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University of Alaska "You Can Write Too" – Elsa Pedersen

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Notes:

Mr. Bedford [Jimmy] tells a crowd good evening and says it is a pleasure to be representing the English and Journalism Department. He says he is also representing on behalf of the Alaska Council of the Arts and University Statewide Services. He says Mrs. Pedersen is a very successful writer with 13 books published. The books have run into sales of 10,000 copies each which is about 130,000 copies of books. Mrs. Pedersen was born in Utah and graduated from high school in Salt Lake City. She went to college and dropped out after one quarter because she was bored. Bedford says he was listening to George Nightingale [He believes] on the radio and heard that George Westinghouse quit Union College at the age of 19 because he said he didn't have the time to dedicate his mind to his studies. Westinghouse later held 361 patents and founded 60 companies. Mrs. Pedersen went to San Francisco where she became a secretary and bookkeeper. She met her husband and moved to Alaska in 1933. She began writing on the homestead and wrote a couple articles and finally wrote a book. She took a correspondence course from the University of Chicago. She has been writing ever since and her most recent book is the book on Alaska for the Coward-McCann series titled "States of the Nation." The News-Miner Today had it wrong and the man says that it was his fault. Mrs. Pedersen is turning more and more into non-fiction and is writing a story about Alaska and the current problems. The man says Mrs. Pedersen is one of Alaska's most successful authors and has won several awards. Mrs. Pedersen is introduced at 3:20.

Mrs. Pedersen says she was on the same stage for a similar program last year. She says she doesn't consider herself the last word on how to go about writing and everyone has to do it the way that they feel comfortable. She mentions Sinclair Lewis having to give a similar discussion. He said to the crowd "So you all want to be writers? Well then why are you at home writing." Lewis left the stage. Mrs. Pedersen says writing is a personal affair. There are no set rules. If only a single person benefits from her speech she will feel rewarded. The program is jointly sponsored by the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington D.C. This is her second year on the program. She asks if writers are born or made. She says that is a matter of opinion. Catherine Ann Porter says writing can't be taught but only can be learned. Mrs. Pedersen says talent is God-given but if you are interested in writing then you have talent and it can be developed. There are many people who have talent but it is those who work at it that succeed. The reason she is there is she wants to help people with their approach to writing. One reason to become a writer is because an author has something to say that people will pay to read. The second is strictly an ego thing, to leave some kind of record that you have lived. She says she is satisfied that her work will endure after she is gone. The third reason people want to write is to put to use God-given talent. The bible says the talent will be lost

if it is not used. Stories are written to entertain the reader. Any message must be within the entertainment framework. Mrs. Pedersen says you can't lecture because you will be writing a tract rather than popular articles. A writer is a creator; a writer is God to the work. She says events must be in a logical order. While stories are written in terms of larger than life, they do solve the problem of everyday existence. There is euphoria to writing well, a mind expansion. There is a glow that a writer gets, similar to what people get from drugs. She says when writing there is sometimes a feeling of wondering how you wrote that. A writer needs to have more than anything a good memory, a total recall. This is because the emotions must be put into a character. This is a curse and blessing because writing causes problems and writers are constantly dredging up past embarrassments and installing the emotions into the characters.

At 10:00 Mrs. Pedersen says that whether people realize it or not, they are constantly putting a piece of themselves into their writing. She gives an example from one of her works called "Petticoat fisherman." She says she was not consciously using herself as a model for the central character of the book. She says she has never seen the artist who drew for the book. She says the girl drawn for the book could be herself from when she was 16 so without realizing it she put an essence of herself into the book. She begins discussing how one becomes a writer and describes her relationship with literacy. She begins discussing the meaning of words. She discusses her history with reading and writing and says she has read over 1,000 books. She gives tips to becoming a better writer. She mentions that Ernest Hemingway wrote 800 words a day and Graham Greene has a quota of 750 words a day. She discusses Graham Greene's accomplishments. The author Max Brand's accomplishments are also mentioned. She says it is a dangerous thing to pursue literature as a trade and the reasons. She discourages people from making writing a single career. She says she writes 2 hours a day, 365 days a year. She does not submit any unfinished work to anyone. She discusses amateur writing groups. She says writers are not capable of being objective to another writer's work because they always think about how they would have written it. She mentions the Author's Guild. She belongs to Author's Guild and the Author's League of America. She says she feels an obligation to pass on the pleasure of reading because she enjoyed reading as a child. She says juvenile and adult mysteries are the only strongly plotted forms of writing in America at that time. She says an average juvenile book will outsell any average novel. She said she was enthralled with Joseph Altsheler and his "Young Triller" series. She said if she could write like he writes she would be happy. She went to book stores in Seattle to find Altsheler books. She says people must believe in what they are writing. She discusses the book she wrote on homesteading and mentions Louise Dickenson. She mentions that writers should get the opinions of newcomers to Alaska because they're eyes are fresh and they give the outsider's perspective. Mrs. Pedersen mentions that there are preconceived ideas of Alaska. She says people from the United States need to feel a tie in of something that they can relate too. She says there are three parts of a book. The theme, the plot, she says the characters must be consistent. She says sooner or later people have to reveal their story to the eyes of an editor. You can't practice forever. She says it's fine to think big but it's not a good idea to invite disappointment. She says there are 2,500 trade magazines published and a list called Business Publication Rates and Data that lists 2,500 trade publications.

Mrs. Pedersen begins speaking about Sears and JC Penny being in Alaska and she thinks that influence from the Lower 48 would be interesting things to write about. She says beware on pay for publication magazines because they have a habit of tying up manuscripts. She gives an example of her time at the old Alaska Sportsmen when she was the secretary to Emery Tobin. She said Tobin had a cardboard box under his desk full of files of good manuscripts. She said he never got to the materials in the box and it got to the point where she was ashamed to tell people she worked for the Alaskan-Sportsmen because someone would always say they sent something to him and didn't hear from Tobin. She says she thinks Tobin isn't the only editor and that that thing still happens all the time.

At 36:50 Elsa Pedersen says she would urge people to always write the best they can, don't save material. She says the more you write the better you get. She says always use the best material on whatever an author is working on. She says an author always has to accept the idea of rejection. Ernest Hemingway got rejected. She said she thinks it is a travesty that they are dragging out Ernest Hemingway's rejected works and publishing them. Taylor Caldwell wrote for thirty years before she saw anything in print. Caldwell wrote books. Caldwell says she is glad the early manuscripts didn't make the cut. Pedersen says when a manuscript comes back; open it because there may be valuable information in there. Pedersen says "Victory at Bear Cove" was a rejected manuscript that had valuable information written in it from publishers. She says she heard back from Abingdon Methodist Publisher. She sent the book to Abingdon because they had published a good amount of short stories. She thought she had been rejected from Abingdon but really they had accepted it. She tells a story about her friend being rejected and how when the book was returned it had notes saying that if she corrected a manuscript by a certain time he would accept it. Pedersen discusses the downfall of fiction writing because of television. She says the reading habits have changed since television was created. She says people feel they should be reading something entertaining if they are going to spend time reading. She says after her first book was rejected she had 12 books accepted by the first editor who read them. She says that was under unusual circumstances mainly that the federal government giving out money to schools and library. The publishers were then accepting a lot of material.

At 44:00 Mrs. Pedersen begins describing the process she undertakes for writing a book. She says when she first starts writing a book she feels a profound discouragement at the beginning because it seems like an endless task. She says her manuscripts are roughly 60,000 words. She says editors now want 40,000 words. She says her ideas for writing come from three different sources. She says if you have to ask where you get your ideas you're not going to be a writer. She says there are so many ideas. She says Petticoat Fisherman was inspired by a girl she knew in Seldovia [Alaska] who was the deckhand on her father's crab fishing boat. Pedersen didn't know the deck hand girl well and Pedersen says she didn't want to know her well. Pedersen says that it seemed like hard, dirty, smelly work. Pedersen says that is how she started "Petticoat Fisherman." "Mountain of the Sun" was inspired by a setting: the Russian era in Alaska. She wrote "Dangerous Flight" on the Russian era as well. "Fisherman's Choice" was based on a situation. Pedersen says she wondered what would happen if a homestead boy was exposed to commercial fishing. Mrs. Pedersen discusses the book. "House upon a Rock" was inspired by a situation and also a setting. The setting was the small Alaska coastal towns that suffered so badly from the 1964 earthquake and the situation being what did the victims do to rebuild. She says she

thinks about a story for 6 months before she gets anything on paper. She says she mulls over the process and considers the book from all angles. When she gets started writing she starts working on characters that are usually based on real life people. She says she writes down the descriptions of characters. She says she studies that background material she uses. She says she keeps a diary, not a journal. A diary is a record that actually took place. It is just a 5 year diary. She says the Department of Fish and Game approached her because she had recordings of wilderness activity and the Weather Company approached her as well because of her recordings. She says she saves a Sears catalog to know what people are doing in a certain year. She says she keeps a tide book to keep reference of what date every day of the week came on when the sun rose and set. She says she writes about 1,000 words a day. She says the next morning she reads what she wrote before and makes the correction. She says every 10,000 words she goes back and reads the work so far. She says she puts the project aside for a couple weeks to look at the projects objectively. She says she still corrects as she makes the final draft but there is a danger to tinkering. She says one thing she does is make her manuscript as inviting as possible because an editor is doing a favor to read works. She says good bond paper, new typewriter ribbon, and clean type. She says wide margins and double space is important. She says don't think that they will call special attention if different colored paper or curly paper is used. She says remember that the writer is trying to make it easy for an editor to read the book. Six pages or less then she folds it and put it in a big envelope. If it is from 6-12 pages she folds it in half and sends it in a 5x7 manila envelope. Anything longer than 12 pages she folds flat. She always uses first class mail. She mails her work to her agent but if you mail direct to an editor be sure to enclose a self-addressed envelope. Pedersen never argues with an editor because she doesn't think there has ever been anything written above judicious editing. She begins discussing contracts for writing. She gives a visual example of a contract for the crowd. She says if she gets an advance more than the book earns then the author is liable to pay the owed money back on the next project. She says 10% of the selling price goes to the author. She says since she works for an agent, her agent gets 10% of her 10%. She says she feels the writer is the lowest person on the totem pole. She says the Author's Guild is trying to get the author more royalty money. She says the next time an author sees their book after it gets accepted the author will see their book in galley form and the author is to make any changes. She says the next time an author sends the book it will look like a regular book. She says there is no relationship between the author and the artist. She says there is no thrill in the world like getting your first book. She says she has a neighbor that is an enemy now because he feels Pedersen is holding out information. She says don't stop when you're stuck. Another tip is her confidence in the subconscious. She makes it a point to think about the writing as she falls asleep so somehow while she is sleeping the problems get solved when she wakes up. She says learn to type because it is an indispensable skill. She says it is the only way to make your fingers almost keep up with your thoughts. She discusses the process of getting an agent. An honest makes their money by a commission of what they sell for the author. The agent is not willing to invest their time in amateur work. She says the way she found an agent was she had a book accepted. She says she read in the Writer Magazine that there is an association of reputable agents and they put out a brochure. From the agent list she selected three names. One of the people she wrote to didn't respond. Another wrote and said he didn't handle juvenile work. The third had a friend who would be an agent for young writer. The woman agent had worked with Macintosh and Otis and Pedersen found that they are one of the better agencies. The woman agent retired and the woman who replaced her

didn't seem interested in Pedersen. Pedersen says everything is built on trust and reputable agents can be trusted. She says she wrote the Author's Guild. She found the Paul R. Reynolds Firm in New York, her current agent. She says an agent won't make the work any better but at least they know the markets and where to submit the work.

Pedersen when she was in the process of changing agents she wondered if she should try to do it herself. She wrote to the Author's Guild and asked them to survey writers on how necessary it was to have an agent. She said the consensus was the farther your life from New York City the more you need an agent. She says there are three racketeers for writers. One is the dishonest agent; the ones who advertise that they charge a reading fee. Pedersen says an honest agent won't ask for cash. The second type of racketeer is the phony writing schools. Pedersen says the Famous Writer's Course takes \$900 dollars. She says in that class the students are getting their writing read by people who know just about as much about writing as the students. The third type is the vanity presses; the presses that charge authors to publish work. The vanity presses give authors a hard sell. She says she wrote to several of them and she says she frequently gets promotional material from them [Mrs. Pedersen is showing the crowd what she is describing as she speaks]. She says a trade publisher is better. She says if an author has a book that has merit and there is a special reason for wanting it printed; the book "From Kodiak to King Crab" by Yule Chaffin is given as an example. Yule wanted it printed and went to a commercial printer and got the exact same service as a vanity press at half the cost. Chaffin sold the book herself and made money. Pedersen says she doesn't carry her books to be sold when she goes on tours. She says a writer writes and a bookseller sells. A trade manager arranges the illustrations and has his own sources for selling the book. She says there are about 30,000 books published in the United States and about 25-50 are considered best sellers. She says the average writer doesn't make much money. The average first book earnings are about \$1,000 dollars. The Author's League had a survey from their own members who are professional writers and former residents of the MacDowell Colony. The survey was about the earnings of writers and the results were that most writers earn \$3,000 to \$4,000 dollars a year from writing. She says the creative part of writing is what's important, not the money. She says she averages \$4,000 a year and the most she ever made was \$8,000. She says when she made the \$8,000 one of her books was a Junior Literary Guild Selection and was also sold in Great Britain and the book was a new edition in which she got double royalty. She quotes Samuel Johnson as saying "Only a blockhead would write for anything but money." Pedersen agrees, she has never given any of her work away. In professional circles such as University Reviews, people whose career depends on publishing do publish for nothing. If someone wants to become a professional writer, they don't give their work away. The fact that someone is paid from writing means that the author is a success. She says there are subsidiary ways that books make money for authors such as special library editions. She says there is a responsibility that it behooves every to keep in mind ... the recording stops.