

EPISODE 486

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:33.1]

FT: Welcome to So Money everyone. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Get this, imagine growing your income 10 times over in just a few short years, maybe even working fewer hours along the way. Sounds good, right? Today's guest is doing just that. She is the founder of New York Book Editors, Natasa Lekic. She founded the company three years ago after working at a publishing house and just wanting to break free from the firm that she described as a sinking ship.

She was working overtime, earning about \$50,000 a year. New York Book Editors was born out of her desire to break free from that and the company now caters to a sweet spot in the ever evolving publishing world. It's a company that provides editorial services and courses for authors and authors to be. So if you are looking to write a book and you need help with an editor, this is where you go.

The company's editors are veterans of the publishing industry. They've worked with well-known authors from little names like Stephen King, to Paulo Coelho, to former So Money guest, Ariana Huffington and James Altucher. But Natasa's rise to success came with some insecurities around money and she talks about how she overcame those fears and the strange connection to her great grandfather that ended up giving her all the answers. Plus, how to successfully publish a book these days, how to find an agent to get a six figured advance even if you're an aspiring offer with zero platform.

Here is Natasa Lekic.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:12.1]

FT: Natasa Lekic, welcome to So Money. You went from what? Making \$50,000 a year to \$50,000 a month?

[00:02:21.1]

NL: Yes, yes.

[00:02:22.5]

FT: That's So Money, welcome to the show.

[00:02:24.2]

NL: Thank you so much, really happy to be here.

[00:02:27.4]

FT: And in an industry that we often hear is a diminishing industry, publishing. We hear about the traditional publishers and how they're consolidating, they're laying off workers. It's sort of this very much an industry in transition. You have managed to find a very nice niche for yourself. Tell us how you got the "aha moment". I understand you were an editor in a major publishing firm and you wanted more. You knew there was more out there for you.

[00:02:58.4]

NL: Yeah, I was actually on the business side. I was a managing editor. I've only edited a few books, but I was very bullish on the idea of self-publishing. I felt like it was a great opportunity for a lot of authors and at the same time, as you mentioned, I felt like the publisher I was working for in some ways was like a sinking ship. I mean I don't know how else to put it?

I felt like they weren't adopting. A lot of us were making suggestions and were willing to make changes and they are fairly slow to change. This is true of every big company so at some point,

I just decided I wanted to try to do something on my own. I felt like the tide was turning and I wanted to take advantage of that.

[00:03:47.1]

FT: So did you quit your job and then figure it out? Or had an idea of what it was that you wanted to create? I know you didn't have much savings, so tell us about that transition?

[00:03:58.4]

NL: I had ideas. I had several ideas. I didn't have a concrete plan. I just knew that I wanted to leave. I wasn't really happy with my role and I literally planned to take the little bit that I had in savings and I am talking about probably \$5,000. I had been on a publishing salary in New York. I didn't have much in the bank and I thought, "No problem, I'll move in with my parents and try to figure it out, and try to build something." My boyfriend at the time was actually trying to convince me to leave as well and he wanted to support me in that phase.

So that's what I ended up doing and I tried to build an app to help children create animated storybooks. That was very short lived. Although I found two co-founders who were technical that it was just too ambitious for me at the time and then I went to another idea that I had had. I was in publishing, I don't know how much people know about an editor's role but I saw the difference that great editing made. I'm sure you have written so many books. I am sure that you have had the experience of working with a knowledgeable editor and how helpful that is in crafting your material.

[00:05:15.5]

FT: Definitely. You know, first tell us though, New York Book Editors, that's ultimately the company that you founded and I find it interesting that you first wanted to do something that you've described as too ambitious. So maybe the advice is, start with what you know and what you're instincts are telling you.

[00:05:34.4]

NL: Absolutely, yeah definitely. That is definitely the take away.

[00:05:39.0]

FT: So with \$80 you started New York Book Editors, right?

[00:05:42.7]

NL: \$80. So just to break that down I had never created a website before. That took \$20 a month on Square Space. It didn't look great. It was really a dinky little site and the other thing that I learned was that when you just build a website, it's almost like building a storefront in the Tundra in Siberia. No one can find it. So I took an SEO class and that was probably \$60 and the big thing I learned from that was the value of viral content, which I think people hear that and assume that it's such a long shot, but it's not.

[00:06:24.0]

FT: Okay, so side bar, well how do you get a content to go viral?

[00:06:27.1]

NL: So it's really important to think about the problems that your target audience has. In my case, I knew that authors experience writer's block. A lot of them had that issue. I researched that topic and came up with an infographic with all of this advice on how to get over writer's block. I put it on Tumblr and I think now, it has 55,000 notes on Tumblr. So it basically made the site visible. I mean there were so many links suddenly going to the site that search engines picked it up and we started getting authors writing in. I think really just thinking about the issues that your audience has and how you can help them...

[00:07:10.4]

FT: And really knowing how they speak, how they articulate those problems, right? Like if they're going to the Google search engines, what are the words that they are using to type in? "Writer's block" is a very common phrase, something that when you're thinking of the inability to write, that's what you think, that's what you type. So yes it is knowing your audience, but even more than that, it's like you really understand how they express themselves, at least digitally.

[00:07:37.3]

NL: Absolutely, yeah. The jargon is also really, really important. Yeah.

[00:07:41.6]

FT: The other challenge I think that you faced, and this is based on an article that you wrote online for Business Insider as you were launching your business, was convincing editors to join the platform. Editors that have very sophisticated resumes, they've worked with New York Times bestselling authors. So how did you convince these very esteemed writers/editors to collaborate with you on a freelance basis?

[00:08:08.5]

NL: It was nerve racking. I had some friends in the industry and I had a friend who joined from the beginning, but then to get other big names involved, I would get an introduction to the person, set up a coffee meeting and I thought, "Why on earth would they want to associate themselves with this dinky little website that was just getting it's start?" But our sweet spot I discovered from talking to these editors was editors who just wanted to spend more time editing.

So the reality of the industry is that when you're in-house, so much time is spent on acquisitions and meetings, on marketing and actually a lot of their editing is done in the evening and on weekends. So some editors who want to go freelance do it because they want to spend more time actually with the material. I didn't know that at the time. I mean this is something that you just figure out all these things by talking to people.

[00:09:16.9]

FT: Right and I am sure the extra money was good.

[00:09:19.3]

NL: The extra money was definitely good. We do work with some people who are still in-house and take occasional projects and yeah, as you mentioned, or maybe not? But the salaries in publishing are not that impressive. Yeah, taking on the occasional project I think is helpful for them. So surprisingly, most of the people that I talked to were onboard right away.

[00:09:41.6]

FT: Interesting. Does your company work specifically with self-publishers, or I should say authors that want to self-publish? Or can you also work with people who have traditional book deals with big publishers? Because in that case, I'm not sure why you would need another editor. You have an editor that comes with your deal. So where do you see yourself fitting in the world of publishing?

[00:10:06.1]

NL: Right. So I thought we would work exclusively with authors who are self-publishing to give them the same experience that traditional authors have in-house, which is as you mentioned, you're assigned with an editor and you work with them. But the reality is that most of our authors actually intend to publish traditionally.

I would say about 65%, and they're either referred by an agent or they just find those organically and they want to polish their book, their manuscript rather, to get it to a state where the agent is ready to represent them. Because as you mentioned, the state of publishing today is such that in-house editors don't have as much time to devote to material as they used to. So they are actually looking for manuscripts that are further along in their development that don't require as much work editorially.

[00:11:00.5]

FT: So as an insider, giving advice to somebody who wants to publish traditionally, they want to work with the big firms, what is the ticket these days? I mean things are changing so rapidly. When I first published 10 years ago, I think a lot of the advice still holds true. You want to have an author, the most attractive authors are the ones that have established platforms that have built in audiences.

The message is important too, but they really pay a lot of close attention to the marketing. Has that just gotten more and more reinforced over the years and so where somebody who has a fantastic idea but is a nobody, has no online platform, doesn't really have a "community" yet around their idea, is not someone who is going to be picked up. What do you think about that?

[00:11:49.6]

NL: I think it's definitely easier if you have a platform. But the truth is, it's not easy to find great ideas and great writing and agents actively look for that. And we've seen a lot of authors who have absolutely no online presence go on and get six figure deals, because the writing is really strong. While it's true that that's definitely a benefit, it's not something that is imperative.

[00:12:20.4]

FT: Where do you see publishing going in the next five years? What sort of sea shift do you see happening? What are the biggest changes forthcoming?

[00:12:29.6]

NL: So we've reached a period — there was so much growth in self-publishing and in eBooks and recently, I don't know if you saw there was an article that showed that people, it started to reverse a little bit. People are reading paperbacks and hard covers more than they used to. I think they're going back to the traditional format.

So I think we've reached a point at which things have stabilized. We won't see the same growth in probably self-publishing and eBooks as we have to date. But at the same time, I think from a

psychological perspective, the validation that authors look for from traditional publishing will continue to be reduced. I think younger authors don't feel like they need to be published traditionally in order to feel like they are a legitimate author. You know, we'll have that influence coming into play as well in self-publishing.

[00:13:32.9]

FT: True. Although I will say though that when it comes to marketing the book it does help to have, not that resources are so robust anymore, but it is helpful to have the backing of a reputable publisher as you go to the market place. I think it's more challenging, maybe more expensive to market your own self-published book. Especially if you don't have the context and the relationships.

[00:14:01.7]

NL: It's definitely more expensive. I think there are two types of authors. There are authors who are more like entrepreneurs who don't mind figuring everything out on their own. They want to be in control of the material, and then there are authors who really want to have that support and that knowledge from a publisher.

[00:14:25.4]

FT: So now, you have what is it? 10-x'd your income, or what?

[00:14:30.9]

NL: Yes.

[00:14:32.1]

FT: In over the span of just a few years. How has that changed your life from a financial standpoint? What are some of the upgrades/changes that you've made since becoming wealthier?

[00:14:44.9]

NL: It's interesting you mentioned that because I had a mini-crisis because of the success, last year's success. I had a So Money moment when you realize you've made almost \$500K in gross revenue through the business. But at the same time, I was more stressed than I'd ever been before. I would fixate on something like an unsubscribe button not working. I started arguing with my husband if he disagreed with my decisions.

I wasn't focusing on things like the great emails that we get from authors who loved their editor, who are so grateful for their edit. Instead, I just seem to be fixating on negative things and I didn't understand why that was happening and I went to see a coach in San Francisco in January. I didn't really know why but I just felt like something was wrong and I was being held back in some way and I wasn't even sure that it was about the income.

But it turned out to be it was. She's an NLP practitioner, a breakthrough specialist and I spent 10 hours talking to her in a session and I don't know, you're probably familiar with NLP but at a certain point, she put me in this state, not hypnosis but just a state. I was fully conscious and asked me where these negative emotions were coming from and you're just supposed to say whatever comes to mind.

And I said, "My great grandfather," and she said, "Fraternal or maternal?" I said, "Fraternal side," and I had no idea why I was saying this. I didn't know anything about my great grandfather it was just bizarre. But after the session, I felt this sense of release. I felt it was just joyful. I don't know what had happened, but I just felt free in a way.

[SPONSOR BREAK]

[00:16:46.6]

FT: Need a website? Why not do it yourself with Wix.com? No matter what business you're in, Wix.com has something for you. Used by more than 84 million people worldwide, Wix.com

makes it easy to get your website live today. You need to get the word out about your business, it all starts with a stunning website.

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When you're running your own business, you're bound to be busy, too busy. Too busy worrying about your budget, too busy scheduling appointments, too busy to build a website for your business and because you're too busy, it has to be easy and that's where Wix.com comes in. With Wix.com, it's easy and free. Go to Wix.com to create your own website today. The result is stunning!

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:17:47.4]

FT: Okay, so we'll take a couple of steps back.

[00:17:49.0]

NL: Yeah.

[00:17:49.6]

FT: So NLP is Neurolinguistic Programming, right? It's an approach, it's kind of like psychotherapy but it's a way to help you breakthrough, communicate what subconsciously you might be feeling. And so you mentioning your great grandfather, what was the connection for you? I mean was it just that you blurted out his name and then you woke up and you felt better? Take me through that grey area?

[00:18:16.0]

NL: It's basically that. I said his name, well it wasn't that I felt better after the whole 10 hour session. But that was a key moment. I didn't know why I felt better. I couldn't understand it. But afterwards, I called my parents and I asked them, if I knew about my great grandfather, I wasn't aware of it. I asked them is there anything, "Can you tell me about my great grandfather?" It was a weird question for them. "You know, is there anything to do with money or something with him?"

And they said, "Yeah, actually there was something." It turns out he was orphaned at a very young age in a village in Serbia. He had two siblings. They moved in with his uncle who barely had enough money to provide for his own family. So he dropped out of school and became an apprentice to a shoe cobbler to help provide for himself and his siblings.

And over the years, he built a little cobbler business up. Over the decades, that became a shoe factory. He had really made it in every sense of the word. He had a chauffeur, a large house and he had spent his lifetime building this up and then communism came and in his 50's, his factory was seized. A lot of his possessions were taken, he basically lost everything overnight.

He was hired as one of the really low level employees in the factory and basically had to work there until his retirement as an employee at that level. So in trying to piece together why I had said his name, I realized that there was a lot of, not negativity but my parents had a certain approach to money that can be consider fairly negative.

[00:20:06.1]

FT: Or insecure because they knew, they have experience in their family of it literally be taken away from you.

[00:20:12.0]

NL: Exactly and so my grandparents, the next two generations including all my grandmothers, it was a similar story on my maternal side, but not as crazy. They all had conventional jobs. After

that, no one tried to build anything or risk anything. So there was these belief about money that I had picked up I think unconsciously.

[00:20:38.2]

FT: Very interesting though that you picked up on this about your great grandfather having not really known the story.

[00:20:44.1]

NL: Right.

[00:20:45.1]

FT: That's kind of spooky.

[00:20:47.3]

NL: It is really spooky.

[00:20:49.3]

FT: What did your coach say? What was her interpretation? What did she encourage you to do following the meeting? You feel great, but how did you continue to feel confident about your money after the session?

[00:21:02.3]

NL: Well, a lot of it is realizing that the beliefs, it's important to think about beliefs that you have that you may not even fully be aware of and examine those and you can actually change those beliefs and so a lot of strategies include visualization to become more comfortable with money basically and ever since that session, I have really welcomed it into my life.

I see it as a marvelous tool, we have continued to grow a lot. Year up to date compared to last year, we're up 58%. We've hired a new employee, we're developing a course that is going to launch soon and I don't think I would have been able to do all these things if I have felt the same way about that money.

[00:21:52.4]

FT: And what I'm also hearing from you is that you're not afraid to invest in your own self-development, even if it means going out on a limb. I read in the article that you've spent a lot of money like \$8,000 to go on a two day workshop hosted by Ramit Sethi, who's been on this show. He's a friend and he's one of the top online educators out there for entrepreneurs and he's not inexpensive and you cashed out and went to his event. And then of course, you have the coach that, she or he probably wasn't inexpensive and so tell us a little bit about getting over the hesitation or fear of spending money to make money.

[00:22:33.1]

NL: Yeah. I actually have to credit my husband with that. He really pushes me to invest in myself and given the way I used to think about money, that was extremely hard for me to do. But I can really point to both of those times that you mentioned as pivotal moments in both my professional and personal development. I know it's a tremendous amount of money. Ramit's summit was \$8,000 but all the times that I have experienced it has been well worth it. It's just investing in yourself has such a ripple effect throughout areas of your life.

[00:23:19.2]

FT: So tell us a little bit about a habit that you have, a financial habit that helps you with either some of the emotional issues, barriers that you have or are working through around money or maybe it's another way of managing your money that helps you with the more day to day stuff. Just give us some insights onto your top habits or habit.

[00:23:40.1]

NL: I check our business numbers on a daily or even probably twice a day just to stay on top of the pulse of what's happening but my personal numbers, I don't check that often.

[00:23:53.9]

FT: Why do you think so? Well you're an entrepreneur, you feel like that's who you are and you forget about your personal side sometimes, and so maybe that's why the concentration is all on the business right now. But why do you think that might be the case?

[00:24:11.9]

NL: I think that it's just an indicator. It's important to check the health of the business whereas my personal account flows from that. I think it's not as critical for me to stay on top of that.

[00:24:26.4]

FT: As you are building this business, I heard you are doing an online course, you are hiring more people what's your overall approach to growth?

[00:24:34.1]

NL: This is probably the second piece of marketing or publicity I've ever done for New York Book Editors.

[00:24:40.9]

FT: This podcast?

[00:24:41.3]

NL: This podcast.

[00:24:42.2]

FT: Oh, I am flattered. What was the first? Was it Business Insider?

[00:24:45.1]

NL: The Business Insider, yes.

[00:24:46.3]

FT: This was last year.

[00:24:47.2]

NL: Yes.

[00:24:48.2]

FT: So it might be...

[00:24:48.3]

NL: Yes, so clearly I haven't done much of this and that's really because we've been at capacity or close to capacity for a while. So we're bringing on the new employee and adding to our editor roster will allow us to grow. I wanted to do that first before really talking about who we are and what we do. Publicity and marketing is coming up and then I'm so excited about the new side of our business, which is the courses and the course development. That is the other part of the growth.

[00:25:33.1]

FT: Awesome. All right and okay, parting advice for aspiring authors today? Let's say specifically authors in the non-fiction space, their dream is to write a book, how do they make sure that it gets published?

[00:25:48.5]

NL: So in the non-fiction space, if it's not a memoir you can actually sell it based on a proposal. Authors should know that they don't have to write the entire manuscript if they want to publish traditionally. They can write a proposal, which in many ways is a marketing document for agents and for publishers, which lays out their plan for what their book will be.

So that is something that's a lot more manageable I think for authors and authors in the non-fiction space are lucky to have that. So I would just say work on the proposal and then focus on researching agents is huge.

[00:26:28.2]

FT: Yeah, how do you get the attention of an agent, really? I know they all usually offer their mailing address or an email but is it just knowing someone who knows someone? I mean that in my career has been really the way to go, is someone connecting me to an agent and I've had two different literary agents in my career and it's always been through a trusted friend or acquaintance.

[00:26:54.4]

NL: Right.

[00:26:55.2]

FT: So is there any other way? Is there any hope for someone out there who doesn't have that connection?

[00:26:59.5]

NL: Yes, most people don't have the connections.

[00:27:02.4]

FT: Yeah.

[00:27:02.6]

NL: Yeah and that is actually exactly what our course is about, finding a literary agent. So my biggest piece of advice on that front is to really, there is so much available online. You can research agents so easily. There are many platforms such as Publisher's Market Place, I strongly encourage anyone — there's a membership fee involved, \$25 a month, but in one month you can just get so much information on agents that work with your genre. And then I would say really, really look into who the agent is, what their interests are. Almost every agent has a Twitter account these days. It's so important to personalize your query letter to them, it means a great deal.

I've heard so many stories, countless agents who wouldn't even probably have been interested in a certain book but the author took the time to say something like, "I know you grew up in Ohio and, you know, my protagonist is also from there." Or, "This event in my book happens there." Just to find some kind of personal connection and show that you took the time and that you really understand. That shows so much, it shows you understand who the agent is, what they're looking for and that makes all the difference.

[0:28:27.5]

FT: 100% agree because most people don't do that and it's someone who also receives a lot of emails, I'm sure you'll get a lot of emails. That's a simple way to get someone's attention.

All right Natasa, let's do some So Money fill in the blanks. This is when I start a sentence and as quickly as possible, try to finish it, first thing that comes to mind, there are no wrong answers. Okay, if I won the lottery tomorrow, let's say a hundred million bucks, the first thing I would do is _____.

[0:28:58.2]

NL: Help my parents retire. They would retire immediately.

[0:29:03.2]

FT: Yeah. Oh yeah, and then some. That's a lot of money. Are they in America or are they overseas?

[0:29:10.2]

NL: They are, they're in Atlanta.

[0:29:11.0]

FT: One thing that makes my life easier or better, a purchase or an expense that makes my life easier or better is ____.

[0:29:19.1]

NL: I know you've heard this a million times but I just have to say it.

[0:29:21.0]

FT: Cleaning lady?

[0:29:22.1]

NL: Yes.

[0:29:25.3]

FT: Got it, yes. Mine was here just yesterday and I'm thankful for it.

[0:29:30.7]

NL: Yeah, I'm sure.

[0:29:31.7]

FT: Worth every penny. When I splurge, I like to spend on _____.

[0:29:37.1]

NL: Luxury hotels. It's not very often but oh my goodness, it just makes you feel like a million bucks.

[0:29:45.3]

FT: Yeah, those Egyptian cotton sheets, worth every penny. When I donate, I like to give to _____ because _____.

[0:29:53.0]

NL: I like to give to people I know. So either people whose families have been afflicted by a certain disease and then research into that disease. Or, you know, I know some people who have had some medical issues and have needed help from friends and families.

[0:30:14.6]

FT: That's nice. There's so many great causes out there. So it's good to have kind of a philosophy around it, because that allows you to really focus and feel good about your contributions. When I was growing up, the one thing I wish I had learned about money is _____.

[0:30:33.0]

NL: Is that it doesn't have to be so hard to make.

[0:30:37.3]

FT: Yeah.

[0:30:40.2]

NL: I used to think that it had to be really hard. The truth is, the people that I know who are very wealthy don't work as hard as other people I know.

[0:30:52.6]

FT: That's interesting. You know, were your parents immigrants?

[0:30:55.2]

NL: Yes.

[0:30:55.6]

FT: Okay. On the one hand, immigrants are very risk averse. They left their homeland and they came a country that they knew very little about and had to start over. So in that way, my parents are the same. They're very brave, they're very, I guess fearless in some ways. That is the — sometimes the blueprint for an entrepreneur.

But I don't find many immigrants at least in my experience looking to entrepreneurship as like their key to freedom. They come here and they want security so they try to find that job, they try to find that recurring paycheck which is I guess I understand it psychologically, but I wish that that too growing up that my parents had been a little bit more encouraging of making your own money.

[0:31:45.4]

NL: Exactly, yeah, I feel the same way. I think though, you made an interesting point. Perhaps they used up all their huge risk taking, you know? Willpower...

[0:31:59.2]

FT: Yeah, they're spent.

[0:32:01.1]

NL: Right and then everything else, you really crave that safety. Maybe it's easier for us to say.

[0:32:08.3]

FT: Right. True, true. Natasa, last but not least, I'm Natasa Lekic, I'm So Money because _____.

[0:32:16.3]

NL: Because I feel like I'm in control of my life and I design it in a way that reflects my values.

[0:32:23.0]

FT: Love that. New York Book Editors is the business, thank you so much. I'm honored that this is your second interview, hopefully this will spark many more and really appreciate your story, congratulations and we look forward to seeing your rise.

[0:32:37.2]

NL: Thank you so much Farnoosh, it's been such a pleasure.

[END]