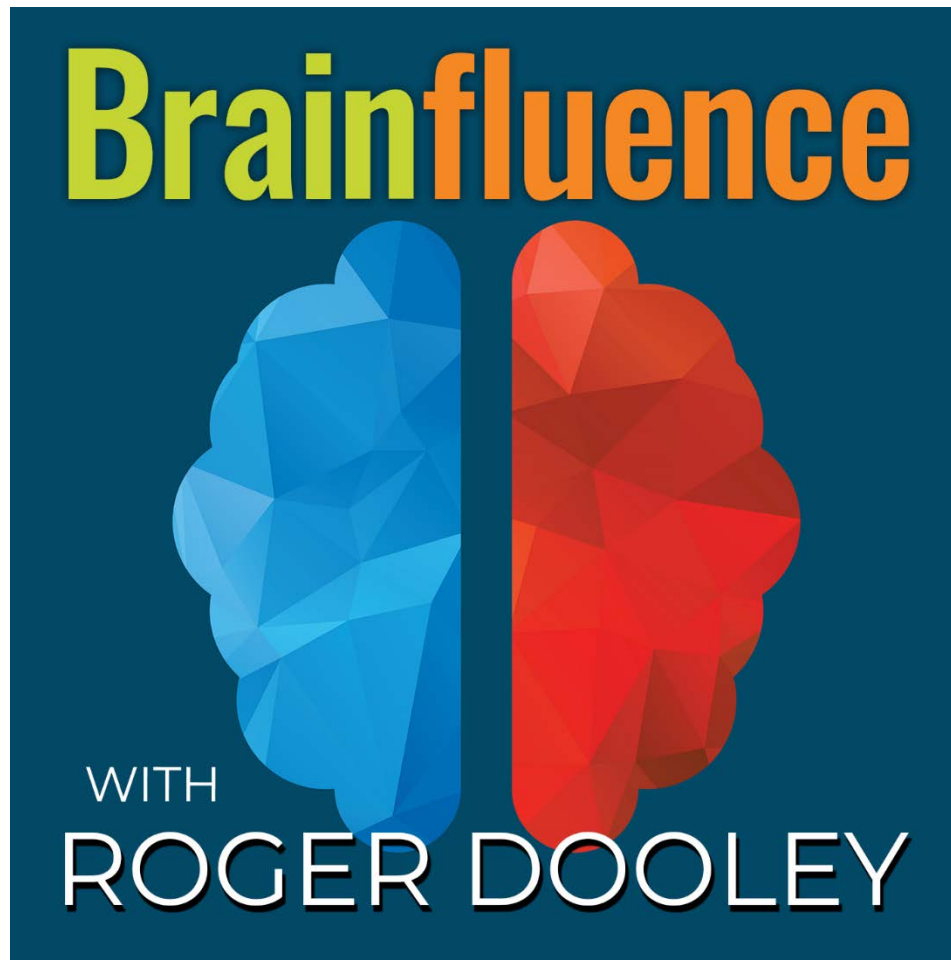


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Full Episode Transcript

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Speakers: Roger Dooley, AJ Harper

Roger Dooley 00:00:00 Welcome to BrainFluence. I'm Roger Dooley, today's guest and I have strangely intertwined book origin stories. I'll get to that in just a minute. AJ Harper is an editor and publishing strategist, who as a developmental editor and ghost writer, has helped hundreds of authors write transformational books. She's worked with novices and authors with New York Times bestsellers who've sold millions of books. Notably, AJ is Mike Michalowicz's writing partner. They've written nine books together, including one of my favorites. *Profit First*. AJ's new book is *Write a Must-Read Craft A Book That Changes Lives, Including Your Own*. Welcome to the show, AJ.

AJ Harper 00:00:36 Thanks for having me!

Roger Dooley 00:00:38 AJ. I mentioned that our book origin stories are intertwined, and that's because we intersected at a writer's retreat in Maryland, co-hosted by Mike Michalowicz that we just mentioned, and Michael Port, the co-founder of Heroic Public Speaking, and both of course are accomplished authors with bestselling books. My objective in attending that was to get my then sort of nascent idea for a book called *Friction* off the ground. I knew what I wanted the book to be about, more or less. I had a title but I was stuck, though, at developing an outline and sort of a capsule that I could use in a book proposal to explain what's the big idea, why is this important, why should people buy the book, who's going to buy the book? And so on. And that retreat and your help in particular, because you were there as a writing coach, was instrumental in the creation of *Friction*, which did end up in a real

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book proposal. It wasn't exactly what we outlined at the retreat, but it was bought by McGraw Hill, and ultimately it was published by McGraw Hill. So I appreciate your immense help on that, AJ, but I was surprised when I was reading your new book, which I'm holding up here for our video audience to see that that retreat was a turning point for you as well, explain that.

AJ Harper 00:02:07 Sure. Well, I was just ending a 10 year ghost writing career, mostly because I was burned out and also because I was disenchanted with some of the value system around getting books done. And so I went there as a favor to Mike Michalowicz, who you mentioned, has been my writing partner. It's been about 14, 15 years now with Mike. I went as a favor and he said, can you come and be there and support the authors? And what happened is I didn't expect to do the laser coaching. I don't know if you remember, we did this in a dining room at that mm-hmm. <affirmative> location. And I realized on the drive home from that retreat that I had met so many people who wanted to write great books, and that maybe I had been wrong about everyone just wanting to get a book out, like a business card. And also I, the spark of teaching that maybe I could actually teach this stuff and help people. Um, that's, that's where I thought, oh, maybe Mike's right and I can teach this as a system. So it, from that point forward, I, I was on a mission to figure out how to help people write better books.

Roger Dooley 00:03:24 Right. Well, I guess Mike and Michael can take credit for <laugh> a couple of products from that effort you know, I mentioned Profit First Mike Macau's bestseller. Are there some other books that you're publicly associated with that our audience might recognize? AJ?

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AJ Harper 00:03:43 So I really can't talk about most of them. As an editor, I've worked with a bunch of notable authors such as Les Brown and Lisa Nichols. A lot of people who are in the speaking industry but for the most part, any sort of solo book I've, Mike's unusual, he's just a unicorn. He, he says he's totally transparent about everything, so he thankfully allows me to talk about it, which has been actually really helpful for my own career to be able to, it's, it's not actually that hard. You'd be surprised to get a ghost writing gig if you can't talk about the other books, because there's this little whisper campaign that happens where people just pass a phone number to each other, but when it comes to teaching something, you want to be able to say books that you've been involved with. So I'm grateful to him to let me talk about it.

Roger Dooley 00:04:35 That's great. I assume you've had some that you can talk about that have achieved some commercial success, <laugh>?

AJ Harper 00:04:41 Yes. I've New York Times bestsellers, Wall Street Journal, USA Today. I've also, when I worked with fiction helped discover several notable authors who've gone on to illustrious careers and then eventually that New York Times bestseller status. So yeah, I've worked with a lot of people who've had the outward measure of success that a lot of authors hope to have, but ultimately what they all have in common is a desire to write something that really makes a difference.

Roger Dooley 00:05:13 You mentioned just now fiction, which I would not have known that you were particularly involved in or good at AJ, but in, oh, your new book, you make the point that fiction is driven by characters. So, whether it's Game of Thrones or anything else, it's

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driven by characters. And for non-fiction books, business books, self-help books and whatnot, the character is the reader. Can you enlarge on that a little bit?

AJ Harper 00:05:42 Sure. So a great fiction story. The character drives the story, what they want why they can't get it, what stands in their way, those conflicts, and then ultimately the resolution of getting it or not getting it. And that's what keeps us on the edge of our seat. And, the reader is the character in the sense that they come to a non-fiction book, especially prescriptive non-fiction, where you're teaching somebody, you're, you're promising some aspect of your life or work will be better because you read this book. They, they too have something they want and probably a host of internal and, and maybe some external challenges that prevent them from getting it. So I liken it to you being like Obi-wan to Luke Skywalker as the guide, taking them on that journey to get what they want. And if you start to think about your reader as a character, and then keep that in mind the whole way through, it's really helpful in terms of structure, deciding which content to use, and then also mindful of their journey as they experience the content. But when we don't think of them like that, their own story arc, we get lost in our own ideas.

Roger Dooley 00:06:51 Well, that's a think valuable lesson for marketers as well, AJ. You know, marketers often use avatars a really detailed descriptions of what a customer might look like you know, down to crazy levels of detail about their appearance what they eat and so on. That's not really what you're talking about, but I think the concept applies both to authors and marketers. How well, how do you

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define your character, your reader character versus say, a marketer's avatar?

AJ Harper 00:07:25 Thank you for asking. I actually have a whole section in the book that says, your ideal reader is not an avatar <laugh>. And the reason is because authors get stuck on that, and then it limits the way they're talking, they get focused on the demographics down to the tiniest little detail, and then they get the, the, it becomes too narrow in focused. So you could have people of different demographic background who have the same desire and the same cha set of challenges. So it's thinking instead about what unites those different demographics in terms of that desire and challenge. So problem, right. What's the problem they have? But more than that, it's thinking about hearts and minds rather than say, age group, geographic location, what kind of car they drive.

Roger Dooley 00:08:18 Yeah, and that's really useful too, I think because that I suppose if you have this very specific person in mind down to their demographics and know what they, a for midnight snack, maybe you can relate to that person, but that's probably not going to eliminate other people, whether you're writing or whether you're creating marketing campaign. So that's, I think, a key insight. And it also, I think, helps you refine what you call your core message, right? What you really want to tell readers or in the case of a product perhaps. So what is this product going to do? What problem is it going to solve,

AJ Harper 00:08:59 Right? And your core message is the foundational truth on which your whole book is based. So it's not everything, that you want to talk about. It's not a summary or a tagline

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or an elevator pitch. It's, it's mostly not the things that we tend to do when we write a core message. It's a simple statement that once the reader understands this, they can actually apply all the rest of the knowledge and the rigor that I challenge authors. I think it will be helpful for marketers is to don't settle for a core message that's not transformational on its own. This is the tricky part, is can your message shift a person's thinking even a little bit, even if they don't read your book, or don't talk to you or don't meet with you? And that's the real test of a transformational core message.

Roger Dooley 00:09:51 Yeah, I think, it's maybe more of a tagline, I guess, but one book that comes to mind, I've used this example <laugh> in in the past is Steve Krug's Don't Make Me Think, which is about how to design websites or digital products that are dead simple to use and intuitive. And I've often told people, look, you don't even have to buy the book. Sorry, Steve. You don't have to buy the book. If you can just internalize the title and operate with that <laugh> as your core belief, you're going to be okay. Of course, I do recommend that people buy the book so they can better understand the idea, but to me, that's the level of simplicity that can come across. Now, that's, it's not really telling them. Maybe the core message there is simplicity will make your website a success or something like that. I don't how, again, can you give us a few examples of core messages, AJ?

AJ Harper 00:10:47 Sure. Well, for my own book, it's a book is not about something, a book is for someone. And that simple shift of, instead of thinking, what's my book about, to who is it for? And then using that as a guidepost the whole way through does shift the way that you actually make decisions about your book. And if you don't

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believe that, then the rest of my book isn't going to be that helpful, quite honestly. So you've gotta really buy into it. You'll see that's two sentences. So you have this setup, which is a disruptor. It's not this thing, it's not this, it's that. And it doesn't have, that doesn't not required for a core message, but it's also in, usually in Mike's books. So you mentioned prove first earlier. The core message for that book is a tradit, the traditional accounting method is killing your business.

AJ Harper 00:11:34 So that's the disruptive part. Take your profit first. You could just take it down to take your profit first, and then that actually becomes the title of the book. So you can take a core message and distill it to a tagline or a title, but it's good to get it set first, and then you can move into tagline, title, mode. But it's, ultimately about shifting thinking. When you're crafting a transformational core message, very often you have to shift thinking away from some sort of conventional wisdom and then move into the thought that you want them to share. And even it's a worthy exercise, even if you don't end up using it in the end, it can help, help you craft it. But it's transformational core message is about a new way of thinking, and that new way of thinking leads to a change in behavior. And there's where the transformation happens.

Roger Dooley 00:12:26 When you wrote about your ghost writing experience, you talked about asking authors to give you everything. And particularly for my first book, that was kind of my approach. Even though I did not use a ghost writer, I wrote it myself. I just got like everything I'd ever written spoken about together and tried to figure out how to piece that into something that people would want to read. And I guess that's one approach, and it, it actually worked pretty well

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for Brainfluence by the nature of just the way that book is written in the, the intention and the way it serves the audience. But most books that probably would not be a great idea. Talk about how you sort of create that outline, figure out what content you need, how to fill the holes and so on.

AJ Harper 00:13:11 Sure. I've, over the years, I've discovered that without certain book fundamentals you end up having to delete a lot, tear down a lot of content. So I really stress that you get that ideal reader very clear, that transformational message, very clear. And then a third fundamental, which is a promise you can deliver. Once you have those three, that becomes a filter for your content. So now you can decide, should I include this story or this bit of research or this teaching point? Well, will it help you connect to your reader, support core message, deliver on the promise? If you get a yes, then it could go in the book. But if you get a no, it goes in a different book or some other type of content. And that's a really effective filter to be able to make a decision, especially if you have a lot of ideas for your book or a lot of content to sift through, which many of the authors I work with do.

AJ Harper 00:14:10 And then that once you've done the sorting through that filter, which incidentally you can use to gather content too, what else do you need to hit those three points? Then you start working on an outline. That sole purpose is to take the reader from where they are to that thing. They want the promise that you can deliver. And it's organizing that content, not by like items like categories of content, not putting it into buckets, or as I say in the book, the silverware drawer method, not putting spoons with spoons and knives with knives, but instead thinking about in what order. Your

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reader needs to hear things based on what's sort of a pre-req well, do you need to bust some myths first? Do you need to talk about that conventional wisdom that doesn't work? Or do you maybe need to do something more personal, like make them feel like it's not their fault before they can move on and read the thing? So it's very personal to the reader, that's why understanding their hearts and minds is so important. And it's thinking about how do I reveal and unfold this information in a way that makes it easy for my reader to get it, stay focused and on the page, and ultimately get the promise.

Roger Dooley 00:15:25 What do you do when it's, you don't have enough content when you say, okay, well, I've got this idea, and I know it's valid because I've seen this work with three of my clients or, or something like that. But I really don't have enough in the way of stories or anecdotes or examples to convince people that this will work.

AJ Harper 00:15:46 I think it's helpful to try a number of things. One is to interview people and try and get other experiences outside of your own experience that can back up your teaching points. A key tip I will give anybody who's interviewing for a book is don't go in just talking generally about your book the whole time. Go in with an idea of a teaching point you want to talk to that person about. So I wouldn't talk, I wouldn't say, Hey, Roger, can I talk to you about marketing? I would say let's, if we're going to talk about friction, I say, can I specifically talk to you about, I, I have this theory about friction that I think you also believe, and I'm just wondering, can I talk to you about that? Now, you get much better content when you have that specificity, but you can also do a content test drive. So if you only had three clients, go get some more, do a group coaching, a little bootcamp, a webinar, just find

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a way you could do it through speaking. Find a way to test the content. You have to see what resonates and see what works for people. And from that, you'll get anecdotes and stories.

Roger Dooley 00:16:56 Yeah, and I think, that could even be, again, applicable outside the world of authorship. If you are trying to craft a better marketing campaign or trying to come up with some better stories and for your marketing, reaching out to people maybe that aren't your clients could really have a double benefit. You know, it would give you exposure. It would make them feel like their expertise was valued and also get you some some useful information. So it's, really great. You know, one thing as, and new author, years ago when I was thinking about this, I was always a little bit afraid to tell people what I was working on and say, wow, somebody's going to scoop me on this, or because I know that there's other people working on books in the same space.

Roger Dooley 00:17:46 You know, something I, so I'm not sure what I might have been concerned about, but I was kind of reticent to talk about it. I guess the, the other reason I might have been is like, gee, what if, what if this doesn't happen? You know, what if I failed to complete it? What, what if I bail out halfway through? Then people are going to be asking, how's that book coming, Roger? And after, well, well, not so well, I haven't worked on it in six months. But, you make a strong point, AJ, for sharing your project with everybody. Why? Why is that?

AJ Harper 00:18:16 Well, a number of reasons. One is you've got to plant your flag and stake your claim so that you will finish.

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I think that's really important writers of a tendency to create in a vacuum, and then it makes marketing that much harder. So that's the other reason, is just start a, start talking about it. Start sharing behind the scenes moments. Share, share bits and pieces so that people are expecting your book to come out. And you can also start building community around the key messages in your book long before it comes out, which makes that launch process so much easier. And I also, honestly, that fear of somebody taking it. So first of all, to speak to that now that to actually complete a book, get it to market, I mean, you, you've got to be dedicated. If you really wanted to take the idea, you better be ready for a long climb up the mountain.

AJ Harper 00:19:12 So it's not it happens. I'm not saying it doesn't happen, and you can't really stop somebody from doing it, but if you plant your flag earlier, it's actually harder for them. So it's better if you do a podcast, guest on a podcast, do a speech, write some articles, do some guest posts, be vocal about your points, because then it's harder for someone to steal it because you're not in your cave writing while they're talking about it. And so I think it's, it's just a natural fear of new authors that something will be stolen, but ultimately focus on getting your message out to plant your flag.

Roger Dooley 00:19:51 You know, one of the advice authors are given, or would be authors are given is, set your writing goal. So many words a day, so many pages a day, whatever it might be. A lot might be, not so much, but just to be consistent and productive. And you sort of echo that advice. But you talk about breadcrumbs and using them as a way to augment that sort of fixed goal process. What, what are

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breadcrumbs as you define them, and how can writers of any kind use them?

AJ Harper 00:20:22 So it's just inspired by Hansel and Gretel leaving breadcrumbs in the forest. It's leaving yourself reminders of the content that the intentions you had for the content. So what slows us down when we're writing a first draft is maybe we don't have all of our research together. Maybe we don't have the right names, maybe we haven't thought through things, maybe we don't really know what we want to do. For me, it's often, I don't, this isn't quite what I want to say, but I want it to feel like this. If I don't leave myself a breadcrumb, one of two things happens. I either forget completely so when I go, I don't, I've missed the opportunity, or I get stuck now because I'm trying to solve that before I'm ready to solve it. Or I go down a research rabbit hole when I should be writing <laugh>. So it's just, you'll, you complete your first draft faster. If you leave yourself breadcrumbs, you can do it right in the text. You can add a comment, you can use whatever means works for you, and then come back and look at your breadcrumbs later. Because there will be days when you don't feel like writing so much, but you can go look, oh, I'll do a research cleanup day. So go find all your research that you need to clean up, or the words that you weren't sure about, and you can still feel productive that day.

Roger Dooley 00:21:40 That describes me perfectly. I would be the one where I'm writing away and I realize, wow, I know this is true but I don't have a citation for it. So then spend the next hour doing research and looking through scientific papers to get the right citation to back up my point. And of course, instead of my writing goal, I've now wasted, not wasted, but I've consumed a lot of time in just chasing down a

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citation where if I was really on a tear writing, it would've been much better for me to go on writing and then maybe save that research project for some day when I'm just kind of feeling lazy or uninspired or something like, oh, I can chase down a few of these citations. So that's great advice. And I've actually done something like that.

Roger Dooley 00:22:26 You have different little things you can put in, in brackets and whatnot, and then search for brackets. I used to use a series of Xs I could search for that anywhere, even if I had a giant document I could search for four Xs in a row and it would immediately pop up something that I had marked that needed attention of some kind. So, I think it's great, regardless of what kind of writing you're doing, even if you're just doing shorter articles or something, you may well put an article away for a few weeks and you're definitely going to forget that thing. Maybe we're going to amplify or change. Or get a better citation. So, that's great stuff. One of the things you talk about in the final editing process kind of surprised me, AJ, was editing for a deeper reader connection. Now usually we think of, I think of editing as a little bit more of a mechanical process. I mean, you've maybe you've got that early developmental or structural edit to get the whole manuscript in some kind of shape and order. And then you're going into, eventually, the copy editing phase. But you're saying, okay, I'm going to edit this for a deeper reader connection. What do you mean by that?

AJ Harper 00:23:33 Well we go into writing the book hopefully with that clear idea of the reader, but sometimes we forget them along the way. And I'm a huge advocate of doing your own developmental editing before it goes to developmental editing <laugh>, because most people

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don't know what's entailed and you can take control of the process. I give my whole checklist system that I developed as a ghost writer in the book, because I want to empower authors to think through the editing before they hand it off. This's this belief of, okay, now I'm handling it off to my editor and they'll fix it, but, you're the best person to understand your reader. So editing for deep reader connection is, it's meant, there are many phases in that, but, or not many, but several. But it's mostly thinking about what's it like for my reader to hear this, read this process, this do this, and am I attending to what's going on with them?

AJ Harper 00:24:37 Maybe it's going to freak them out. Maybe it's going to challenge something that they hold dear. Maybe it's the thing you're asking them to do is actually not doable for anybody but you. So an example of that is Mike and I wrote a book called Get Different, which is about marketing, and, it's my favorite of our books actually. And, it was, it was our last book, or the last to come out. And I knew right away that we had to address the fact that he's a marketing unicorn. He's not afraid to do anything. You know him, he'll just, he'll do anything, he's not afraid to be embarrassed. He's not afraid to be humiliated, he's not afraid to be vulnerable, but that's not most people. So part of taking care of our reader and establishing connection was acknowledging that, that most people reading the book weren't going to have the easiest time with that. So how do you address that, get in front of that and work with that to maintain that connection to them, because it can actually split the connection if you just make assumptions about what they know and what they feel.

Roger Dooley 00:25:40 AJ Well, one, the last question, or comment or something. As I was reading the book, I got to page 183 and found to

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my surprise, that my name was mentioned along with my book Friction, and you talk about friction for readers. So I think if I tried to accomplish anything with my Friction book, it was to show that friction exists everywhere in multiple domains. It's in citizen experience, it's in customer experience, employee experience, it's in our personal lives. And so I was really pleased to see you sort of take this and run with it a little bit in a different area that I had never even thought about. Explain how friction figures into your advice.

AJ Harper 00:26:25 I mean, it's, it's not, I don't think that many editors would call it friction, but having read your book Friction, I thought, oh, let me talk about this like that so that people can really understand, because all editors are trying to remove anything in the text that's jarring to the reader or will often say takes them off the page, right? So our goal is to keep them reading. That's our goal. And then a lot of things make a reader put it down, go off the page, go look for something, go Google something, or just be mad or frustrated. And there's a lot of reasons why a reader might give up on something that they don't really know why they're doing it, such as, for example if you've never explained terms, if they feel confused, if you're using inside baseball terminology that the average person doesn't know and you never explain it over time, they will just, ugh, I don't, they just put it down. They're not going to, they're going to get off the page. So that's friction. It's friction when we, there's a lot of grammar issues and some other things that editors know cause a reader to be frustrated even if the reader doesn't know why they're frustrated. And so it's getting really very specific about eliminating all the friction we can eliminate,

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can eliminate all of it. Because human beings are different, but you can make a real good effort to get most of it out.

Roger Dooley 00:27:48 Right. Well, I think that writing style is part of that academic journals tend to be very jargon laden and use incredibly long sentences to the point where a lay reader could almost, you would find them almost incomprehensible, even though the point they're making isn't that difficult. But they use this sort of inside academia jargon so that they feel like they're communicating with their people or something. And it's unnecessary. And if you're trying to write a book that other people are going to read, I think just making sure that writing style isn't all that challenging break down those sentences. There are certainly tools out there that can evaluate the level of writing, whether it's a high school senior can read this or a postgraduate student. To me that's really important because the more difficult a slog a book is, the more likely they are to abandon it. I, I've certainly abandoned some though. It was just, it was just too much effort and that, that's what friction's all about. You know, when you make people work harder, they're going to do less of it or they're not going to do it at all.

AJ Harper 00:29:00 Yes, for sure.

Roger Dooley 00:29:01 This has really been a lot of fun. How can people find you and your ideas?

AJ Harper 00:29:06 So I'm on LinkedIn, I'm pretty active there. Anjanette Harper is my name there. I'm at ajharper.com and if you can get a bunch of really cool free tools that you can use for a book or for marketing at writeamustread.com

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Roger Dooley 00:29:20 Great. Well, we will link to all of those places on the show notes page at rogerdooley.com slash podcast. AJ, thanks so much for being on the show. It's been great catching up. And thanks for the shout out in your book.

AJ Harper 00:29:33 Thanks for having me.