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WRITING
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with Pat Iyer



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Radio

Story Creation through Sailing Dave Bricker

The author of 12 books and a highly experienced editor and ghostwriter, Dave Bricker brings his unique history as someone for years lived on a sailboat to the creative voyage of writing. He gives new meaning to the “independent” aspect of independent publishing by emphasizing the freedom to design and publish your book according to your needs and wishes. As an expert navigator, he will guide you to your special destination.

Learn

- The importance of bringing your life experiences to whatever you write
 - How to bring out the deeper lessons that will make your stories compelling to the reader
 - To keep foremost in your awareness that people want to be inspired and transformed
 - Why independent publishing allows you to realize your vision
 - The importance of your published work as a steppingstone to other goals
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Pat: Hi, this is Pat Iyer with *Writing to Get Business* and I have with me today, Dave Bricker. When I thought about doing this podcast and came up with the idea of it, I made a list of potential guests, and Dave was on the list as the number one person I wanted to talk to on the show. I'm delighted, Dave, that you can be with us today.

Dave: I'm very happy to be here, Pat. I'm honored.

Pat: Dave and I met through our involvement in the National Speakers Association, and I remember meeting him at a reception for people from Florida who are at our annual conference. Dave has an interesting background, with lots of areas of expertise. He spent some time in his life living on a sailboat without a permanent home and has developed a real expertise in writing, in editing, in ghostwriting, and helping people with that creative process. Dave is the author of 12 books, so I'd like to start with that, Dave, to take you back to when you thought of writing a book for the first time.

What went through your mind and what took you from that zero to one? That hardest step I think for any author is writing your first book.

Dave: always knew that I'd write a book because I spent that early part of my life sailing in search of stories, because I met people who had great stories. And when I realized I was living in this secret floating village in this world that nobody really knew about, I knew that I was... This was like living in Tortilla Flat or something out of a Steinbeck novel.

I started writing things down. I started taking pictures. And at that point in my life in my twenties, I was very much accumulating stories for something I'd do later. And in my work as a graphic designer, eventually that 20 years later came, and somebody came to me, a wonderful novelist by the name of Richard Geller. And he came to me with three novels that he'd written, and he wanted me to typeset because I do old school typesetting. I don't do much of it anymore but go into an antique bookstore and compare that to what you see in a normal bookstore. There's no comparison. And I did the covers, and I learned, started learning about the publishing process. And at that point I said, "You know, it's not that difficult. I can do this" and I began to write.

I guess my first experiment in real writing was a novel. A friend of mine had some wonderful sailing and adventure stories. I started by creating three novels about his true-life adventure stories. And in doing that, I learned a lot about the publishing process and wrote a little book about self-publishing, thinking, "Okay, I've got the art stuff over here. Let me try to create a product that someone might want to actually buy."

We can talk about that difference between fiction and nonfiction and writing for business if you want. But then I started writing and working on the craft of writing. I discovered the merits of working with an editor, no matter how polished you may be, and got on that journey. And I'm still on it and, God, I've got almost 30,000 words of the next book in the can. I just keep doing it. It's a sickness.

Pat: I would call it a compulsion, maybe not a sickness. Your friend whose stories made up the novels, were you ghostwriting those stories for

him or were you using his life as the basis for the character in the novels?

Dave: Well, he never approached me and said, "Hey Dave, will you write a book about my stories?" This was a sailing buddy of mine, and I knew him for 20 years, and I realized that... I mean, he was just a gifted natural storyteller and he'd close his eyes and go into his memories, and the stories never drifted. They never changed. When I heard them over the years and I realized, "Wow, this stuff is true. I want to write this down. These are not sea stories in the traditional sense. This guy's either diabolical and has spent immense time crafting all the details and really getting... No, no way. Truth is stranger than fiction." And I took his stories, and they formed the basis of the three novels and that was my introduction to writing, but I did it.

I guess I wasn't ready to tell my own stories and I had these wonderful stories of his that I practiced on. And I mean, it's a first. They're first efforts. I don't push those books but occasionally, I go back and I'm proud of them. I think they were a good first effort. I worked very hard on them. Eventually, I wrote a sailing memoir called the *Blue Monk*, which was the name of my sailboat in my twenties. It was named after the Thelonious Monk tune, and that talks about the crazy world of living onboard a sailboat in Miami in the 1980s and what the Anchorage community was like. It talks about sailing up and down the Bahamas as a young man by myself. It talks about crossing the Atlantic in a wooden boat, and it just creates a picture of a time. It's a memoir.

Pat: I think for some of us it sounds incredibly romantic and carefree. Yet, I know there must have been hard times and hard work and bad weather and boat breakdowns that you had to figure out how to fix. Yet still it seems like that would be a way of living that would be so far beyond the ability of many people to be able to attain.

Dave: Well, it's... as far as attaining it... I'll work backwards on your question. As far as attaining it, I left with \$30 in my pocket and a locker full of food and dreams. And it was a little 26-foot boat I bought for \$3,000, and I odd-jobbed my way up and down the islands. And if I made a couple of hundred dollars, I was able to live on it for a few months. I was catching fresh fish. All I needed was eggs and vegetables and basics. And in that time of my life, I did fine.

As far as it being romantic. I think that's an excellent word for it because when we think about romance, well there's always that wonderful, sexy, lovey-dovey kind of that beginning part of it. And then you get into the differences of opinion, and you find out that the person you fell madly in love with is human and has flaws. Over time, you decide whether this is someone you're going to spend your life with or not, and reality sets in. That's the nature of romance. Long-term romances are not long-term honeymoons, except perhaps in very rare cases. And so, yeah, sailing is like falling in love. It can make you feel so sick that you want to die. You can get lost at sea. You can just lose your way and feel cold and abandoned. But when the wind is just right, there's no better feeling in the whole world.

Pat: My father gave me a book (*Dove* by Robin Lee Graham) that I read many years ago about a young man who sailed around the world in a small boat and then got a lot of publicity, a lot of backing. He came back to the United States and had a hard time integrating back into society. He went to Stanford University for a while, dropped out, became very depressed. He went into a deep depression at a time when his house that he was trying to build was partially done. And he and his wife were living in this cold, leaky basement of this house, and then he never wrote a third book.

The lessons that he learned going around the world were incredible in terms of having to rely on his own ability to repair his boat. You know it seemed like such a tale of adventure that, I think he was 17 or 18 at the time that he did this, that it made a strong impression on my father. And it was one of the things that I decided to read after my father died. It took me years before I read this story.

The elements of a story are something that I know that you have studied, and you spend a lot of time crafting stories. It sounds like you got exposed to a master storyteller early on. Can you share with our listeners some of the points that we should be considering when we're integrating stories into what we do?

Dave: Well, I'm going to bounce off a point that you made about that feeling of isolation that a big story can impose upon you. After I got back from my Atlantic crossing and my years at sea and returned to the land of clocks and calendars, I mean suddenly, you've got a very different perspective. You hear about people who spend time in a

foxhole, and they have post-traumatic stress syndrome. We used to call it post-island stress syndrome, PISS, and you come home, and you don't quite fit in. You go to a party and someone says, "You're that guy who lives on a boat, cool," and you're thinking, "Okay, well, put me in a cage. I'm the noble savage, right?" I mean, no common frame of reference. And it's easy to carry that stuff around with you, but I think coming to your actual question about storytelling, it's all great to have memories and experiences.

"How can you put them in the service of your *reader*?"

"How can you put them in the service of your *listener*?"

So, it took me a long time, but I dusted off my sea stories because everybody's got oceans to cross. People need to navigate. They need to stand watch. They need to trim the sails. They need to learn to trust their compass.

One of my favorite lessons of all is if you're the captain, whatever happens on your boat is your fault no matter who screwed it up. Captain John Smith was on his last cruise before retiring. He was aboard the Titanic, captain of the Titanic. He was asleep in his bunk when the ship hit the iceberg, and he was standing in the wheelhouse when the ship went down. There are huge accountability lessons, business lessons, and life lessons to be gotten, well, from sailing and from whatever your own life experiences.

Pat: Wow, what a way to end your career.

Dave: I'm not sure I think of it as being ended, but okay.

Pat: No, I'm talking about the captain of the Titanic.

Dave: I know. Yes, I'm teasing you. I jumped on you there, I can't help myself sometimes. But no, I mean it's tragic, right. But imagine here's a guy who as a sea captain understood the importance of accountability and what it meant to be a captain and for him to say, "Look, with all my heart, I want to jump in one of those lifeboats, but it is my responsibility. All of these people perished on my watch and it's my responsibility to ride the ship to the bottom." It's an enormous sense of duty. And I would have preferred that he paid homage to those people in other ways and repented in other ways, I would have

preferred he survived. But I respect his decision to do that. We don't have leaders who do that kind of thing anymore.

Pat: I had an opportunity to be at the wheel of a boat that had about 20 tourists in it when I was in the British Virgin Islands in the... probably 15 years ago. I had never piloted a boat. I'm not even sure if that's the right word. I had never been at the wheel, and the captain was standing right next to me and he said to us, "Anyone want to be interested in taking charge of this boat as we head back to the dock?" And I learned in that 15 minutes that you don't go straight ahead with a boat, that you're continually doing this little zigzag motion, and that there are cross-currents that can knock you off your course as you pass an island.

I took that experience and turned it into an analogy. I was president of our national association at a time that we needed to fire our management company and bring in another management company. And in that period, there were three months where we had no management company while we were interviewing new ones. When we had our new management company, a few months later we had our annual conference and, as the president of the association, I gave a speech at the conference. I said that this year had been like piloting that boat. We were zigging and we were zagging, and at times we were on that boat all by ourselves. And then the management company came onboard and took charge of the wheel and we were once again back with the assistance of a management company.

There were people who came up to me for years and said, "Pat, I remember your story about being in charge of that boat." And I thought, "That's the power of a good story. It sticks with people." You drew lessons from your experience when you were out on the ocean that you use to convey and communicate to other people, and they remember it.

Dave: Yeah, and you need to find those universal themes. It's very important because you know, for example, I heard a speaker talk about going to San Francisco to fulfill his dream of crossing the Golden Gate Bridge and hiking in the Muir Woods. Now I've done that trip. It's a beautiful trip. At the conclusion of the speech, the speaker said, "I encourage you all to make that trip. It was very gratifying trip." And, okay, great. And having done it, I agree, but we all have... we all get lost in the

deep, dark woods, and we all have bridges to cross and there's usually either a toll booth on top or a troll underneath trying to get our money. And when you find these metaphorical threads that go deep into the human psyche, your book, your speech, your mission statement, whatever it is, becomes much more powerful. Otherwise, it's just an anecdote. It's not a story.

Pat: Are there any pieces that we should think about? I know you've talked about analogies, but when you're structuring a story, is there any framework like a universal framework that would be helpful to us as we're incorporating stories into books or videos or blogs?

Dave: Funny that you should ask. I start off with the golden rule of storytelling, which is that stories are always about people. If you're not talking about people, you're not telling stories. If you're not telling stories, you're not connecting. If you're not connecting, you're not selling. And by selling, I mean selling not necessarily your products or services. It can be your ideas, your leadership, your credibility, anything. So, if we're not talking about people, we're talking about... It's the adage about sell the benefits, not the features. And people really don't care about the features. They want to know what's in it for them. So, when you tell a story, tell it on behalf of your listener and be very cognizant of the outcome.

So, given that golden rule, imagine the main character. It could be a group of people but imagine the main character of the story and they're in this sailboat on the rocky, stormy seas of conflict. And what they want to do is get to the safe port of transformation. They want to make that journey. And very often take, for example, an advertisement for insurance or an anti-tobacco ad that shows you the black lungs or the yellow fingers or the bird houses or the crashed cars. It turns people off. Nobody pays any attention.

Show me the ad that has the elderly people enjoying time with their grandchildren. Show me the ad where somebody is finishing a marathon. And that makes a much more powerful point about... It makes a more powerful message because people want that transformation. The conflict drives the story, but it isn't the story. And then for that boat to make the journey, the water must be deep enough. And that's the authenticity factor.

It's fascinating when we talk about people who aren't very deep or stories who aren't very deep or concepts that are. And it has to do with these human themes I talked about: sex, survival, safety, status, food love, shelter, things that really matter to people. Because if you're not getting at the authentic conflict, that story's going to run aground.

And the fourth element of storytelling is wind. It's magic. It's that invisible, powerful force. And I love this model because, look, Pat, you and I are both editors and I can talk to prospective clients and say, "I'm an editor," and you can say the same thing. And we can talk about our titles, the functional description of what we do. But to find out whether that relationship is worth pursuing with that author, we need to talk about our approach, the way we see language, the way we see storytelling. And you'll do it different than I will, and I'll do it different than you will and that's why I'm going to be better for certain clients, and you're going to be better for certain clients. It's relationship-based, but that's our magic. That's that invisible, powerful force that moves our client's boat from conflict to transformation.

And I love this model because there is no competition. We're not competing. We just do... We may fill that same functional role, but we'll do it in different ways because we've got different magic powers. And that can be your talent. It can be your experience. It can be your team. It can be your tools. It doesn't have to be woo-woo like it sounds, but it's those four elements of story and that's what *Storysailing* is all about. It's conflict and transformation. It's authenticity and magic. Four elements, plus a golden rule. Stories are always about people.

Pat: You said that so nicely, Dave.

Dave: I've talked about it before.

Pat: I bet you have. Let me take you back to your books because I think we've covered the early books that you've written and I think we left off with the four... the three novels that you wrote based on the stories of the sailor. Where did you go from there with your books?

Dave: Well, I went into a lot of other people's books along the way. I've probably done 40 books or so for other people, whether that was editing or typesetting or cover design or all three. Not all of them were

edited. I've ghostwritten a couple of books. I can't tell you for whom, for obvious reasons, but yeah. And then along the way I think what I... as I began to think about publishing, almost all my clients and I are independent publishers, and we're self-publishers. And that has a bad rap for obvious reasons because the average do-it-yourself book is kind of like a do-it-yourself airplane. It's not very safe or well-crafted.

Pat: That's quite an image.

Dave: But I also discovered that writers who get the right team, the right resources, can produce better books than traditional publishers are. And they're not assigned an editor. They find an editor who's right for them, who gives them that tough love and they really beat up the pros. And the ones who are willing to do the work, who go... are willing to just go back and fight with their editor and engage in this process, this publishing process. You end up with a manuscript that's much more refined than a lot of trade published books are. Then you get into the book design. You get into the typesetting aspect of it.

Now big publishers have... they produce 10 to 30,000 books at a time for each of the 90 to 120 books they release each quarter. They're thinking boxcars and it makes a lot of sense for big publishing companies to save ink and paper. If they can save 40 or 50 pages per book over the 10 or 20 or 30,000 books, that's a huge savings in shipping and paper and ink. But as indie publishers, we're using print-on-demand. If you order one of my books from Amazon, Amazon will order from Lightning Source. Lightning Source will manufacture one book, put it in an Amazon book box and drop ship it.

So, it's fascinating that we have this ability to manufacture a single book to order quickly. And given that, it allows you to focus on the design again, to put those beautiful wide margins as classic margins, all that stuff that's missing. And then, again, covers. If you want a very commercial looking cover or a commercial looking layout for that matter, you can have it. But if you're writing an artistic book, if you're an artist and writer, or you want to write something classy or you just want it to look better than new, hire a cover designer who isn't so worried about what people in your genre happened to like.

"Does it need to look like the latest vampire book or Stephen King book or Agatha Christie book or whatever's popular?"

No, it's just... it's a wrapper for the narrative. We have a lot of freedom, and with great freedom comes responsibility, but indie publishers have incredible opportunities if they get the right guidance and focus on quality and don't cut corners.

Pat: You've really changed my perspective about the benefits of independent publishing because I never considered the idea that you have a lot more freedom and flexibility over the quality when you are independently publishing versus a traditional publisher.

I ghost wrote a book a couple of years ago with a man whose book was accepted by a major publisher and the cover that they came up with was dreadful. It was the most horrible image I had ever seen. The man I was working with is African American, and they put an African American character on the cover who looked like little black Sambo and he was running away from a bull. And we went back to the publisher and said, this is horrible, and they ignored us. It was like a caricature. It was offensive. It was a stereotype. It missed the point of the theme of the book.

It was sort of in the right ballpark and I'm deliberately not saying the name of the book to protect the identity of the publisher. Then we had to struggle with the publisher. We had to get our agent, our literary agent, involved to apply pressure on the publisher to switch the design around it, and they were very reluctant. And it took some persuasion for them to realize that, no, this was not the right cover for this book. You don't want to put this little black boy running away from this creature on the cover. They did come up with a better cover. In hindsight, if the book had been independently published, that was not something that would have required that much struggle to get right.

Dave: You end up with a different problem, which is that very often the author has some idea of what the cover should look like, and very often they're too close to the work. And they're trying to put the picture frame on this big picture they've just spent perhaps a thousand hours or more creating. And in my experience, what happens is if someone hires me to do a cover, I'll deliver that cover. And the first response is shock and then 15 minutes later, "So, you know, I didn't like this at first, but it's growing on me." And then 45 minutes later I get a call, "You know I came home, and I showed this to my wife.

Everybody loves this. I really like this, let's run with it." But it's your work and you've got a picture of what it should be.

Now going back to the big publishers, you... it's... they're in the business of selling book product in large quantities. Imagine the size of these industries and that every time they sell a unit, they make a couple of bucks. It's a very difficult industry, and the way they work, it's kind of like a mutual fund. They release those 90 to 100 books, 120 books every quarter. Some of those books are pretty sure bets. Somebody's got a celebrity tell-all book. They're going to release yet another version of *Moby Dick* or *Charles Dickens* or some sort of a set of classics that they know are going to sell. And then there are those perennial favorites like *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* and just the classics.

So, these publishers have a catalog. But as far as new books, it's a big risk. Most of the time the book gets its 90 days in the bookstore between 18 months and two years after it's been accepted for publication. And almost all those books end up... The paper part goes to the pulp mill and they send the covers back to prove the book has been destroyed because it's not worth the shipping to ship the books back and warehouse them. The book, a few copies go in the remainder bin, and any future copies pretty much go to pay the publisher back for the loss. And hopefully the author can leverage the fact that they were published and picked up by a big house and move on and get another deal. It's very difficult, but they get a couple of J.K. Rowlings and a couple of Dan Browns in there that just sell millions of copies, and the whole thing pays for itself.

It's a tremendous business. I have great respect for it, but it is a retail business. It's about moving product, and that's why the people in New York don't want you designing your cover. And they may make edits, even changing names of characters and things because they have their ideas about what's marketable, how it's going to affect the readers. And hey, they make money and sell books. That's their mission, God bless them.

I see indie publishing in a different light. I'm not going to sell enough books in most cases to make any kind of money. Most of my clients who are independent publishers, I tell them up front, "You're probably

going to pay me more money than you're ever going to make in books."

"So, why should you do this?"

Because you get to be the person who wrote the book on your subject is one reason. It gives you instant credibility as a subject matter expert and that can get you speaking gigs, consulting contracts, things like that, that can really turn your business fortunes around. Give away those books to the right people and you're making money on the backside. The other reason to do it is because you're an artist. Some people oil paint in their basement, some people weld dinosaurs out of automotive junk, and most of those people don't make money. But they find it very fulfilling to create their art, and if you're writing your novels or whatever it is or you want to leave your memoir behind for your kids, go for it. Just don't conflate that with a good business opportunity. "Build it and they will come" rarely is a good business strategy.

Pat: For any type of business, absolutely.

We've covered a lot of ground today or a lot of water, using your analogies. Dave has shared with us an interesting background in spending time living on a sailboat and has shared some of the romance involved, and some of the trouble and the difficulties of living on a sailboat. He has talked with us about using your stories as analogies, bringing in people and elements that will compel the reader or the viewer, however you're incorporating your stories into your work so that they get the lessons the messages told in story form.

He has shared with us that there are some significant advantages to independently publishing your book over what is a huge retail business that's built on volume truck loads and train loads and carloads full of books that have to be pumped out by the retailer who is interested in mass production. Whereas when you aren't independently publishing your book, you have much more control over the look, the feel, the cover design, the elements that you want to include in your book. And a book is a steppingstone for you.

You may end up paying more for the production, for the editing, for the cover design, for the printing than you will recoup. However, if

you look at only book sales, that's true. If you look at the way that you use the book to build your speaking business or create online courses or coaching or consulting, those are the payoffs. And that's one of the consistent messages of *Writing to Get Business*. It is the spinoff work that ultimately gives you the rewards.

Dave, how can our listeners connect with you, find out more about what you offer and go further with your services?

Dave: I have a website and blog at Storysailing, S-A-I-L-I-N-G, storysailing.com. I blog every two weeks about writing, storytelling, and lately I have been doing a lot with virtual presentation work because I work with speakers and of course storytelling is a big part of that. There's a list of my books there. And anyone who wants to reach out and talk a little bit more about storytelling, there's a place on the site to book a Zoom call with me and I'm delighted to speak with anyone who shares my passion for words and presentations.

Pat: Thank you Dave. I appreciate you spending your time with me today.

Dave: It's been an honor.

Pat: And I thank you, the listener, who's listening to this on our audio platform. This show is carried by C-Suite Network, the largest business podcast network in the world, and these shows are also on my YouTube channel. So, please come back next week or pick another show in the lineup and get some wisdom from *Writing to Get Business*.