would be your answer to this question? This is a loaded question, because I know it can take a long time, but when I started my book, my thought was that I wanted it traditionally published. And that was in my head. I need to be traditionally published. And as you sit and wait and wait and wait, I thought, okay, well, I don't wanna wait so long. And a girlfriend of mine said, now,

14:49

you're going to keep waiting, but give yourself a deadline, maybe. Then you can self-publish. And so I decided that if I don't hit that deadline, if we don't have a deal by then, and I believe it was like the spring, then I'll move forward and self-publish. But I got the deal. So I didn't have to self-publish, but I can see why people self-publish. Right. I think that's actually a really great framework for people who they would like to traditionally publish, but they don't want to be.

15:18

hanging on forever. I think it's so wise to say, I'm going to try up until this point, but no further. I've seen people try to get that traditional deal for 10 years, even 20 years. I'm like, you've got to move on. You can't just get stuck on this project. So why they're self-published or you put it in the drawer and you know, it's a personal choice, which direction you go on that. But I think something I've noticed, you know, in my 25 years is

15:46

the emergence of the so-called hybrid publishing area, which, in my view, and this always upsets the hybrid publishing people, I think it's just the new version of using the so-called vanity presses. But it's a rebranding of that whole model. It's still financially, it works the same. You pay to publish. And you're giving up a percentage of your earnings.

16:16

Hybrid is taking a cut of every sale, just like a traditional publisher would. So if you're going to do that, if you're going to both pay upfront and give up a piece of your earnings to a hybrid publisher, then you have to ask, what value are they providing you that you really need to reach your goals? Now, this obviously is going to be very dependent on the author and the book and what they want to get out of it.

16:43

But I find usually the people who are most happy with the hybrid publishing arrangement are really focused on in-store sales. So they really want to see their book in bookstores. They want as much credibility as possible with what I would call publishing industry insiders. They want to try and get all of the reviews, like mainstream, professional, industry reviews. And they're not as focused on going reader direct.

17:10

as professional self-publishing authors are, who tend to be very online focused, Amazon driven. They're probably writing genre fiction. They're probably publishing lots of books over the course of a year. And by lots, I mean like three titles, six titles. If you get into the romance category, those people are churning out books frequently. But if you look at the people who tend to benefit from hybrid, they often are publishing maybe one book every...

17:38

two to four years. It's often in a women's fiction category or its memoir. And they're really concerned with status, prestige of having a publisher, of having a partner, belonging to a community. And I find that often they're less entrepreneurial. They're also willing to fork over a lot of money. So I want- Which makes me wonder, why wouldn't you just self-publish in the first place?

18:05

Exactly. So hybrid publishing, let's be clear, is for people with money to burn, in my opinion. So usually you're looking at 20,000 minimum investment. And yes, there are hybrids that charge less than that, but are you actually getting the value that or the strengths that they can actually offer you, which usually relies on having a print run.

18:30

You know, so you also have to pay for the print run. And that's why the costs start to get into the five figures very quickly. So I've always been, I always try to encourage people like, do the math here, list all of the things that you're paying for, and then total up. How many books will you have to sell to recoup that investment? And then go in with your eyes wide open as to what it's going to look like, you know, depending on certain tiers of sales.

18:58

I was listening to a webinar yesterday from the Authors Guild on book launches and whatnot. I was at the same one. Yes. That was great. I had to listen to the recording because I couldn't make the original webinar. But I remember the one gal that said she sold, it was Chelsea Fagan. She said she sold, had to sell 5,000 copies to recoup her costs and ended up selling like 7,000. And I thought, wow, that is amazing.

19:24

I don't even know how many I've sold so far. No one has told me yet, but I think that's incredible. And the amount of work she's doing behind the scenes with sponsors and marketing partners, and she's still traditionally published. Right. I think anyone who is interested in book launches and self-publishing should go watch that recording because it's, I mean, the amount of time, effort, investment for thought, it's...

19:52

If you want to reach that level of sales, it's absolutely necessary. And not everyone has a publicist. Let's remind everyone of that.

20:02

Yeah, the really unusual thing from that presentation, which I actually have to research further, is her discussion about a marketing partner, someone who actually takes a percentage of sales. And I actually haven't really seen that model prevalent before. I have not seen people willing to work, marketers willing to work on that model. But obviously, they exist. And I'm just curious.

20:31

how prevalent that is, if it's easy to find someone who will work on that basis. Yeah, I was surprised that she said every woman on her team takes a cut. And I thought, wow, I don't know that I'd be left with anything. Profit sharing is a hard model to pull off. I mean, I've been around long enough that I saw startups in the 2010s, early 2010s trying to do the profit sharing model and none of them are still around today. Interesting. Yeah. When she said that I was, I was definitely taking notes all over the place.

21:01

And you know, that was what really enlightened me. I thought it was interesting, but you know, they didn't mention podcasts, not a single one. No, they didn't. It kind of made me sad and I wish I would have been there live so I could have popped into the chat and said, you go to schools in person, you go to book signing events, but you haven't hit a single podcast. You haven't said anything about that.

21:26

I'll get a hold of the Authors Guild now that I'm a member, thanks to you. I have so much to thank Jane for. So now Jane, where do you see the future going? Where do you see authors? Because it's constantly changing. You've been through enough change in 25 years. So what does the future look like for authors in the publishing industry? I mean, it's a hot mess as we see with Simon & Schuster being acquired, McGraw-Hill going under. What's going to happen next? What do you see?

21:56

interesting that came out of the DOJ trial against Penguin Random House. So this is where the government blocked Penguin Random House from acquiring Simon & Schuster and thus creating a Big Four instead of a Big Five. So that didn't happen. Simon & Schuster is privately owned now. But in that trial, so much discovery was made about what's happening behind the scenes at these enormous conglomerates.

22:25

And one of the things that I don't think was talked about nearly enough was the fact that Penguin Random House, after those two companies merged in the early 2010s, they saw a 75% decline in their genre fiction sales. 75%, like that's astonishing. And so it raises the question, why? What happened? How did they get so much worse? Or what changed in the market? And I think it's pretty obvious what changed in the market. Ebooks.

22:54

and self-publishing, Kindle Unlimited. And self-publishing has taken away considerable market share in very specific categories, especially romance. And now, where does that leave the commercial publishers when there's this whole community of authors who are able to do this on their own? Now, add on top of that the fact that you have serialized

23:23

storytelling platforms that have been gaining in popularity, like Wattpad, Webtoon, Tapas, and some other companies, Radish is another, where we see younger people not only reading on these platforms, often on their mobile device, but we also see them learning to write on these platforms. And it's a much more, I would say, friendly, supportive way.

23:52

to learn how to write rather than like being isolated and wondering if you're doing anything right and you don't have readers, you know, for years and years and years until some gatekeeper says, yes, you were approved to have readers and we will issue your work. That's not how it works, you know, on Wattpad and really online and the internet has changed so much about how people write and publish today. No one has to wait any longer.

24:15

you can write and publish while you build an audience. And I think this is only going to become more and more the case over time. And so it kind of puts the biggest publishers in this interesting position of selecting to boost whoever is already doing well. And you can see this happening with some prominent self-publishing authors that have gone on like Lucy Score who've gone on to do like print only deals.

24:44

with Bloom Books, which is a subsidiary of Sourcebooks, which is now partly owned by Penguin Random House. So I'm not like saying this is right, wrong, good, bad, but I do see more and more publishers cherry picking what's already doing well, rather than finding unknowns and then nurturing them over the entirety of their career, helping them find a readership. I think publishers are getting pretty bad.

25:14

at helping authors find their readers. It's really falling on the author's shoulders. And here I'm not saying anything new. I just think it's not going to, we're not going to revert back to some earlier time. It's only, I think that effect will only become more pronounced. I think it's really hard for people to understand how much goes into writing a book and that's not just writing the book, but getting yourself out there, you know, getting...

25:39

as an author known, there's stereotypes of, you know, authors are introverts. They don't want to put their faces out there. They don't want to engage too much on social media. They don't want to do all the interviews. You know, there's, there's book signings, but they don't want to go on stage and you have to meet strangers and you know, all of those things. But we're seeing that you have to do that more and more. And I feel I was lucky that I was already doing this type of thing without even realizing that I was building an audience.

26:08

so that I already had something, a platform for when my book came out. But you have to network. You have to go out and do this because the publisher is not going to do it for you. Yes,

absolutely. You can't depend on publishers or agents or anybody to do this for you. And you don't want to hand over that power and control and or be that dependent anyway. And I try to encourage the introverts, whoever they are.

26:37

whoever's listening, that at the very least in an online environment, you can control the timing, the when and the where, the platforms that you're gonna engage on. You do have a fair amount of independence and freedom to decide those rules of engagement. So if you don't wanna be on video, I think it's totally acceptable to say, I'm not gonna use TikTok, but I am comfortable having a sub stack and writing.

27:07

regularly to my audience through that channel or having them hear my voice on a podcast or whatever the case might be. So I try to reassure people in that way that there's so many tools to choose from, so many platforms. You don't have to be on them all. Find the one that's sustainable and that you can show up consistently. Yeah. What do you think about new publishers that are coming out that are traditional publishers?

27:33

and what they're doing for the authors. I heard through the grapevine that some of the bigger publishers that we know are getting upset over seeing these newer publishers who are bending over backwards for their authors. Are we gonna see more traditional publishers pop up that are doing more for their authors? Just to make sure we're on the same page, do you wanna mention one or two of who those new publishers are?

27:58

Yeah, the newest publisher that I know of and think of is Zibi Books. And, you know, I see what Zibi's doing for all of her authors. I see what my publisher is doing for me. And it's a lot in their marketing stuff. You know, I didn't get a publicist. They're like, here's your book. You're on your own. Do good. Whereas with Zibi authors, she gives them all kinds of marketing materials. She's helping them get book signings. They're everywhere.

28:23

I interviewed Megan Reardon Jarvis and in the interview she had this cool poster behind her with her book cover and I asked her, oh, where did you get that? And she said, ah, Zibi sent it to me. And I thought, okay, well, I'm going to send myself that because no one else is doing it. So I feel like the big publishers are thinking that the authors are kind of being treated too well. Well, I wish I could say Zibi is going to be, uh, how, like is a trend that's going to, you know,

28:53

lead to other publishers behaving in a similar manner. But I think she's an outlier, unfortunately. I mean, this is a very wealthy woman who, I don't doubt her seriousness of intent and her dedication and support, but other people can't replicate what she's doing. So if you can get Zibi to take your book, go for it. But it's like...

29:21

I'm afraid it's not a harbinger of things to come. And being on the business side of pitching my services to publishers, I know that they're not quick to do more in regards to hiring others to help, which is a total shame. But this means that the authors are going to have to pay for these additional services and whatnot. So we'll see where it goes. Now, Jane, you are.

29:45

Just lovely. I adore you. You have so much knowledge. I could sit here and listen to you talk about the publishing industry all day. 25 years, you pick up a few things. Yeah. Well, I appreciate you sharing it with all of us. When the hot sheet comes into my inbox, I literally leave it unread because I want to have time to dive in and read every single thing that is in it. I absolutely love it.

30:10

Your hot sheet last week came in and you shared about a Substack book tour and I thought this is so interesting and I went and I read the Substack and then I told the author that I had found her because of the hot sheet and she was like, oh my goodness. And then she ended up giving us both a shout out. I saw that. Yes. It's amazing. Can you share with everyone where they can find you, how they can subscribe to the hot sheet because everybody needs that and electric speeds, the other one, right? That's the free one. That's right.

30:39

So the best place to go is JaneFreedman.com right on my home page. I mentioned the free newsletter, Electric Speed. I mentioned the paid newsletter, Hot Sheet, and also the classes where you could work with me one-on-one if you wish. So yeah, that's where to go. Thank you so much, Jane. I really enjoyed learning so much from you. My pleasure. I adored listening to what Jane had to say about where the industry is going.

31:07

and what as authors we need to consider because there's just so much change and there is so much that falls on our shoulders besides simply writing the book. That's just the beginning. I encourage you to go subscribe to Jane's newsletters if you want to stay up to date and gain the knowledge that she has to share. It is just phenomenal. As a reminder, you can pre-order How to Get on Podcasts because remember that part where she said we have to promote ourselves?

31:37

Here I am plugging away. You can find how to get on podcasts on Amazon, bookshop.org, Books-A-Million, Walmart, Barnes & Noble, and it is now going to be out on January 11th. That's over a month sooner than we originally anticipated. So if you purchase it now, email me your receipt. You will also receive a free companion course that will launch the day the book drops. As always, friends, thank you so much for listening.

32:07

Keep writing.