

Book Journeys Author Interview - Jan 30, 2014

Dr. Angela Lauria with Jennie Withers, author of *Hey, Get a Job! A Teen Guide for Getting and Keeping a Job*.

“Even though you have a traditional publisher, you’re still responsible for all of the marketing ... make no mistake about it, you’re not going to get marketing help from a traditional publisher.” ~Jennie Withers

Angela:

Well, hello, everybody, and welcome to Book Journeys Radio. My name is Dr. Angela Lauria, I am the president of the Author Incubator and the founder of the Difference Process for Writing a Book that Matters. Every week on Book Journeys, we talk to an author about their experience writing their first book, and today, we have Jennie Withers. Jennie is the author of *Hey, Get a Job! A Teen Guide for Getting and Keeping a Job*, Jennie, thanks for being with us today.

Jennie:

Thank you for having me.

Angela:

So – so – so, tell us about the book? What’s it about?

Jennie:

It was designed to help kids – get that first job – to know how to look for a job, where they can find openings - ...

Angela:

Jennie, is this like a part-time job while you’re in high school, or like a summer job, or is it – your first – full-time job?

Jennie:

It’s – it’s for high school kids. I actually wrote it while I was teaching job skills to ninth graders, and so, we’re talking high school kids – that first job, either a summer job or a part-time job – but that first work experience.

Angela:

And so – and so, the focus was really to help them get the – the first bit of work experience for their resume or for their college application. Why – w – how – how did it – how did it come to be? Why did you decide to write it?

Jennie:

Well, like I said, I – I was teaching job skills to ninth graders, and I – and I absolutely was shocked at how much they didn’t know. I think that teenagers are – are apt to think that they

know more than they do, and they aren't very apt to let their parents help them. And so, I was shocked at how much they didn't know, and then I was also shocked at how much information there wasn't out there. There's a lot of information for college graduates, but – people who are going into the work force full time. And so, I started doing a lot of research and talking to a lot of employers who hire high school kids and things like that, and so I had this great lesson plan, and I had all this great research, and so I decided to write a book and share it with more than just the kids that I taught.

Angela:

And – and how did that – so, did other people suggest that, or – how – 'cause are lots of teachers, probably lots even listening to this call, that have lesson plans, and they have a ton of content, but it doesn't come into their head to do it as a book. Even if there is a lack of information out there, a lot – I – I don't know very many teachers at all that have written books, and certainly lots of them have the content to do it with.

Jennie:

Yeah, absolutely.

Angela:

So, what – what inspired you?

Jennie:

Well, I was, like most teachers, we are – we are very open sharers. And so, the process – i – it was twofold. Nu – number one, I was sharing this content with a lot of other teachers, and they – I had a lot of my colleagues tell me, "Hey, y – you should really write this into a book," because it – it lends itself – to a workbook form, for one thing – that are – there's a lot of activities for kids to do in preparation to fill out that application or to write that resume or to interview, and those kinds of things, and then, the other thing was, whenever I had a parent night – at school, and I would be explaining, "Hey, this is what I'm gonna teach your kid," and all of this – parents were just, "Oh, wow, I'm so glad you're teaching this, and – because we can't find anything, and –" and those kinds of things, and so, that – just led me to decide to write the book, and I've always loved to write, so. . . .

Angela:

Wow. I think that's a great example of – repurposing content that you already have out there. What, for you – what are some of the advantages of being an author? What are s – have - ... for you to get teaching gigs, have other opportunities come to you as an author?

Jennie:

Absolutely. I taught for sixteen years, I – I'm no longer teaching. I decided to – go a different way, and I – and I decided to go a different way with the writing. And I can honestly say that I wouldn't have gotten positions that I've gotten if it weren't for not only having a teaching

background and the – the English background, but also having been an author and a – a published author, things like that –

Angela:

So, ... something that comes up in interviews, does it come up – on – on cover letter, your resumes, how does that come up for you?

Jennie:

It is come up in – yeah, i – I put – I definitely put it on my resume because – after I wrote the book – I – I – I got speaking engagements and I started presenting – well, for example, I started going out to a – a juvenile detention center and talking to those kids about job skills and getting a job and – and I've spoken to other teachers, and – and so, all of those things – not just writing the book, but the speaking engagements – and – and things like that, they're on my resume –

Angela:

Yeah.

Jennie:

– and so – and so it's really helped, and – and, obviously – I've had interviewers say, "Oh, I see you're a published author."

Angela:

Mm-hm.

Jennie:

And – and – and so, it – it makes me more impressive, and so – I've – I'm – I'm currently a technical writer – and – but I'm switching jobs in the next couple of weeks, and I'm going to be a digital content manager –

Angela:

Mm-hm.

Jennie:

– and I'm going to write web content and also help – the personalities that I'll be dealing with write blogs since ... on web. And - ...

Angela:

Yup. I think it's – it gives you a credential that is just very hard to compare to any other credential, and I don't know why, 'cause you obviously don't know a whole lot more about job searching now than you did – two weeks before you published the book.

Jennie:

...

Angela:

But somehow, just being able to say you're a published author makes – makes people take notice and pay attention in a different way.

Jennie:

Right. And – and it's not that – not everybody is a bestselling author – for those of us who are not – for those of us who publish to a very small niche market – it – it's a great way to open doors to other things.

Angela:

Yeah. And so – and you've decided to – to get out of teaching and moving to more of a writing career. Did your experience writing a book influence that decision?

Jennie:

Absolutely. Yeah - I – I knew that – I always knew that I liked to write – it was the reason that – that I became an English teacher, in part, in the first place. And I'd reached a point in my teaching career where I was really ready to do something new, and – being a right-brained writing – oriented person – I don't wanna say that your choices are really narrow, but as far as you want to have fun and you want to love what you do every day, that was just a natural – a natural progression for me.

Angela:

Yeah. Sorry, I think we – connectivity problem there for a second. So, I know you're – you recently worked on your second book?

Jennie:

Yeah. I'm working –

Angela:

... your second book?

Jennie:

My second book was actually – called *Hey, Back Off!* and it was published by a traditional publisher in 2011.

Angela:

Okay! Okay.

Jennie:

So, it's actually – my third book that I've – I'm currently working on.

Angela:

So, you're on your third book, so having – done this two or three times, or two and a half times, why don't you talk us through what your writing – what's your writing schedule? How do you actually get through the process of organizing your thoughts and getting the book written?

Jennie:

Well, I'm a person that's always worked full-time while I've written – and so, for me, it's about finding the pieces of time and making the most out of those pieces of time. I'm definitely an outliner, and for whatever reason – during the outlining stage, it has to be a pencil and a piece of paper for me. And I get that – that outlining done first, and then I can go to a computer and write and edit and all those kinds of things.

Angela:

So, once you have the outline done, you – do you start from the beginning and actually work from the beginning to the end, or do you pick certain sections that will be easier to write and write those first? How do you break down?

Jennie:

I'm – I'm a beginning-to-the-end kind of person. (chuckles) ...

Angela:

'Nkay, so you write the outline, and then you start at the top and you write, and when you write, how – what would you say is a typical – how long would you typically write for? Would you spend an hour or a day or a weekend? How much time do you usually spend?

Jennie:

Well, that's the thing about – working and having a family and things like that. It could be anywhere from an hour – my husband works Sundays, and – and so, I usually have a bigger block of time on a Sunday, so it can be four hours on a Sunday – and I have to be open to – when you have kids, there's – there's interruptions and there's things like that, and – and you really have to – I really had to train myself and – and be disciplined that, okay, I – this is my block of time, if it gets interrupted, then I have to have the discipline to go back and – and find where I was at again and refocus.

Angela:

And so, what's a – what's a trick that you would say you've learned in – in – with the books you've written, to help you stay on track? Do you have some tips you might give to somebody?

Jennie:

Well – I – for – like I said, for whatever reason – I – I – I’m – that actual pen and – pen to paper, whatever, so – whatever my last thought, if I’m on a roll and I’m – I’m always thinking forward to what I’m writing next, if there is an interruption, or if I have to stop for whatever reason, I always have a notebook and I take that – that pencil and I write down – I just jot down, “Okay, this is what I was thinking when I stopped.” So that I have that reminder so that I can pick up.

Angela:

Yeah. I think that’s a great tip – having ... and it’s not even what you write as much as just – the physical sense memory when you stopped to write, it’s – triggering something to just help you get back to that spot as quickly as possible?

Jennie:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Angela:

And I think those are really good – tips that authors, as they’re – getting to know themselves, getting to know their style, see what – see what helps them get – see what helps you get back into writing or get into writing as quickly as possible. How about writer’s block? Have you bumped into writer’s block at all? Have you had periods when you haven’t been as productive as you want, and what advice would you give about that?

Jennie:

Well, I – I don’t think you can write without experiencing writer’s block occasionally – and when I first started – when I first decid – decided I was gonna write a book and writer’s block would happen, it was so frustrating, and I would just – I would sit there, and I would just – “Okay, c’mon, you gotta get over this,” whatever. What I had to learn – you know what? If – if you have writer’s block, that is your conscience telling you, “You’ve gotta leave, you’ve gotta go do something else.” And, for me, it’s usually something physical, like exercise or whatever, and what I find is that, that is the time that you need to rely on your subconscious, ‘cause what – where – when – when you’re doing something that you enjoy – and then you come back to writing, I find that my subconscious has worked it out, and I’m good to go again.

Angela:

Wow, I love that advice, I think that’s terrific. I always think there’s a message in writer’s block, and the trick is to – pause the frustration long enough to hear the message, and I think – even if it’s just taking a walk around the block or taking the dog for a walk or doing a couple of jumping jacks, but doing something physical, I think, should help make those – those connections, so that’s fantastic. Okay, well, let’s –

Jennie:

Yeah, ... I had to learn it’s – it’s not a time to force your way through.

Angela:

Yup. Yeah, yeah, that seems to slow things down, slow ... down even more. So, let's talk about publishing, 'cause you've – you've published a few different ways, so why don't you talk about how you published your books, and then what – what the pros and cons are of – of different options that you've explored.

Jennie:

Well, the first one I self-published – but I – I want everybody to know I had a lot of help. Even if you self-publish, you still need some people that are in the know. I had a friend who was a business consultant – so she knew a lot about business and marketing and things like that, and then I have a friend who is a graphic artist, and so she put pictures and – and – and made it look good – and things like that.

Angela:

And did she do the cover as well?

Jennie:

Yes. Yes, she designed the cover – and then she designed the interior as well. And I think that, especially when you're writing – self-help for a younger audience, like I was – kids are very visual, and so that was extremely important. The second book, I published with a traditional publisher, it is a very small publisher – and I have not had a good experience. They didn't – they didn't make any attempts to make that book, which is also written for teens – inviting in appearance. They haven't communicated with me, as well. And things like that, and – I don't want not traditional publishing, because I – I don't know what other peoples' experiences are, I don't have an agent, I think that would probably be very helpful – in – in that communication ki – those – those kinds of things. But with that one – I was told that certain things would happen, and they didn't. So, it's – it's out there, but it's –

Angela:

So, this is a pretty – this is a pretty common story I hear on Book Journeys, is that there's an excitement of getting a traditional book contract and working with a traditional publisher, but there's also – a loss of control, and in your case, did – did the traditional publisher say – do they own the copyright – did you give them the rights to do the cover and to do everything and you – don't really get a vote, or get as much of a vote as you might like to have?

Jennie:

No, I don't – I don't have any say, and – I think what is frustrating to me the most is that – when I – when I first began talking to them, and they – and – they told me that they wanted to publish the book, and I – it is very exciting, 'cause you're – there's not an author out there who doesn't want to be published, and – and – traditionally, publing – published – publishing houses were the way to go, and so, when I initially began talking to them – there were a lot of

promises made. And then, when I signed that contract, and it was all said and done, none of those promises were kept. And they ...

Angela:

And did you feel like those promises were in the contract – if you had to do it all over again, would you change something about the contract?

Jennie:

Oh, absolutely. If – because that was the thing, is, those promises were made verbally, they were not in a contract, and the – and the contract is – it was a pretty standard book contract, but if I had to do it all over again, absolutely.

Angela:

You get that ... in writing.

Jennie:

I – I would put the things that I want in there – before I signed the rights away, because – the other thing that you need to realize is, when you self-publish, you get to keep about sixty-five, seventy percent of your – of your profit, whereas, with a traditional publisher, you're getting seven percent.

Angela:

Right.

Jennie:

So – so, you have a lot to make up in sales, and so traditional publish –

Angela:

So, like a rock.

Jennie:

– yes, traditional publishers can help you do that – but you really need to be a lot smarter about it than I was.

Angela:

So, what were the pros? Why – 'cause, obviously, you had self-published, so there were some things – there was some part of you that wanted to go the traditional route, what were you looking for that you – haven't gotten, at least, not so far?

Jennie:

Well – as an author, you're also – you're always thinking about your platform, and, definitely, having a traditional publisher can help your platform – it sounds great when – such-and-such a company, publisher. And I really thought that, if I had a traditional publisher, that they would

help me sell the volume – that I needed to make up for having a traditional publisher. I also – looked forward to having those resources as far as designing a book –

Angela:
Mmm.

Jennie:
– and what I found out was, hey, my – my graphic artist friend did a hundred times the job that they did.

Angela:
Wow.

Jennie:
So – and – there's – there's ego involved – let's be honest.

Angela:
Sure!

Jennie:
A lot of – a lot of people think more of the author who is able to snag a traditional publisher, 'cause it's difficult, but they think more of the – those people than they do, or somebody who just puts a book out there, because – let's face it, there's a lot of –

Angela:
Well, you can compare – you can compare and contrast for us, so, were there – do you think there were speaking opportunities or media opportunities that you got because you had a traditional publisher? Was the reaction different in any way, when you compare your first two books?

Jennie:
No, in fact my – my second book was a traditional, quote, publisher got less exposure than my first book did.

Angela:
Wow.

Jennie:
Primarily because – even though you have a traditional publisher, you're still responsible for all of the marketing – and I – make no mistake about it, you're not going to get marketing help from a traditional publisher, and I don't know if –

Angela:

Yeah – the irony is, unless you’re – Dan Brown or J. K. Rowling, the m – there’s no publisher that’s gonna spend money or resources marketing your book, and, of course, Dan Brown and J. K. Rowling don’t need marketing help! They’re gonna sell ... the books on their own – but, yeah, publishers don’t – they don’t have the resources to market, number one, and they – they don’t know your book the way you know your book, they don’t know your space the way you know your space, and their job is to publish.

Jennie:

Yeah. ...

Angela:

But I think a lot of authors think they’re gonna get marketing help, when that’s not a realistic. .

..

Jennie:

Yeah, and I thought, going into it, I thought – I – I was pretty realistic about it, and I thought, “Okay, so, I’m not gonna get a lot of help,” but I did expect some help, and I expected some better communication – from the publisher.

Angela:

Mmm.

Jennie:

I – I don’t – I don’t ever hear from them unless I initiate the com – unless I initiate the communication. And it’s just – “Don’t you wanna know what I’m doing, as far as marketing goes, so that maybe we can collaborate?” Those just – none of that – which –

Angela:

And then, in terms of sales, I think – would have need to have been – ten or twelve to one, have you found the sales with your second book have been ten or twelve times your first book?

Jennie:

No. No, not at all. It – it’s not – it’s not selling at all.

Angela:

Fascinating.

Jennie:

And it’s the – especially not selling when I decided that I wasn’t going to spend my own time and resources ... marketing –

Angela:

Mmm, getting ... money.

Jennie:

– when I was only – yeah, when I was getting only seven percent. I would rather spend my time and effort and - ...

Angela:

Nobody has made – nobody has made that point on the show before, but it is – I think that's a very good point is, there is something demotivating when you're getting seven percent on a book, you do feel – for every dollar – every dollar you earn, you're earning ten dollars for somebody else, and it is a little hard to do the work involved in marketing a book when you're really doing it for somebody else.

Jennie:

Well, yeah – and they haven't – they haven't done anything to motivate me or to – earn my royalty.

Angela:

Mm-hmm.

Jennie:

Harsh as that might sound, but it's –

Angela:

I think that – I don't think that's specific to this publisher, that is the story I hear of almost every traditional publisher. The model is broken, and I think publishers have their hands tied behind their back, and authors are – really – yeah, don't know how to make it work for them, either.

Jennie:

Yeah.

Angela:

Unless you happen to have a hit, and then – there's an investment on both sides.

Jennie:

Yeah.

Angela:

But if it's a regular book that requires – marketing muscle, it's hard to figure out – the – the model that works, and ... win-win. So, for your third book, you've decided to self-publish. Are

you going back and doing it exactly how you did the first one, or are you making some changes and what advice would you give to people who are thinking of self-publishing?

Jennie:

No, I'm doing this one different, because I – I – I self-published – *Hey, Get a Job!* in 2009 – and since then, we've had this explosion of Kindle and CreateSpace and all those kind of things, and so, my initial investment is – is nothing these days.

Angela:

Mmm.

Jennie:

You can go on CreateSpace and – and do all of it, and – and put it up on Kindle and all that good stuff – and this one is a little different, too, because it's a m – it's a memoir.

Angela:

Hmm!

Jennie:

So, it's more – it's a – more of a – a traditional book – there's not graphics in it, and all those ...

Angela:

There's gonna be less – less cartoons, or less – imagery, probably.

Jennie:

Yeah, yeah, there's not, and – i – it reads just like a novel –

Angela:

Mm-hmm.

Jennie:

– ... but it – it's a true story, so ... more different.

Angela:

And how did you – and so – so, you're doing more yourself? Are you working with an artist, or ... – who have you hired, are you working with an editor, an artist or anybody else, or is it all you?

Jennie:

I – I hired an editor – for the content, and other than that I – I haven't done – I haven't hired anybody else. I haven't hired a graphic artist, I – I'm – in that stage right now where it's – I – this – this book was, like I said, it's a memoir, and it – it's more cathartic for me –

Angela:
Mm-hmm.

Jennie:
– than it – than it is about making money or – or any of those kinds of things. And so, I'm just keeping it really basic, and I'm – I'm not investing a lot of money in it yet, I'm just – I'm just – taking it slow and easy and – and picking and choosing what I want to do with this – with this book.

Angela:
So, how do you balance the – the – artistic side, or the expression, the catharsis side of writing, how do you balance that with the business of writing? How do you know – how much of your energy do you wanna spend – on – on the business side of writing, how do you split that?

Jennie:
For me, right now, it – i – i – it's not about – creativity versus business, it's about making a living and – and taking care of my family, and – and the writing, and then the business comes last. Because I have a full-time job, and I have a family, and so – a – and especially with this book, it's – it's – if it makes money, great, if – if it doesn't, that's okay, too, this was just – it was fun to write, it was very cathartic for me, like I said. It's about dealing with my – my own abuse – and the – and some things that happened to me, and so – I'm very much more relaxed about this one, because it doesn't have – it doesn't have to do well, financially.

Angela:
Mmm.

Jennie:
And, like I said, it's – I – I – I'm still in the process of deciding – when and how do I wanna market this. There's a couple of websites that I think do a great job with – what they have – they don't market to a huge audience – but just enough to just – get it started – bookdiddies.com or something I just discovered. I do – I'll do a blog tour with it eventually – and just – just some things like that ... really inexpensive.

Angela:
So, in – in the last – five years or so that you have been an author, what would you say has been the most different thing than what you expected before – before you became an author, the way you pictured it? How is it different?

Jennie:
I would say that the diff – the – the gap between – self-publishing and traditional publishing. I felt like, when I started – even though I self-published the first one – the first one, it was –

“There’s no way that I can experience any success, because I’m self-published and who’s gonna listen to somebody who’s self-published?” And –

Angela:
Mmm.

Jennie:
And I think that was the mindset of a lot of people – traditional publishers were still very much on top of their world –

Angela:
Right.

Jennie:
– and then ... electronic publishing, and – and all of these kinds of things, and every day, people talking about your book on their blog – that’s a – that’s a powerful thing.

Angela:
Yeah.

Jennie:
And traditional publishers haven’t tapped into that.

Angela:
Mm-hm!

Jennie:
They’re – they’re finally discovering, “Hey, we need to get this on good reads, and we need to get people talking about it,” but – I’ve done blog tours with – there’s a group of – there’s just money bloggers, and so I think they –

Angela:
Well, ...

Jennie:
There’s a book – there’s a book for your kids, would you guys – would you guys read it? Would you review it on your blog, and I’ll give you one to give away?

Angela:
No, definitely a – there are definitely a lot of changes in publishing, it’s fast-moving, that is why we do Book Journeys, in fact, is to – get advice from people that are ... up-and-coming. jenniewithers, j-e-n-n-i-e, withers, w-i-t-h-e-r-s, jenniewithers.com, she is the author of *Hey*,

Get a Job! A Teen Guide for Getting and Keeping a Job. Jennie, thanks so much for being on Book Journeys with us today.

Jennie:

Okay, thank you very much.

Angela:

And we'll be back next week, changing the world one book at a time.