

AMERICA'S NEXT Great Author

What's the origin story for America's Next Great Author?

At the beginning of this century, Arielle Eckstut and David Henry Sterry wrote a book called *THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR BOOK PUBLISHED*, which Workman published in 2005. The origin of the book came about when they were on an NPR show where people called in and had one minute to pitch us their books. It was such a success, the show had Arielle and David back later that week to hear more. They realized an event featuring one-minute pitches would appeal to writers and get the word out about their book. The idea was that writers would get a minute to pitch their boo, and Arielle and David would critique it like on *American Idol*, only kinder and gentler.

Arielle and David had their first Pitchapalooza at The Strand, where a line snaked around the block. Several people said that night that they thought this event would make a great television show. Over the last 15 years Arielle and David have done well over 500 Pitchapaloozas, from rural Alaska to Miami Beach to Deadwood, Cape Cod to Kauai. *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, National Public Radio have all done pieces about Pitchapalooza.

Two years ago, they began in earnest to put together a pitch deck for Pitchapalooza. They then teamed up with Grant Faulkner, Executive Director of NaNoWriMo. But it wasn't really until they told the idea to best-selling author and force-of-nature, Kwame Alexander, that their reality show started to really become a reality. Kwame was already doing several TV shows himself, based on books that he had written. He saw the potential of America's Next Great Author immediately.

What is the tone of the show?

Think *The Great British Baking Show*: lots of support from fellow writers and constructive feedback from judges who want you to succeed. Sadly, we can't promise perfect pavlova.

How did you adapt a format that's been used for fashion and flirtation, baking, and business, drag and family drama, and more to books?

America's Next Great Author will start with Pitchapaloozas, which is a twist on *American Idol*, which is a twist on the old fashion talent show, a staple of live entertainment.

You can find challenges that are akin on shows that feature creativity and aim to show off an artist's talents. We love challenges that show off a writer's ability to use words, think fast, and be creative.

But we are also interested in challenges that help a writer learn how to market and promote their books because writers are called upon to do so many different tasks now in modern publishing that have nothing to do with writing your book.

Putting everyone in a house/environment goes all the way back to the first reality television show on MTV, *The Real World*. There's *Big Brother*, *Jersey Shore*, the list goes on and on.

How did you form this collaboration?

David and Arielle met Kwame at the New England Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators conference seven years ago. Arielle and David were doing a Pitchapalooza and Kwame was keynoting. They met each other after Kwame's moving and brilliant talk. Shortly thereafter, Kwame approached Arielle about representing him even though Arielle didn't represent children's books and was no longer a literary agent. But she couldn't pass up the opportunity to work with Kwame. Arielle went on to sell many of his books and helped him start his imprint, Versify, at HMH (now HarperCollins). Arielle, David and Kwame then went on to create a joint venture between our newly hatched production companies, Can Do Entertainment (David and Arielle's company) and (Big Sea Entertainment, Kwame's company). And America's Next Great Author was one of their first projects. Arielle, David and Kwame have all known Grant Faulkner for years and have always been sympatico about how they view the writing community: We are all very interested in inviting people in, not excluding anyone regardless of education, connections, background, etc.

What genres will you include in the pilot?

The first season of America's Next Great Author is going to focus solely on novels (adult and YA) and memoirs.

What kind of response have you gotten to this idea so far? What kind of skepticism do you anticipate?

Right from the beginning, there were certain people in the television (and publishing) world whose eyes just lit up when they heard about America's Next Great Author. These are people who understand just how many Americans want to write books. As Arielle, David, Kwame and Grant toured the country back and forth for decades, we discovered how staggeringly, freakishly large our demographic is. From 10-year-old kids to 85-year-old World War II Veterans. Pierced punks to soccer moms. Retired judges to people living out of their cars. All ages, sizes, sexes, races, religions, philosophies, politics, socioeconomic realities. A couple of years ago there was a survey done that revealed 82% of Americans want to write books.

That said, there is the perception in Hollywood that writers are boring. We want to change that.

We also know there will be people worried that we will steal their books! People don't understand that the single best way NOT to get a book published is to NOT share your work.

Lastly, we've already seen people misreading our website and stating that the winner of the entire show wins \$2500. The winner of the Pitchapalooza for the pilot episode (which is a proof of concept) will win \$2500. Once the show is on air, there will be substantial prize money and publishing opportunities.

Have you already partnered with a network?

We are shooting a pilot episode—a proof of concept—that we will then take to networks. We decided not to go to a network or production company off the bat because this is a mission-driven show, and we want to control how it gets made and who it features.