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Katherine Boo, a Pulitzer Prize winner and New Yorker staff writer, gives instructions to an overflow crowd in Fisk Hall about how to entice readers into stories they aren't immediately interested in.

Intimate stories key to writing, speaker says

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Pulitzer Prize winner and New Yorker staff writer Katherine Boo told a standing-room-only audience in Fisk 211 Monday how to write what no one wants to read.

"Even my dear mother doesn't wake up in the morning and pour her coffee and say, 'Now I want to read about 10,000 words on mentally retarded men being anally raped in group homes or the hostile lives of women in Oklahoma City housing projects,'" Boo said.

Boo brings "important issues to public consciousness," said David Abrahamson, director of the Center for the Writing Arts, a sponsor of the speech.

The journalism market is addressing unpopular issues less and less, Boo said. Poverty and its effects aren't popular subjects for editors and publishers.

"They don't jump off the sales rack at Barnes and Noble and they certainly don't sell advertising," Boo said.

She described coverage of poor people for the New Yorker as "bizarre."

"I'm commodifying their lives for an affluent audience and I get paid and they don't," she said.

Boo described her approach to this "market subversion": Tell intimate stories supported by analysis and research.

She described the reporting process as "two polar opposite inclinations." The first part is taking control over a large amount of information, and the second is giving up as much control as possible to immerse yourself in the lives of your subjects.

"When you lie low and when you see where the story takes you, that's when you really learn about the world you are trying to convey," Boo said.

Boo said her three most important tools are a camera, tape recorder and notebook. She doesn't bring a cell phone or a car when she reports.

And silence is probably "the most underused reporting tool," Boo added.

"The harder you stare (and) the more you listen, the more your stereotypes and assumptions are going to be challenged and rearranged," Boo said. This process can engage a reluctant reader.

Reporters must also be flexible when relying on human subjects, Boo said.

While covering a story in Texas, Boo found an unemployed man who was so poor that he was feeding himself salads that he made out of weeds cut from sidewalks. Boo was set to use him as a subject, but the man's financial situation suddenly improved and his insights no longer carried the same weight.

"The darnedest thing about real people is that they don't conform to our little preconceived narrative of life," Boo said. "So they are going to surprise you, and if they don't surprise you, then you probably aren't doing your job right."

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