

UCSD-TV Behind the Scenes

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Behind the Scenes of *Writer's Symposium By The Sea*

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Interview with Dean Nelson, Host and Director of Point Loma Nazarene University's Journalism Program

Now in its 13th year, the Point Loma Nazarene University Writer's Symposium By The Sea has become a great resource to learn about the craft of writing from some of the country's premiere authors. We asked host Dean Nelson to tell us a bit more about the series.

UCSD-TV: How did the Writer's Symposium by the Sea begin?

DEAN NELSON: Many schools and regions have what are called writer's workshops, and we thought we could do something that would attract great writers, but didn't want it to be about "how to write," or about "getting published," or filling would-be writers with false hope. There is a place for those kinds of gatherings, and we didn't want to duplicate what was already out there. So we thought we'd try to focus on bringing in role models who could enlighten, encourage and inspire great writing.

The interview format was something we did from the beginning, but we did it as sort of a fluke. I was begging [Joseph Wambaugh](#) to come, and he refused, saying that he didn't give lectures. But he added that if I wanted to ask him questions, he would come and answer them. His interview was such a smashing success that we stuck with it, and many writers actually prefer this format, because it takes the pressure off of them to try to prepare something profound.

UCSD-TV: How did the partnership with UCSD-TV come about?

DN: I met Shannon [UCSD-TV Producer Shannon Bradley] when I was a reporter for *The New York Times*, and she was running a UCSD summer school program for high school journalists during the Republican National Convention here 1996. I contacted her about the symposium and she was interested in working with me to turn it into a series of programs for UCSD-TV.

UCSD-TV: How do you prepare for your role as host? Does being an author yourself help?

DN: It helps that I am a writer because I can ask about technique and craft a little more pointedly. The secret to the interview is that I try to read as much as I can of what they have written, but I try to read their stuff in chronological order so I can see how they have changed over time. So I usually can point out some examples of how I think they have evolved. I don't pay much attention to what other interviewers have asked them.

UCSD-TV: What insights have you gained on the writing process after picking the brains of so many authors?

DN: One of the recurring themes of virtually all the speakers has been in regard to how hard it is to write well. I take perverse pleasure in hearing them say this year after year, because it's still hard for me, too. Every writer has his or her quirks, some have gotten a little lucky, but most great writers have become great writers because they were willing to commit to it and pay the price. Students don't get that because they're young and used to abandoning things that are difficult.

UCSD-TV: The past year has seen the demise of several magazines championing long-form journalism. How do we get people excited about the craft of writing again when technology seems to demand sound-bite simplicity?

DN: People will still read good writing. My daughter eats bowls of Froot Loops for a few days, then decides what she really wants is a great salad full of all sorts of stuff that's good for her. Readers do similar things when they come across something good. I am not worried about the future of long-form narrative, as long as it's well done.

UCSD-TV: The Writer's Symposium gives the live audience a unique opportunity to get up close and personal with their favorite authors. Each session generally ends with a question and answer session. Any memorable interactions with the audience?

DN: The Q&A with [Anne Lamott](#) usually turns into a love fest. Other writers say some profound things about writing during those interactions. Probably the best was [Ray Bradbury](#) telling everyone to go home and write a story. It wasn't a suggestion. It was a demand. I think everyone did it, too.

UCSD-TV: What is your current favorite book? What book could you read over and over again?

DN: This is going to sound like a cop-out, but it's usually true -- my favorite book is usually the one I am reading right now. So that would be *The God of Small Things* by the Indian writer Arundhati Roy. There is also one book that I find myself re-reading whole sections of, so maybe it's my favorite as well, and that is *Jayber Crow* by Wendell Berry. He's one of the most profound, elegant craftsmen I have ever read.

**Behind-The-Scenes Photos from
*Writer's Symposium by the Sea***



Anchee Min discusses her bestselling memoir, *Red Azalea*, with host Dean Nelson.

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UCSD-TV's Alan Thwaites adjusts Jon Foreman's mic before his unplugged performance.

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A view from the stage.

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American icon Gay Talese talks about his life as a writer with host Dean Nelson.

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The audience listens intently for tips
on the craft of writing.

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The UCSD-TV crew is on hand to capture all the literary goodness.

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Dean Nelson and author Philip Yancey having an animated conversation about writing and faith.

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