



Boise Nonfiction Writers

Rocky Barker, March 5, 2008

**Notes recorded by Cindy Salo (Your Humble Scribe)
Quality Control by Rocky**

Is Rocky Barker a journalist? Or is he an environmental writer? An author? A movie producer? Perhaps a blogger? Your Humble Scribe was not sure exactly how to introduce him at his talk in early March.

Yes, Rocky is a journalist. He is the environmental writer for the Idaho Statesman (<http://www.idahostatesman.com>). He started his newspaper career at the Rhinelander, WI Daily News, then moved to the Idaho Falls, ID Post Register on his way to Boise. Along the way he covered the Endangered Species Act, the breaching of dams on the Snake River to improve habitat for salmon, and the Yellowstone fires of 1988.

Yes, Rocky is also an award-winning author. His first book, *Saving All the Parts: Reconciling Economics And The Endangered Species Act*, was cited for 'excellence in achievement' by the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award judges. His latest book, *Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America*, was a finalist for the Western Writers of America's Spur Award in Nonfiction. In addition, Rocky co-authored the *Flyfisher's Guide to Idaho* and the *Wingshooter's Guide to Idaho* with Ken Retallic, and contributed a chapter to *The Next West: Public Lands, Community, and Economy in the American West*.

Yes, Rocky is a movie producer. *Scorched Earth* was made into the movie *Firestorm: Last Stand at Yellowstone*, on the A&E network (http://www.videodetective.com/movies/FIRESTORM:_LAST_STAND_AT_YELLOWSTONE/trailer/P00207148.htm).

And yes, Rocky is also a blogger, at *Letters from the West* (<http://voices.idahostatesman.com/barker>). In his spare time, Rocky is a free lance journalist, which has allowed him to visit places such as Kamchatka and Moloka'i.

However, Rocky says that he started his career as something different. Early on he saw himself as a reporter; he simply reported the facts. Rocky has polished his craft over the years and now describes himself as a writer: someone who uses narrative and detail to tell a good story well.

During his evening with us Rocky shared his 'Rules for Writing Well', described the difficulty making a living writing books, and answered our many questions.

Rocky's rules for writing well

1. Identify your audience and write to them

Rocky wrote his most recent book, *Scorched Earth*, for people who enjoy historical novels. This includes Rocky, who admires the writing of Stephen Ambrose (*Undaunted Courage* and *Nothing Like It In the World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869*, among others). Historical novels tell a story well; even stories that have been told many times before.

While writing his first book, *Saving All the Parts*, Rocky saw his job as conveying knowledge to the reader. He has since become skillful at telling stories well and he uses these skills as both an author and a journalist. However, he admits that some pieces exist simply to convey knowledge. For example, it was difficult to make a recent piece on air emissions in the Treasure Valley into a real page turner.

2. Use narrative to tell the story in an interesting way

Narrative uses characters and a story line to describe a sequence of events. For example, Rocky told the story of wolf reintroductions in Idaho through the life of B2, one of the wolves. Between his release near Salmon, ID, in Jan 1995, and his death while killing a young bull elk in 2004, B2 traveled widely, raised several families, and interacted with many humans (<http://www.idahostatesman.com/119/story/74031.html>).

In telling B2's story, Rocky described Horace Axtell, a Nez Perce elder who welcomed B2; Brett Barsalou, Sheriff of Lemhi County, who was concerned about the reaction of residents of his rural county to wolves; and Dave Nelson, President of the Idaho Cattle Association, who first opposed, then later came to accept, B2's presence.

3. Include detail to make the story come alive

We have all heard it before: "Show, don't tell". In *Scorched Earth*, Rocky used detail to show his readers the people whose ideas shaped Yellowstone Park and the management of wildfires in the U.S. West. Although many of these stories had been told before, others were overlooked until Rocky's account.

Your Humble Scribe had been a natural resource professional for many years before she encountered General Phil Sheridan in *Scorched Earth*. This Civil War general played a pivotal role in shaping U.S. fire policy, through his emphasis on strong federal government control. Rocky read the local newspapers of the time to learn of


"It's easier to get the answer than to get the details, but the details are important for telling your story."


the chance encounter that first piqued Phil Sheridan's interest in Yellowstone and led to his role in U.S. fire policy. In addition, Rocky was able to include his own story, of running for his life while covering the Yellowstone fires, in *Scorched Earth*.


4. Find a good editor


Rocky's first book agent was also his editor, as he had previously been a publishing house editor. A good editor knows you and your work and can comment constructively on your writing.

Advice for aspiring nonfiction writers

.... **Promote yourself** In addition to Rocky's other job titles, he is a promoter. He spends a great deal of time traveling and speaking to groups to promote himself and his work, especially his books. "*Your publisher is interested in your book for about six weeks.*" After that, it is up to you to find the money to travel and promote your book.

.... **Sell your work more than once** Don't stop after selling one piece on a topic; sell your research and hard work more than once. Find another angle, rewrite the piece, and sell it to another audience or in another market.

.... **Publish in local venues** For example, the Idaho Statesman's *Treasure* magazine (<http://www.idahostatesman.com/treasure>) is always looking for good nonfiction features. This publication covers homes, gardens, people, and events in the Treasure Valley.

.... **Don't count on make money writing books** Few of Rocky's books have 'paid for themselves', meaning that few have earned enough to pay him for the time he spent writing them. His fly fishing book is his personal best seller, selling about 2,000 copies each year, for a total of 20,000 books so far.

Scorched Earth has been Rocky's biggest money maker, but his key to financial success was the movie that was made from it (see box, below). The book is out in paperback and should see increased sales this year, as this is the 20th anniversary of the Yellowstone fires.

For nonfiction books of this type, advances run about \$10,000 to more than \$100,000. Rocky took a sabbatical from his job at the Idaho Statesman to write *Scorched Earth* and received a grant to help fund writing it.

✍️... **Welcome the other opportunities that come from writing books** Rocky's first book, *Saving All the Parts*, led to funding for travel to Kamchatka and Moloka'i. Writing is a good starting place for doing many other things.

Questions and Answers

How do book contracts and royalties work?

There is an endless variety of agreements. One common contract clause is a request for first right of refusal on your next book.

Rocky did not have an agent for his first book and he receives royalties of 7% of its retail price. But he hastened to add that he was happy to let the publisher take the financial risk of his first book. From his most recent book, Rocky receives 15% of the retail price, although that price varies among sellers.

What about agents: do you need one and how do you find one?

Whether or not you need an agent depends on the audience for your book. For local audiences, you might try going directly to a local press, such as Caxton Press. But if you want to reach a national audience, it is probably best to get an agent. University presses also publish certain kinds of nonfiction books for national audiences and can usually be contacted directly.

Rocky looked into agents that other writers recommended and located others online. He wrote to 50 that had experience in his field: he sent them a 250-word summary about his book and asked what they could do for him. Rocky selected the agent that offered to rewrite his book proposal for him for free...and took him up on the offer.

What goes into a book proposal?

A book proposal describes your book to a prospective publisher in 250 words and tells them why you are the best person to write it. Include your best chapter with the proposal - this will probably be your first chapter.

Rocky's guide to making money writing books

1. Identify your audience
2. Use narrative
3. Include detail
4. Post a short version of your story on the website at work
5. Arrange for a movie producer to see it
6. Let them negotiate with your (by then former) employer
7. Make sure someone points out your copyright
8. When the producer contacts you, ask him to be your agent
9. Write the movie treatment (precursor to the script)
10. Co-produce the movie
11. Eat popcorn while watching your story on A&E
12. Remember to cash the checks

Your book's first chapter "*has to really sing*". This takes work; Rocky says that he rewrote the first chapter of *Scorched Earth* 150 times. The first chapter needs to include a synopsis of the book; it even needs to give away the punch line. Rocky compared the first chapter of a nonfiction book to the first five paragraphs of a newspaper article: the reader needs to get the gist of the story and to decide to read on.

"If you can't explain your book in 250 words, don't start writing"

A book proposal also describes the market for your book; be specific here. For example, Rocky saw that National Parks book shops would be a market for *Scorched Earth*, and included that in his proposal.

How do you know when you've done enough research?

More research is never bad; the wisdom is in knowing how much to print.

How would you suggest writing a story about people displaced by the formation of Cascade Lake?

Find a few stories that tell several people's stories, as Ken Burns does. Describing the selected characters and using direct quotes can bring their stories alive for readers.

Books by Rocky Barker

Link to Rocky's books: (http://www.summitmediapartners.com/cgi-bin/amazon/amazon_products_feed.cgi?input_mode=books&input_search_type=AuthorSearch&input_string=Rocky+Barker)

Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America by Rocky Barker. Island Press, 2007.

Flyfisher's Guide to Idaho (2nd Edition) by Ken Retallic and Rocky Barker. Wilderness Adventures Press, 2002.

Wingshooter's Guide to Idaho: Upland Birds and Waterfowl by Ken Retallic and Rocky Barker. Wilderness Adventures Press, 1997.

"New forestry in the next West," by Rocky Barker. pp. 25-44, in *The Next West: Public Lands, Community, and Economy in the American West*, John A. Baden and Donald Snow, editors. Island Press, 1997.

Saving All the Parts: Reconciling Economics And The Endangered Species Act by Rocky Barker. Island Press, 1993.

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<http://www.sageecosci.com/Writers.html>