

PODCAST 37: WRITING AGAINST THE ODDS WITH AUTHOR T.J. GARRETT

James: Hello and welcome to podcast number 37 from the Self Publishing Formula.

Voiceover: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a best seller. Join James Blache and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James: I should say we've had a few outtakes for this podcast because we're doing something new. You can hear us in glorious stereo. God, there's a word from the 70s, but we're also going to experiment with video so if you're on YouTube, YouTube channel unfortunately you've got our mugs in shot as well, so here we are. Mark's in his brand new office in Salisbury Wiltshire in the United Kingdom and I'm in ...

Mark: Bedroom.

James: You're right. Bedroom, it's not a bedroom. It used to be garage converted to my office but I think I've outgrown it. I've got a den even put the camera around. Oh my God. Everything's falling apart. My screen went black. It's back. I won't touch my laptop again.

Anyway, yeah so if you're listening on audio, the normal way on your iPod or whatever, iPhone, this will be meaningless to you, but from YouTube a bit of a shock that we're going to be in vision. We'll try to do this from time to time. We'll see how this works.

Okay, in this episode we have an interview with a man called Tony Garrett who writes as TJ Garrett, he writes epic fantasy books, although he's just

starting I think paranormal suspense and Tony has a remarkable story. I mean, seriously, it's an absolutely phenomenal story.

A year ago he was at the end of a 20 year period. While he has a degenerative disease which had taken away his eyesight almost completely, he had not read a book since he was at school, and you will not believe where he is today. We're going to hear from TJ Garrett in a moment. It is an inspiring, wonderful interview coming up.

We've had a lot of e-mails and a lot of questions on our Facebook group about the 101 course which we've been working on in the background here at Self-Publishing Formula headquarters and I've asked Mark if I can quiz him as a new author. I'm working on it as well, obviously, but we really would like to know what's going to be in the course and rather than us keep telling people hold on you're going to find out, hold on you're going to find out, let's use this podcast just for a few minutes to have a discussion about what the 101 course material is going to be.

Mark, what's going to be in the course? Who's it for?

Mark: Well, James, it's for people at the start, or just beginning their careers as authors. A little bit of background will help explain what I mean. When I started doing courses a couple years ago, I originally wanted to do something that was comprehensive, would be a start to finish checklist of everything that you need to do to give yourself the best possible chance from the moment that you finished typing the end and your book was ready to be converted into the various formats and then uploaded and sent off to the retailers.

Once I sat down and thought about that, every time I worked and I was adding more and more and more onto the course and before I knew where I was it was vast. It would have been hours and hours and hours worth of content and I'd never done a course before, I wasn't sure that I could

deliver that kind of product that would successfully teach people what I wanted them to know. It was quite stressful.

In the end I decided that rather than try to do that and do a bad job, I focused on one thing that was generating a lot of interest back then and is still generating interest now and that was the Facebook and social media advertising side of things.

I put the rest of it to the side and concentrated on the smaller niche area. We've done Facebook 3 times now. I'm a little bit more experienced in delivering this kind of content and we've got more people helping us now so I thought I'd have another go at it.

The thing that I was having trouble with was working out a structure that would take a very big topic and make it logical and easily digestible for people at the start of their careers. The hook, which we stumbled upon, was the fact that you have a novel that you've been working on for a couple of years as we mentioned before, and you were effectively the perfect guinea pig.

Because you're the average guy, you're the new author just getting started, getting these kinds of things done, you've got a book that you're ready to sell. We can get a cover, we can build you a website, we can build the kind of platform stuff that you need and then we can take that book and give it its best chance to start selling and making you some money.

That was the kind of thread I was searching for. Couldn't find it previously. I guess it came to me over the course of the last 18 months as we've been working closer together.

James: Going all the way through the course this is all about setting yourself up as a commercially successful author.

Mark: Module 2 is all about pre-publication and that would be something that would be applicable for anyone at any stage of their career, even if they just want to know how to take their word document, turn it into a mov file or an epub file and then upload it to the retailers. That would be something that the course will teach and they'll be screen flows and extensive information on all that kind of stuff.

The main motivation, as you say, is to teach people how to do that and then also how to sell that book, make profit from it. We look at mating lists and advertising and strategy about going wide or going exclusive. Everything that you need to know will be included. That's why we call it 101. It does cover everything from A to Zed. That's the plan.

James: You talk about authors at the beginning of their careers. People who've got 2 or 3 books out but maybe haven't cracked the commercial side of things or aren't really sure where to go on this, is it going to be of use to them?

Mark: Completely. In some ways they're just slightly further down the track than a newbie writer would be. Say they've got 3 books, that's a lot of ammunition and they can then pilot into building a platform, getting readers, giveaways, all that kind of stuff. They're just a year or two further down the line. It'd be absolutely perfect for those kinds of writers too.

James: Okay. Good. It's exciting and we've been incredibly busy in the background, recording screen flows. Some of it's quick and easy and just follow. I've done some setting up of accounts today and they vary from the Amazon one where you end up banging your head against the table and almost need an accountant sitting next to you to get through the tax interview, and KOBO, which was a really easy one to do. Some of them are going to be very very useful for people just to handhold through that process.

For me, it's not just about you need an account in X, Y, and Zed, it's how to set up a website. And what the purpose of that website is, what the purpose of your Facebook group is, how you talk to your readers, how you engage them, that's the magic for me and the bit that obviously you've been through over the years. I'm not going to say perfected because it's something that I think probably even month to month you work on and develop, but you've got a system which is working.

Mark: Yeah. When you take somebody who's never had any before, a new reader, and then at the end of the process they're a dedicated fan who will be prepared to go out and buy everything that you put out. That's the goal. That's what I want to teach people how to do.

James: Good. Okay, that's exciting. The other thing that we should just say is that it's not just you and me even, we brought together some of the trusted, well-known and leading edge names in the industry to deliver some of the material and that's exciting stuff. We're going through that at the moment and it's going to be a really good package.

Anyway, enough of that. If you think maybe it's not for you just at the moment, don't forget that we do have Facebook groups which are free to join and there's some great repository of information and a great community helping each other there. We have a 101 Facebook group, purely for people who are starting out and we have a marketing Facebook group as well.

If you search for Self-Publishing Formula on Facebook and click to join either of those groups and Mark or myself or Catherine or Alexandra or Sarah or Carrie or possibly even John will click approve and let you into those groups. It's great to see you there. They're a great vibrant community and really really helpful for people like me in particular finding their way. Okay, let's get on with our interview today. We've got Tony Garrett, TJ Garrett, he reached out to us a short while ago and said, "Oh do you think you'd be interested in having a chat with me," and we definitely were. Both

Mark and I thought straight away this is a really interesting story and I'm really glad that we spoke to Tony. He was a little bit nervous when we spoke to him. It's only about 20 minutes, the interview, it's really really worth a listen.

At the beginning, to get things going, I got Tony to explain to me a little bit about his background and his books.

Tony: At 25 years of, well almost 25 years of living on welfare which was about a progressive condition called Don-ne Bou-de Syndrome, which means at some point I'm going to go totally blind, but the moment I've got a very small amount of vision. It was 5 years ago when I got my first tablet and realized that I could change the text, I could read, even though it was huge. I got halfway through that first book and I decided I would try writing myself. The first 2 or 3 years was all learning and practicing and I actually thought I was really good and then after 3 months I sat down and read it and thought that's not right.

James: We've all been there.

Tony: Then I started full time about 6 months ago, 6, 7 months ago I think it was and actually came off benefits. At the time my income was around \$1,500 to 2 grand a monthish. That was plenty for me because I live in a small town. Obviously you just keep doing it and things got a bit better in the last few months and this last week and a half has just been unbelievable really.

James: Just to put this in perspective, you say you got a progressive condition, you've been living on state benefits or welfare. It's called different things around the world, but what's happened to you is transformational.

It's amazing that you've found something that you can do that it turns out you are good at and that has given you a financial independence, what you say for the first time in 25 years.

Tony: I used to be a builder years ago when I sort of normal eyesight. I've never had perfect eyesight but normalish and I've done other things and I've tried music and I've tried this and that. But nothing that you could hang your hat on and say this is going to be a career and I'm going to be able to make a living out of it. With writing I did and it was obviously support from friends as well telling me to carry on with it.

James: Great story Tony. We're so delighted for you. Let's just talk about the writing a little bit, then we'll talk about what the breakthrough was in terms of marketing and so on.

In terms of the writing, when you realized you could change the font size on the tablet, am I to gather that you hadn't done a lot of reading for a few years at that point?

Tony: I hadn't read a book since I left school.

James: Wow.

Tony: I can't read any size print at all unless it's the big title on a newspaper. Even the large print books weren't any good. 20 something years I'd not been able to read.

James: On a tablet you can make it such that you can?

Tony: I have to look at white letters on a black background because the other way around is just too much whiteness. Everything can get lost. Make the text big enough so there's probably 3 words on a line maybe.

James: What books were you reading?

Tony: The first book I read was The Hobbit. I got halfway through that and that's when I decided I wanted to have a go myself and then obviously I read Lord of the Rings as well. Then I went to Robert Jordan. The Wheel of Time series. That took months to get through because obviously there's 14 books in each one, so that's 300,000 words or so. Then I've gone on to all sorts of stuff. Stephen King. I've read a couple of Mark's books. I'm halfway through The Angel at the moment.

James: You said you were halfway through your first Tolkien book, your first book in 25 years and that was the point in which you thought that you might have a go at writing?

Tony: I tried writing after I left school. I tried writing a sci-fi thing but honestly I just didn't have the patience for it. It was a long job and it takes a bit of figuring stuff out. I'm not a plotter. I just write what I think has to come next and that can be confusing at times.

If you haven't got a method for building the story back in and getting your plot back in line again you can end up getting to a point where you think oh this isn't going anywhere and just stop. I figured out a way around that now so hopefully I can keep that going.

James: Tell me a little bit about that journey then. You started writing, you thought oh this is good I can do this. And then you read it back as you said and realized it wasn't as good as you perhaps thought it was.

What did you do to improve yourself?

Tony: I sent an e-mail to my friend Matt who's the main force behind helping me to get the confidence to do this and I actually sat down with the tablet and read it for the first time and realized that wasn't very good. When I realized that I basically read about 30 books on how to write.

I think I managed to get some decent information out of that and just kept practicing. I did a lot of working things out. I got some very good advice

from some friends of mine that I met on Wattpad, Walton A particularly, some other people as well. Just basically gave the book out to friends and told them to tell me what they thought of it and do everything that they said.

If it makes sense to me then I changed the method or put in extra bits or what you write about. A lot of it is to do with getting the flow right. I knew what was in my head but I wasn't getting it on the paper so it was getting the flow right. I think was the hardest part for me.

James: We should say in terms of genre was epic fantasy, is that right?

Tony: That's the one I've been writing up until now. I just started some paranormal investigation kind of things as well but everything is epic fantasy.

James: Really interesting that there was something in you when you left school that, I mean I'd imagine for most people who go from school to the building trade, they probably haven't tried to write a book at that point. There was clearly something about you that was a writer trying to get out but I still think this is a very very impressive period of self-improvement
Tony.

Tony: The creative side has always been there. I've been a musician since I was 11. I've always had the creative edge. I did some art and stuff but I never imagined for a minute I'd be, I mean like I said I had a go at it, but I didn't think for a minute I'd be publishing stuff.

James: You were first published in the summer of last year, August 2015. How many books now?

Tony: I think there's 10. Maybe 11. Books are actually parts of a series. The first book itself is four parts, which all the books are available now. That's, I

think, depends on how you look at it, there's 8 separate things you can buy anyway and 2 of the books that I just released anyway.

James: How many words is each book?

Tony: Juganock is over half a million.

James: Oh my goodness.

I thought you were going to say they were 40,000 words each and you put 4 of them together to create.

Tony: No, no, no, they're all big books. There are 4 books together. Each one is about 150, 160,000 words.

James: The clue is in the word epic.

Tony: Yeah, that's it. When you say epic I think they mean over, I know it's a genre but at least 500, 600 pages over an epic. It might just be me, but that's what I expect.

James: You obviously got the writing thing done. You've built an audience and how did you do that?

How did you go from being able to write to being able to sell?

Tony: That was the hard bit. I loved the writing but because everything takes me so long, it took me a long time getting the marketing end up. I was going to do your course but at the time I didn't have the money for it. I did but I thought did I want to spend it on that.

I wish I had now because I spent months trying to figure out how to do this and if I had done that in the first place I would have saved all that time rather than trying to figure out what to do with the marketing.

The main thing I do for marketing is I've got an e-mail list, which isn't very much. I've got about 1,200 people on there I think. I keep building that up, I keep doing Facebook ads. I do the countdowns on Amazon. I do a free thing every now and then.

I try to make sure that at least 5,000 new people a week see the products and whatnot. Other than that I just keep going. Keep Facebooking, keep blogging, keep doing what everybody does I think. I don't do enough of it, I know that because the writing takes a lot of time.

James: You've sold your first book I guess not too long after you published it.

It took you awhile to get things going but can you give me an idea of what type of sales income you're up to now.

Tony: Last month I think I sold 6,000 books but I've got most of the income from reads because the books are so long. You know the KDP, I've got over 5 million reads in September. August was building up to that.

So far this month it's not a bad, just over 1,000 sales and nearly 2 million reads and I'm sure that isn't exactly but it's a lot more than I usually end. My welfare was improving. About \$14,000 I think. September I think was 19 maybe 20.

James: That is amazing. 19 or 20 grand in a month from a pretty much standing start last year not just as a marketer but as a writer. There are lots of people who've done our course and they've found a breakthrough or whatever but they've been writing for years and it's the marketing that's come.

You weren't even a reader until last year.

Tony: It was a bit of a learning curve doing all this. With me, like I said before, the time it takes is a problem. The marketing or the sales, I don't know if it's the marketing or not but the sales have gone really well.

James: Well, I would imagine good books. Let me ask you Tony. I don't want to pry obviously but it can be obviously a challenge for anybody emotionally to have a progressive disease and it's an understatement really and we all value our eyesight so much. I think all of us find it very difficult to conceive of a situation where that's being taken away from us, so I can only imagine the emotional impact on you of this turn around.

It must be tremendous, right?

Tony: It's absolutely incredible. I wake up everyday wanting to do something now where I used to wake up everyday feeling almost as tired as when I was when I went to bed and think oh God, not another day.

Nowadays I look forward to coming downstairs and doing stuff. I write all day, read all night, apart from a few breaks obviously. I take the dog for a walk, but other than that that's what I do and I love every minute of it.

James: Fantastic.

Technology is obviously played a significant part in this. It's been an enabling factor for you.

Tony: Definitely. Without the tablets I wouldn't be able to read. I've got a lot of help from the RNIB, the Royal Institute for the Blind, bough software packages off them. I've got a very good narrator which I can't actually use for editing because it doesn't pick out sound alike words and stuff like that but it makes life actually reading some of my work that much easier. I've got large screen things, magnifiers, all sorts of bits and bobs. It just keeps getting better really.

James: Yeah a lot of technology I can imagine sitting around you.

Tony: Yeah there is.

James: You'll have to take a photograph and we'll add it to the blog post that goes along with this podcast Tony. I think people would be interested to see that.

Tony: I think you can actually get a photo off my Facebook account. I'll give you a link to that. It's quite the studio. Nobs and buttons and lights all over the place.

James: Excellent. I'll dig that out after the interview. I imagine, the RNIB, if people aren't in the U.K. it's quite a famous historical organization that campaigns for and looks after the interests of people with vision impairment or blindness.

I imagine you're a bit of a pinup boy for them now, Tony, because this is absolutely what their about isn't it? Is about using technology to enable.

Tony: Yeah. It's a bit like that. I might write to them and see if they want to speak or something.

James: Oh, I definitely thing you should. We'll send this interview to them to wake them up. I used to walk past their place in London and I know that they're very keen on the technology and the use of that and, as I say, you've been helped by them.

Disability aside, what you are is obviously an accomplished and very able writer and you found that marketing thing. In terms of what we always try and do with our podcast in terms of tips for other people, is there something that you can say to me, for instance, who's just finishing their first book, is it a mindset thing.

What do I need to do to make sure I'm going to be successful?

Tony: I think you have to separate the writing from the marketing. The writing is one job. The marketing is something completely different. You

have to look at is a totally different business and get your strategy right just for the marketing side of it.

Definitely get as many people to see your work as possible. Stick it in everybody's nose you can find. Keep plugging away at the Facebook stuff. Get your blog working, which I don't do enough of. Look at the countdown stuff. Look at the e-mailing services like bookbub and son.

Get yourself a plan that doesn't look at daily sales, because that just drives people crazy. You're looking at what you're going to do in a whole year here. Your plan should spread over the year to get you the income you need by the end of the year.

You do look up months but you can't worry about that. You got to look at the whole process, the whole year's income, as opposed to just like ...

Because I used to when I just started I used to check every couple of hours and it'd be depressing, but you look at it on the long term and plan yourself for a whole year. Don't just think, "Well, this isn't working," after the first couple of weeks and give up. It doesn't work like that.

James: I think that's very good advice. We do occasionally see people, I think I've mentioned this before on the podcast, who've run their advert for 5 minutes and immediately gone to Facebook saying what am I doing wrong, I haven't had any signups.

Tony: Exactly yeah. It's getting it under people's noses that matters. If 1 person in 100 buy your book and you've got a million people looking at it, you're doing all right.

James: What sort of help did you get? You said you mentioned some help you found in the community for you. Is this people writing in a similar genre to you? Did you chose this genre because it's something you enjoyed reading or was it a commercial choice? Two different questions there.

Tony: Not commercial choice. I don't think fantasy is even in the top 5 as far as genres go. I had some writing help, which we talked through. We talked an awful lot and helped with everything but the other help, the book covers and the beta reading is all mostly family and friends.

Matt Taylor does all my covers. My ex-wife, she does a lot of the reading, so do the kids. I have a few friends that do beta reading for me and then they all contribute towards the finished product, which is another thing I'd say. In the end, that's the end. Writing is rewriting and polishing and doing all the other bits to make it into a product rather than just a story.

James: When did you know it was going to work?

Tony: When I had 4 solid months of enough money to pay the rent I thought this might work. All I thought about at the time was can I keep doing this? Can I keep benefits and can I keep paying the rent? That was my main motivation.

And of course you have to think of things differently for people who are making 10 grand a month or whatever but as long as I could pay the bills, that was my main motivation. It happened after about the first 3, maybe 4 months. The most important thing I got out of it was the ability to do things. I've got 2 kids at University, one who's just buying his first house. I've been able to chip in and help with them. That's a huge deal for me. I've just been to Holland with my daughter. She's doing a year on the arisement thing and I never would have been able to afford to pay for her to go over there a year ago. This is what you get from writing if you work hard at it. You can actually live. You can do things.

James: That's incredible. Tony I'm so pleased for you. You're a prolific writer and I imagine that's part of your secret is that you, particularly with KU people get into it and then they're going to stick with you. They've got a lot to go to. There's always something next to go to. You think maybe 14 or 15 books. I'm just going to quick look down your Amazon page.

I imagine that's one of the reasons you've been successful is the fact that people want to read the books.

Tony: Yeah, the KU thing, I actually got into just after they changed over from the per book to per page model. Which if it was the per book model I don't think I'd of been able to say that I'd earned all that money because the Jauganot was 2,000 something pages, Mersius is 3 books together, I think they're close to 1,500 pages. I mean I didn't intend it to be like that because obviously at the time I didn't know they were going to do a per page model but I don't know. I thought if it was going to be epic, it's got to be epic so I just kept writing.

James: It certainly is epic. The covers are definitely worth having a look at. They're very nice indeed.

You say you've got a friend or family member doing the covers?

Tony: That's Matt Taylor. He actually works in health and safety but he's always been an artist and he just helps me whenever I need it.

James: They're superb and there's a very cool picture of you.

Tony: Oh the one with the hat, yeah.

James: The one with the hat looking at 1960s country western.

Tony: I can tell you a story about that. We actually took 75,000 and picked that one because I'm not at all photogenic. Matt did that as well with his digital camera and it took all afternoon to get one decent photo.

James: It's a great picture Tony. It's a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much for contacting us. I suppose the last question we should ask you is really about in terms of what you would say to other people who have a disability or a progressive condition that you have and maybe haven't

made the breakthrough yet. I would imagine you don't need to say anything.

I think your story itself speaks for itself but that's got to be encouraging.

Tony: Definitely yeah. I mean anyone who is limited, we're quite lucky actually being in the U.K., the help we get. I know it's not the same in different countries and I know this podcast will go all over but regardless it's not the end just because you have a disability. You can always find a way around it.

Well not always but hopefully you can find a way around it and just keep going. All of my work has been down to the support of friends and family. I don't think I'd have done it without them. It's a big ball game and you just need to have the will to carry on and find the help and the support you can.

James: Tony Garrett, Mark what a story. Just to recap, a year ago hadn't read a book since school, worked out on a tablet and iPad or whatever that he could get the font size up to the point where with his condition he could still start to read. Halfway through J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* decided he was going to start writing and last month made 19,000 pounds. That's approaching \$30,000 on a normal exchange rate, in a single month. Just unbelievable.

I mean that's as much as he earned in a year on his benefits and it's changed his life. It can help his daughter do her arisement course abroad, help his children through college. For people who want to contribute and want to work but struggle to, it's an inspirational story.

Mark: Yeah it is. One of the takeaways from that is not, I say don't focus on the numbers, although they are amazing and he's done incredibly well. I think there are hundreds and hundreds of authors just like Tony and you and me who are earning enough money now to maybe fill the tank up with

gas or to take their wife or their husband out for a meal they might not have otherwise been able to afford, pay some bills.

It's almost those unheard people working in a way that wasn't possible 10 years ago, wasn't even possible 5 years ago. Those are the stories that are inspirational. Then you get people like Tony just crushing it. It's very difficult not to be so impressed with what he's done and grateful with the facilities that are available to us now.

I may actually send this podcast to Amazon because it's something that they should hear about because I'm speaking at a conference in Ireland late in November and I think this is exactly the kind of story that they'd be really pleased to hear about.

James: I think the RNIB in the U.K. would be as well because it's what they're all about is empowering people and giving them, if it's technology, it's technology, what they need to be independent and contribute.

Mark: For those people in America, RNIB is the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

James: Yes it is. I'm sure there's an equivalent organization in the states and Canada and elsewhere in the country so a large charity based organization, but one that looks after the interests of people with visual impairments and blindness. Yeah, so great.

Really really pleased that Tony got in touch with us and I think we'll keep in touch with him over the years. Good, look, that's it. Thank you indeed for listening and indeed watching if you persevered with the nasty astronauts here in Cambridge and the white coat wearing former lawyer in Wiltshire. We'll try to do this again, shall we? Try and do the video again.

Mark: Do we have to?

James: We'll reserve judgement. We'll see what it looks like. Thanks for listening.

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