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Pitchapalooza



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(Editor's Note: The April 10-12 Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop at the University of Dayton sold out in 12 hours, but events are open for media coverage. Pitchapalooza is scheduled for 3:45-5:15 p.m. on Saturday, April 12, in the Kennedy Union Ballroom on campus. Talk show legend Phil Donahue opens the workshop with a keynote address during a 6 p.m. dinner on Thursday, April 10, in the Dayton Marriott Ballroom. For the complete schedule, see <http://humorwriters.org/2014workshop/schedule> (url: <http://humorwriters.org/2014workshop/schedule> .)

A magical moment happens when a writer takes a deep breath and launches into a passionate one-minute elevator pitch of a book concept before hundreds of other would-be authors.

"It's very touching," says literary agent Arielle Eckstut about the emotion-charged atmosphere at Pitchapalooza. "These writers are wearing their hearts on their sleeves."

Adds her writer-husband David Henry Sterry: "This is the first time some have said in public, 'I'm a writer.'"

At the April 10-12 Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop at the University of Dayton, 20 randomly selected writers will get the opportunity to make a one-minute pitch — and perhaps write their own perfect ending. One winner, selected by Eckstut, Sterry and two other publishing experts, will receive an introduction to an agent or publisher appropriate for the book idea.

Welcome to Pitchapalooza, billed as the "American Idol for books, only kinder and gentler." Since 2005, Eckstut and Sterry have taken Pitchapalooza to approximately 150 bookstores, writing conferences, book festivals and libraries — from Cape Cod and Chicago to the far-flung states of Hawaii and Alaska. It has drawn standing-room-only crowds and captured attention from *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, NPR and other media outlets.

"Our whole goal is to help people improve. There's never a sense of humiliation," said Eckstut, an agent-at-large with Levine Greenberg Literary Agency in New York and the author of nine books.

The event also illustrates the importance of tenacity. "In 2010 at LitQuake in San Francisco a woman pitched an idea for an anthology by American-Muslim women writing about their secret love lives," Sterry recalls. "You could hear the murmur throughout the room. That pitch is a book waiting to happen, but an agent had dropped the idea."

The lesson: an initial rejection doesn't always determine a book's fate.

"There's a great expression, 'Don't quit five minutes before the marathon ends,'" says Sterry, who's written 15 books himself. "I called up a publisher I knew, and it took about 10 seconds to sell that idea."

The couple came up with the idea for Pitchapalooza after co-writing *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published* and trying to figure out how to creatively promote their own niche book. They're the founders of The Book Doctors, a company dedicated to helping authors get successfully published.

"We were at a party in San Francisco, and writers in the room heard the rumor there was a literary agent in the house. People started buzzing around Arielle like moths to a flame," says Sterry with a laugh. "There were some great drunken pitches made that night. Later, we realized we might have hit upon something that could help us help writers and sell our own book."

When the couple introduced Pitchapalooza at New York's iconic Strand Book Store, "we thought it would be a terrible bust," concedes Sterry. "We show up, and there's a line out the door. We looked at each other and said, 'What's going on here?' If it's not Michelle Obama or a celebrity, it's hard to get more than 15 or 20 people at a book signing."

Over the years, Sterry says they've heard "some amazing and some horrifying pitches." One writer tried to pitch five book ideas in a minute. Another had an idea for a 30-book series. Another didn't win at Pitchapalooza, but still ended up with a book contract.

"The writer was an arborist who had an idea that took off on *The Elements of Style* — only for fruit trees," Eckstut says. "She had incredible expertise, and I knew just the right publisher."

Writers don't have to win or even participate in the Pitchapalooza contest to receive a professional critique of their book ideas. Eckstut and Sterry are offering writers who buy their book, *The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published*, a free 20-minute telephone consultation after the workshop.

The two offer these tips for making a great pitch:

1. When pitching a narrative, memoir or creative nonfiction, make sure you have a hero we can fall in love with.
2. Don't tell us your book is funny. Make us laugh.
3. Compare your book to a successful one. Show us where the book fits on the shelf in a bookstore.

And finally, "Don't say you're the next Erma Bombeck," Sterry says with a laugh.

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