**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 23: How to write a For Dummies book with Gwen Hernandez, author of Scrivener for Dummies**

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Host:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Gwen Hernandez [GH]

[KW] I'm super excited to talk to you. You are the author of several books and one of which we're going to be focusing on today is Scrivener for Dummies. I usually start with asking people when did they know they wanted to be a writer? I read on your blog that you, in seventh grade, I think you had written your first novel. And you say you use that term loosely. [Laughter] I also believe I read somewhere, and I can't find it now, but you said that around a few years ago, is when everything fell into place. If we look at the books that you've published, Scrivener was out in 2012, so I'm curious - can you explain when you ramped up and started putting out all this work?

[GH] Laughter

I've always liked writing but I never considered it as a career. Then I quite my full time job back in 2008 and kind of decided if I was going to stay home and didn't want to be bored, that maybe now was a good time to try my hand at writing for real. So I really wasn't sure what type of writing I wanted to do. I was thinking more technical writing. And I actually found that romance was really where I wanted to be. And just through trial and error and some reading and things. In the course of writing romance and romantic suspense, and just sort of learning the craft and that sort of thing, I had joined a writers' organization. One of the ladies there recommended Scrivener, so I started using it and I started blogging about it. So that's kind of how I got into the Scrivener side of things. I was using it for my romance and stuff.

I think, right around early 2009 is when I decided to seriously pursue writing romance, and I was writing and querying agents and editors and going to classes and conferences and all that kind of stuff. But along with that, I was also blogging about Scrivener and later teaching about Scrivener. So the For Dummies people actually kind of found me when they were looking for a replacement to write a book they had already contracted. The original writer had to drop out. So they asked several of us to give a proposal and they picked mine. So that's when I wrote my first book that got published, but it certainly wasn't in the direction I had originally been going. I still write romance and I have two of those out but it came up very quickly and all of a sudden I had a book deal and a book due in like four months.

[KW] Wow.

It was kind of a whirlwind in a totally different area. But I have a technical background and I enjoyed that.

[KW] Yeah, you were an engineer right?

[GH]  Yeah, a manufacturing engineer.

[KW] Wow.  There's so much you just said, I don't know where to begin. When you were blogging about Scrivener, had you made contact with the Scrivener people - Literature and Latte - at that time when you started blogging and teaching classes or were you doing it independently?

[GH] Initially it was independently. It was more like I felt like I had to have a web presence. I wasn't published. I didn't know what to talk about. So my friends were the ones who were following me. And some of them were curious about features I had found on Scrivener so it just gave me a topic. And as I started digging into it more and finding new cool features, I was sharing them. And through that I did eventually get to know the guys at Scrivener because they're very good about promoting people who promote them. I had done this whole long series where like every week for about ten weeks are so, I was showcasing a new feature in Scrivener and David - who does most of the PR for them -  was retweeting and sharing on Facebook and thanking me and that kind of then. So I was kind of known to them and we had connected through social media. But once I got the book deal, Keith who is the programmer at Literature and Latte who started it and the original Scrivener guy - you know he still does all the programming for the Mac version - he and some of his team were the subject matter experts for the book. So through that, I developed an even tighter relationship with them on that level. Now, I definitely would say - it's not like we chat on a regular basis - but we definitely communicate and have a working relationship if you will.

[KW] So it's interesting how something - I don't know if you would call it a passion, when you started blogging about Scrivener - would you call a passion or was it just something you were interested in?

[GH] That's funny, I was just thinking about this literally yesterday. I think **when we follow our passion, we're much more likely to meet the luck that makes something really cool happen**. I do think it kind of became a passion because I tend to love things that make my life easier that are really slick, especially technology. Throughout my life as a programmer and a manufacturing engineer and I also used to be an instructor for business colleges and stuff - on the software side. So I have this long history of writing technical documentation both for my own jobs or for my students and things like that. It was just a natural way for me to take something I was excited about and share it with people because I already had the skills to do that, I guess. So I think it is pretty much a passion. I've been doing it since 2010, and I don't get tired of it. I still love teaching. I love doing workshops. I teach six classes online a year and do workshops. Anywhere from 8 to 10 workshops a year in person. And then I'm pretty active in a lot of the online forum - I shouldn't say a lot of them - specifically like Facebook and a little bit on the Google forum and talk to people about it a lot. I enjoy it.

[KW] I love that line you said, I am going to have pull it out and put it in the beginning of the show. Something about when we follow our passions, we meet the luck...?

[GH] [Laughter]

[KW] What do you think pushed your proposal over the edge when the For Dummies people contact you? When they contacted you, what did they ask you to pitch to them?

[GH] That's a great question. I actually get that quite a bit. They basically went out on Twitter and they said 'who are the Scrivener experts?' And they got all these names. I'm not sure how many of us they sent requests to, **but I basically got an email from an acquisitions editor and I had to look it up to make sure it wasn't a hoax.** [Laughter] He was real. It was just totally out of the blue. I'm like Yeah, right. Banging my head against the wall to try to get an agent or an editor to notice me with my fiction - this doesn't happen. So but they wanted a full proposal like what you would submit if you were querying them blind I guess. They kind of gave me an idea of what they were looking for - like a sample. It's the whole thing where you talk about the market for the book and what makes you unique from others, like if you look up a typical nonfiction proposal, it had all those elements as well as a complete outline for what I thought should be in the book by chapter. I was like 'Oh my God.' [Laughter] I felt like I **had no idea and I had three days to turn it around** - How long did Gwen have to write her proposal for Scrivener for Dummies? Three weeks, Three Days, three months. Find out!

[KW] Laughter

[GH] So I spent the entire weekend just - it was crazy - I spent the whole weekend just going through, at this point I had been teaching classes for about a year online so I did actually have a pretty good idea of what I felt were the main topics that should be covered and kind of in what order, so I think that was partly what gave me an edge though I had no idea what other people submitted. But because I had something to work from already, I could be fairly detailed in my outline. I also had a platform already: I had students. I had a lot of support from the guys at Literature and Latte. And I could say, here's what I've been seeing as a trend - like when I first started teaching, this is how many students I got, here's how many students I'm getting now. I'm starting to teach classes specifically for Windows separate from that, because I had started teaching them both together and these are the kind of numbers I'm getting. I think it helps me to kind of have that platform already, but also just to be able to provide a detailed outline and show that I knew what I was talking about.

[KW] I'm sure people who are listening are on the floor when you said you had to do it in three days. [Laughter]

[GH] That was a little stressful. I wasn't as much worried about the marketing and all of that because they had already decided they were gonna publish the book. So they were like do it so we know you understand what you're getting into, but don't worry as much about that. The outline was like the key thing. Yeah, I was - like nonfiction proposal! What's that?

[KW] That was one of my next question about the marketing part of the proposal, which I feel like, I dunno, I'll put myself in this, I feel like many writers look at that part of it like what? Where do I get these numbers? I was gonna ask you how you tackled that aspect of it in three days.

[GH] Yeah, if I'd had a little more time, or even a more confident relationship with the Literature and Latte guys at that time, I probably could have gotten some information from them. But what I did, I kind of just went and looked at how big is their following on Facebook? How big is their following on Twitter? How - I looked at what other books were out there that would be competition. It was a time where very few - and I don't think - any of them were profes-okay - I hate - traditionally published. [Laughter] I mean, my fiction is self-published, and I actually really like it that way but you know, at the time, there was like maybe one or two other books and they were both self-published and they were short. They were very specific, like writing a novel in Scrivener - by David H... but that was very specific to that niche and it was fairly short. And you know, I'm doing a 400-page book so it's in competition but a lot of people end up buying both. You know they like his book because they end up writing a novel but my book is a big reference book for all the major functions. So there was kind of very little competition, which is great. So I just kind of looked at those things and did the best I could with the information and time that I had and then focused most of my energy on just writing a kick-ass outline that was very well fleshed out. I mean I had to tell them how many pages I thought each chapter would be. I mean, I thought, I don't know! So I was just kind of guessing, and I really felt like no idea what I was doing and they were going to think I had no clue. But I think making the effort really says a lot, especially when they know they've only given you a few days.

[GH] If I were approaching them, I would put quite a bit more time into it.

[KW] You might still be working on it. [Laughter]

[GH] Yeah really.

[KW] I know I would. [Laughter]

I think that's great. I think they say deadlines are a writer's friend?

[GH] That's true.

[KW] Congratulations for that, to get your first book deal and be the author of a For Dummies book which the series is massive - massive brand. What does that feel like to?

[GH] Oh my god, it was amazing. It didn't feel real for quite a while. Sometimes still doesn't so I'm getting used to it. It came at a really nice time in my life because writing romance. About nine months before, I had finaled in a major award for one of my romantic suspense, one of my novels, and was really beating my head against a wall trying to get noticed. I mean I got tons of great feedback but nobody was publishing in that time in that genre with new authors. It was all - historical romance was hot. Contemporary was hot. Paranormal - but not romantic suspense. And then to have this come along it was a real boost in my confidence. I think it also helped with my family and nonwriting friends. It was like - oh look she is a writer. She's published. Even though I don't feel like I should need that, I won't lie it definitely helped and it felt really good. It was nice to be getting paid for writing too for the first time.

[KW] I think that a lot of writers still do have that need for validation. I mean, that's what the publishing industry is really built on. The way it’s designed - you send something out to someone and someone is going to like it and publish it, and that's validation.  You know?

[GH] Right.

[KW] You said something, and we're going to talk about your fiction that you have self-published a little later. But I want to stick with Scrivener for Dummies right now. So you got the book, got the contract, then you said the book had to be done in four months?

[GH] Yeah. I think - I got the contract in February - it was finalized in late February. The whole book was due end of May. So, really, I guess like three months. So that was a bit daunting. Luckily this was not my full-time job. The first quarter of the book was the hardest because I was sort of starting a little behind on my timeline and sort of figuring out my process and getting to know my editor and everything, but the way it works is you basically you just turn in each chapter as you finish it, and I just had deadlines for each quarter of the book. I was actually telling David from Literature and Latte that there's no way I feel like I could have managed to write the book without using Scrivener to do it, just because it helped me stay on track and keep my schedule, and sort of color-coded everything to schedule sort of where I was. So that helped a lot with project management.

[KW] One of the things that I noticed immediately is that you seem to capture to the For Dummies voice really well. It's kind of smart, snarky, you should know this maybe you don't, snippy but humorous.  I looked at some of your blog posts, and it seems this is also a part of your style because you're humorous as well. So I wondered how you really captured the For Dummies voice. Did you have to really concentrate on it? Was that a discussion with the editor?

[GH] It turns out; I think I’m just a really good match because I have a somewhat dry sense of humor. I had been writing my classes that way already because my classes online feature written lectures and other support and things like that but, I think I just have this tendency and want to take something - as soon as it starts feeling a little too dry, you know to spice it up a little bit, and never take anything too terribly seriously. You know, I guess it's more of an irreverent approach to things - not that I can't be serious. I think it just worked out that I was a pretty good fit. They had me do a test chapter. Chapter 4 was my test chapter and so I wrote that one first and sent it in and the editor and the project editor both looked at it and just went through and so I could get a feel of what kinds of feedback I'd be getting from them. But then she said I think the tone you have works really well, so just keep with that. So I kind of just let loose, and if I ever went too far - I had some analogy like building a house or something - and I think I had to take a whole extra paragraph and my editor was like, "okay, we don't need that much. Let's just get back to teaching."

[Laughter]

So she reined me in a few times, but for the most part they just let me have fun with it because that's what they wanted. That's what people look for in the Dummies line.

[KW] What other types of feedback did they give you on that sample chapter?

[GH] That's a good question. I can't remember specifics but it was mostly just things about how - sort of like - what kind of level of clarity, how deep do I need to drill down when I'm writing the step-by-step aspect of the process. And then, just sort of learning some of the fundamentals of the way they write a book. So my approach when I teach a class is to start with- I have you create a file and we just build on it in every lesson. So I'm walking you through the creation of a project from start to finish. The Dummies book has to more like a reference - where I'm talking about annotations or something like that - and I mention the binder - you know what the binder is - I'm going to have some reference in there like, for more on the binder, go to chapter 1. So everything is written like that where I can't assume that you know what I'm talking about even though we're on chapter 8, 9, or 12. So it was a little bit of a different approach. So it was more of that, making sure I understood how they wanted the chapters to work. How they wanted me to handle the reader and sort of the approach to the book. And then just watching for certain things like - you don't want to say "so as you can see" or something like that. There's all these little guidelines and things they have. So it was, I don't think I had too many big changes for chapter 4, it was mostly kind of a quick check to make sure I was on the right track and we just went through chapter by chapter.

[KW] What was the most challenging part of writing the Scrivener for Dummies book?

[GH] Probably just the timeline for me. Well, and specific to the book, it would be the compiling chapters. Compiling is how you export your work from Scrivener into whatever format you want. Word document. Epub. Kindle. Whatever. And it's probably one of the more complex aspects of Scrivener for people and I really struggled with what kind of approach to take in order to cover such a huge topic. In the user manual at the time, it was like 90 pages, now, I think it's over 100 something. I had originally written - I had wanted to write like a 70 page chapter. And they're like "No, no. You can't do that. That's way too long." [Laughter] I had to break it into two. So I was like wait, how do I break this into two? So I think I started writing chapter 12 and I was like - I had allotted like a week or something, and I was halfway into my week and I decided this isn't going to work. I had to start over completely with how I was going to approach it. I would always wonder, did I pick the right way? I have all sorts of ideas for how I would do it again, but that was a real struggle for me. It's still a topic that is probably the toughest one for me to get across. I'd spend a whole week teaching it online and I still don't cover everything. So that was definitely probably the biggest challenge other than getting it done in such a short period of time.

[KW] It's interesting you say that was one of the most challenging parts because that's one of my go-to sections. I didn't know that until reading through your book that you could compose in any font, any color, any size that you want. You could do Helvetica green - like you said - 16 point but then when you compile and export to a Word doc or whatever it is whatever you set it to be. I didn't realize that. I thought that's really cool. So the compile option for me is the most challenging but the chapter really takes you through.

[GH] Well good. [Laughter] If I had to ask people what's the number one reason you bought the book, that would probably be high up there. I haven't ever done that, but I know that's still where I get so many questions. For a long time, that probably was my number one hit on my website. And I don't really have a detailed blog post - because how do you cover compile on a blog post - but I had written one that was kind of highlighting a few key things and that for a year was probably my number one hit.

Now, it's adding images.

[KW] Which you can also do in the notes section I learned from reading, I didn't know that. I think Scrivener is such a powerful software I think it's great you have this For Dummies book out there; it just puts everything right as your fingertips.

[GH] Thank you.