

EPISODE 54: INSIDE AMAZON – WITH DARREN HARDY, AMAZON KDP

Speaker 1: Two writers: one just starting out, the other a best-seller. Join James Blatch 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 Blatch: Hello. Welcome today. Last time, well not last time, but at some point when we were recording, somebody emailed us to say that we have to get rid of paper cups. We should get mugs.

Mark Dawson: Oh. Okay.

James Blatch: So SPF mugs, obviously. Can we afford them?

Mark Dawson: We've already got a couple of mugs in Essex.

James Blatch: There's one of them sitting down there. Uh, hello. These are British mugs, with the union flag on them, Lounge's coffee, I don't know where this ... oh that's the Cosy Club. Which looks like a private members club, it's obviously starred on that 1930's type of feel in Salisbury. It's rather nice, isn't it? We've eaten there a couple of times.

Mark Dawson: We have, yup. It's one of my regulars.

James Blatch: Yeah. And surely you've got an actual club as well? Are you a member of a club?

Mark Dawson: I am not a member of a club, no. What was it that Winston Churchill said about clubs?

James Blatch: No, it was Groucho Marx.

Mark Dawson: Groucho Marx.

James Blatch: He wouldn't be a member of any club that had him ...

Mark Dawson: That's right. Very true.

James Blatch: I think it was Groucho. Someone will look it up and tell us who said that. But we are going to move on from the launch, which we talked about last week, and surely you can find the club membership fee out of the 28,000 you cleared in profit last time. We are going to talk about, should we call it 'the beast'? The large, looming, single organization that ...

Mark Dawson: The 800 pound gorilla?

James Blatch: The 800 pound gorilla, yes. Cause we talk about lots of retailers and we talk about lots of services, but there is one name, if you're an Indie publisher, frankly, if you're a traditional publisher, now as well, that's a very important name in your life and that is Amazon.

So, Amazon. We don't know huge amounts about it, do we? Just this company that is there when we turn on our computers. Started by a guy called Jeff Bezos a few years ago who that thought that people buying stuff on the computer would be the future.

Mark Dawson: Started with books.

James Blatch: And he was right.

Mark Dawson: He was absolutely right, yes.

James Blatch: It was books, wasn't it? Yes.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, and now, of course, everything is possible with Amazon.

James Blatch: As you know from your affiliate sales, everything and anything is possible.

Mark Dawson: Yes, I had all kinds of things bought on Amazon, which we won't go into here as a child friendly podcast, but I've had some interesting ...

James Blatch: Things that could keep a relationship alive.

Mark Dawson: So I'm told.

James Blatch: And some expensive wrist watches.

Mark Dawson: Yes, that's true. So, yes. Amazon. So, I've known Darren, who we went to London to interview, I've known Darren for a couple of years now, and it's quite a funny story how I got to know Darren. I started to sell pretty well in 2014, so, that was when I was still employed when we were all working together in the same place watching movies for a living. I was doing quite well, and Darren reached out to me because I think they noticed that I was selling quite strongly and they reached out to me and said, "Is there any way we can work together to help you sell a few more books?"

Of course, that sounded good to me. So, we started to work together and as the year progressed we got to November, and I remember this very vividly, I stopped working on the 24th of November 2014 and went out to do this full time and literally an hour after I had handed in my notice, yeah, this would be in October, I finished in November so I handed in my notice a month before, an hour or so after I went into the boss's office and said, "Look, thanks very much. You can stick your job right there. "

I didn't put it quite like that. Darren called me and said, "Hi, Darren it's Mark from ... it's Darren from Amazon."

James Blatch: Was he confused when he called you?

Mark Dawson: He was as confused as I am right now. He said, "Hi Mark, it's Darren from Amazon. I'm afraid we've got quite a bit of a problem with your account."

So, I'm thinking all right. My wife's on maternity. I've just basically jacked my job in. What on earth is the problem?

And he said, "Well if you check your bank account, I think you'll find we've overpaid you this month." I was expecting him to say, "by maybe a few pounds". It was probably something like 60,000 pounds. It was a huge amount of money. Anyway, it was all fine, basically they're very flexible so it was paid. I didn't earn any extra royalties for about 2 or 3 months.

James Blatch: Right.

Mark Dawson: As that was recouped, effectively.

James Blatch: In advance?

Mark Dawson: It was effectively an advance, yeah. But they were really relaxed about it, you'll hear from when we speak to Darren that he's a very laid-back guy and a lovely, lovely guy.

I've met him lots of times now, since I've gone full time, I've spoken at the London Book Fair, two times. I'll be speaking with Amazon again in March this year. I've been to Dublin to do an event with them, Darren, again. I've spoken at an Amazon Academy event in London. So we see each other a fair amount. And the other staff at Amazon who are equally lovely. It's fair to say, I think, that Amazon has changed my life. It is the company that I

started to do well on, first of all, and I've got a very fond space in my heart for them because they did enable me to do what I've always wanted to do, and that's tell stories and entertain people.

And although I get amazing support now from the other platforms especially Acal and Kobo, who I love as well. The guys there are fantastic. Amazon is still about 70% of my income comes from Amazon. So, I'm a big Amazon backer, unashamedly so, and we can talk about some of the things that people say about Amazon perhaps after we listen to the interview because not every one loves Amazon. In fact, far from it. Some people actively dislike them.

I'm certainly not one of those people and we can have a chat about their role in the industry, the responsibilities that come with being by far the biggest player, but I think it would be good to do that after we've spoken to Darren.

James Blatch: So, Mark and I have been released from captivity, haven't we? We've come to the city of London.

Mark Dawson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Blatch: And one of Amazon's buildings here in the UK, it's rather nice inside, and this is a place you've been before I think, Mark?

Mark Dawson: I have, yes, because Audible are here and Abe Publishing are here as well, Abe Pub. So, yeah, I've been here a few times.

James Blatch: Yeah. And Amazon. The beast at the center of the publishing industry in the world now. It sounds like a slightly negative tone but let's bring in Darren Hardy who we're here to talk to today.

So Darren, the manager of KDP in the UK?

Darren Hardy: That's right, yes. I've never been called a beast before.

Mark Dawson: No.

James Blatch: 'The beast of publishing', there you go. Something for your business card. Well look, thank you very much for coming on to the podcast. Amazon is such a big feature in our writers lives.

There are a number of platforms but the word 'beast' probably does describe the place Amazon has, right? Culturally, it's right at the center, isn't it now?

Darren Hardy: Well, I think certainly programs like Kindle Direct Publishing's you say have had a huge impact for authors. So, I think, we hear lots of enthusiastic response about what we're doing. Clearly, Kindle Direct Publishing is in the heart of what a lot of authors are doing, which is great, so long may that continue.

James Blatch: Good, well we've got a few questions for you, Mark, some from us, some from our listeners. I'm going to try and bring it back occasionally to newbie language because I don't necessarily understand. I haven't published my first book yet.

There's choices about Kindle Select and all the rest of it, I can't even get the terminology, right but you know what I mean. KDP Select.

Darren Hardy: Yes, there's exclusivity on the one hand with Amazon or go wide with everyone.

James Blatch: Yeah. I'm getting into lingo like 'going wide'. I may interrupt every now and again to say, "What are you talking about?" But, where are we going to start because I know we want to get through as much as we can in the time that we've got.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I think it would be really interesting to talk to Darren about his time at Amazon. Obviously, I've known Darren for a little while now, and I mentioned in the introduction the phone call that you made to me the time I handed in my notice about there being a problem with my account, which was possibly the first time we'd spoken but that was not the most auspicious start.

But since, then we've been to the conferences together and spoken onstage and it's been great. Now I know that Darren has been at Amazon for a very long time, so probably one of the earliest UK employees?

Would that be fair to say?

Darren Hardy: I've been at Amazon for about 13 years, so, certainly not the earliest, but one of that initial group of people that have been around for a little bit of time. But I've always worked in book selling in one form or another, so fresh out of university I did that classic thing of not quite knowing what it was I wanted to do with my life, working in the local bookshop while I sort of made my decisions and just falling in love with books and falling in love with the idea of authors exchanging ideas, and just the huge amount of variety within the publishing world, so here I am. 2017, looking after KDP.

James Blatch: 13 years, that must be a long service award at Amazon? Do you have a cup?

Darren Hardy: No, I don't think so. No, nothing quite like that. It's one of the things actually that surprised me. I think one of the amazing things about publishing, not just Amazon, but especially about Amazon, is there are so many things happening. There are so many new things coming along and changes, that it actually often surprises me when I say, "Yes, I've been here for this amount of time" because in some ways it feels like only yesterday. There's no sense of ... I've worked at other businesses for a shorter periods of time and you sort of sometimes feel that you've been there a while. It

sounds a bit of a cliché, but I genuinely do skip into work in the morning thinking actually there are some really fun things going to happen? And I get to meet Mark and people like that all the time, which is one of the great things about my role is working so closely with so many authors and people within the publishing industry. So, yes, it's great fun.

Mark Dawson: So, 13 years ago you came to Amazon for the first time, so that would have been pre-Kindle.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: Pre-KDP.

How long have you actually been involved with the Kindle side of things?

Darren Hardy: I've been working in the Kindle Direct of Publishing side for about three years now. Three and a half years. I used to work on the print book side. So, I was sort of in the publisher relations team on that side of the business. I just wanted to do something slightly different. For me, personally, working within books and within publishing is absolutely what I love doing.

Obviously, moving from the printed books world and the managed, traditionally published world into Kindle was a very different thing, and then coming into Kindle Direct Publishing was sort of different all over again. So, it enabled me to continue within the industry, but to do some different things. As I say, I haven't looked back, it's been really interesting.

Mark Dawson: **How did you feel about the Kindle when it came out?** I've said before that I wasn't an early adopter by any means, I was probably reluctant to read on a device. I love books. I love the smell of books, and the touch and the feel of them. Now that's completely changed, I read everything on my Kindle.

Did you feel the same way as you came across?

Darren Hardy: Yes, I mean, not as reluctant. For me, I've always been surrounded by books and my parents and my family are absolutely immersed in books. But one of the things that I was always very conscious of, is some of my relatives, some of my family, weren't lucky enough to be near a bookshop or weren't lucky enough to, for my older family, to actually be able to go into a bookshop. So, one of the things I was really conscious of was that the Kindle really did open the door to the access to books. Really did make it so much easier to get books.

I grew up in that generation where things like music and film were a very, sort of, physical product and you'd have to wait until you could go into a town and buy the new album, buy your favorite band or buy the new book and so on, and that immediacy and the ease was just sort of mind blowing. You could see that from day one, and obviously the device itself has gone through several different iterations, but that whole sort of ease of access and the ability to be able to just download within 60 seconds and get the book that you want to read, I think was self evident from the first stages. I remember thinking, if some of my relatives who find it harder to get to a bookshop or those kind of situations, it would be brilliant for them.

Mark Dawson: It is one of the things that it's very easy for us to take for granted now. I downloaded and started to read a book on the train this morning, as I was coming into London. It's easy because that's become common behavior now, to forget how revolutionary that would have seemed, even 10 years ago. The idea that you could do that, you would have been burned as a witch probably if you were to suggest that. So, when you started, you would have been out in Slough I guess.

Darren Hardy: Yes, indeed. Yes, in Slough.

Mark Dawson: What did John Betjeman say about that?

Darren Hardy: Yeah, come friendly, bombs.

Mark Dawson: So, I've been to the Slough office in another life, before I was writing, not to meet you, but to meet the guys in the video team. That was a very different office to the sleek and shiny building that we're in now and the main building in Hoburne.

How have things changed abouts organizationally as the time has gone past?

Darren Hardy: Well, obviously the business has grown in size quite significantly over that time. I think that one of the amazing things, and you mentioned earlier, so when I first started at Amazon, the products that Amazon sold were a far smaller product group and group of categories and so on, it's just grown phenomenally. But then not only in terms of retail, but then in terms of things like web services and some of the video side of things. It's just mind blowing just how many different aspects there are to the business.

As an employee, obviously, you become conscious of growing size and people coming into the teams all the time. I think the great thing is, there's a real sense of excitement, a momentum, and new opportunities and one of the great things I think for many of the things that we do, is that you identify an opportunity to try and help customers better or to try or to help authors better. You get feedback. "If only we could, as an author, do something" the particular thing is to be sort of try and see what we can do about that. Where we feel like there's an opportunity to add value.

That shows no signs of slowing down. You sort of think about all the innovation and all the change going on over the period of time that I've been here, for example, and you would think for many people, "Okay, surely that's it now. It's time to start leveling off and stick with what we've got." But I don't think there's any sign of that here. Just look at all the

changes going on in the publishing space. There's still so much to do and so many opportunities.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, James and I, as we said before we started rolling today, I mean Alexa is a very exciting new technology. Just rolled out yesterday with the Fire Stick. There's lots of opportunities for readers and writers there as well, maybe things will develop over the next few months and years.

James Blatch: **How does a large company, because Amazon is now a very large company on a corporate level, how does it keep that culture of innovation going?** Because that's the big trick that lots of the other older companies are really struggling with, they struggle to keep as fresh as they were when their forefathers started it.

Darren Hardy: Yes, that's really interesting and people have written books about exactly that. It's a fascinating aspect of it. I think from my experience, often you'll hear reference about Amazon leadership principles and things like that. There are certain values that the business works to that have been there from day one and continue to be there and I think one of the amazing things is that that is a sort of a living, breathing set of principles that do get referred to on a day by day basis and are often used to help solve problems or -

James Blatch: So, it's not just a plaque on the wall at reception.

Darren Hardy: That's it.

James Blatch: It's something you live by.

Darren Hardy: Yes, that's it. And I think we often get asked that when we have people come in for interviews, for example. That's obviously recruitment clearly is something that Amazon does a lot of and often within the interview a candidate will ask, "What is this, these Amazon leadership

principles? I've heard about these. What does it really mean?" Often, we'll talk about that fact that this is a genuine, real, living, breathing set of values that the company works to; making sure your customer is at the heart of what you do, try and be innovative, try and keep things simple. I think that's what helps. Keeps the momentum going. Because they are tried and tested, they work really well for the Amazon business and I think have been fundamental in many of the things that you've seen.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: When you say, you used the word customer a few times, Amazon is notoriously, that's the wrong word ... is famous for being customer-centric.

Who is your customer? Is it the reader or is it the writer?

Darren Hardy: I think it's both. And many other customer types. Obviously, as a retail business, there is a retail customer who buys products on the retail website but then when it comes to business or a group like Kindle Direct Publishing, authors are obviously fundamental in what we do.

There's a huge amount of focus in the way that people will talk publicly about the customer, retail focus. Huge amount of focus in the author as our customer. What can we do better? Where are we really helping? What are the opportunities ahead of us? Yeah, so, I think it's one of those things where I think we have a slightly split view on that. Clearly, to help serve our customers as best as possible as authors, we also need to serve our retail customers.

Mark Dawson: You mentioned the team, so, how big is the team for KDP in London now?

Darren Hardy: Well, it's one of those interesting aspects of life here is that actually the team is quite geographically spread. There's a handful of us in

the London office, but equally we work very closely with colleagues in Luxembourg. There are, obviously, a number of businesses around Europe that work very closely so I spend a lot of time talking to my counterparts in Germany, in France.

What's working well? What can we improve? What are we hearing from authors?

Similarly, in the US, obviously, there's a very large industry over there, it's one of the things that we try and do is learn from each other as well as spending a lot of time hearing from authors. It's also spending a lot of time talking internally about what's going on in your particular area and can we learn from that? Even things that you hear from individual authors, it may be the first time you might've heard something from an author in France, but perhaps that's a question that is equally relevant to the UK.

There's a real global focus, I think, I think many authors are taking that kind of a perspective now. The technology and the tools that are available mean that, whereas in the past, you might have considered yourself as an author to publishing to the UK, for example, it's now just as easy to publish into Australia, into the US, into Countries all around the world. Why not cast your net as widely as you can to learn about readers in all of those countries, as well? I think it's a similar process for us.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, that's really true. Something that I've discovered over the course of the last few years, 65% of my readers are in the States, so, I'm publishing obviously in the UK, but the vast majority are in the US. I don't know if you guys know, there's a piece of software called 'Book Report', it's definitely worth checking. It's a clever little piece, it's a bookmark that you go into the KDP dashboard, where the reports are and it will pull that data from the Amazon servers and present it in a very visual fashion. The insights you can get out of it are fantastic.

James Blatch: Interesting.

Mark Dawson: I have 2.5% of my sales in Australia, which I didn't know, so, I'm going to focus my marketing on that as we go forwards.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: Go on, James.

James Blatch: I was going to say, we talked about innovations and the heart of Amazon, so should we talk out one or two of the innovations of recent, I mean really hot off the press, literally, the press is the change in press is the print side of things. So, obviously Amazon acquired CreateSpace a few years back, whenever that was, an eon in Amazon terms. We've looked at that and our students are familiar with that process.

What is the change that's just been announced?

Darren Hardy: So, the main way of thinking about it is in the past as an author, you would have signed up to Kindle Direct Publishing and Kindle Direct Publishing would have taken care of your digital publishing, and you would then separately sign up to CreateSpace and that CreateSpace service would have taken care of your print book sales.

Now, basically, you can access both of those things within Kindle Direct Publishing. So, Kindle Direct Publishing is the service that will enable you to digitally and in print.

Some of the benefits of that include things like consolidated reporting, for example. So, you'll go to KDP and you'll have reporting that will combine both of your print sales and your digital sales and a lot of the publishing process is made a lot simpler by the fact that you are going through a simple work flow, if I can call it that, with a clear "here's your ebook details and here are your print book details."

So, you're not having to go backwards and forwards between two different systems. You can do it all within the same user interface, as we call it, the same sort of website.

From our perspective, and the feedback that we're getting, is that from authors saying it's just so much simpler, it's just so much easier to go into one place and do all of it in one go, and get that one set of reports.

So, as you say, we've just sort of announced that this beater is ongoing, but there'll obviously be changes and updates to come as we go along, so, watch the space, keep looking at the website. You'll keep seeing new features coming on as we can add them and send us your feedback.

James Blatch: And the fee structure will be comparable for authors?

Darren Hardy: In terms of the structure of publishing, none of that's changed. All of your royalty rates are the same. Essentially, it's sort of consolidating what's already there. So, yeah.

Mark Dawson: I'm definitely impressed with bringing in that under one dashboard, just the fact that you see the data, more often, means you're more likely to focus on the data and concentrate on developing it. Do you think ... Most of my books are on CreateSpace.

Do you think it's likely that those will be consolidated, so that the data will be available under the KDP dash in a year or two's time?

Darren Hardy: Yeah, I mean with any beater, obviously, the service is there as is at the moment. We're aware that there are things that we'll be adding over time. I think, wherever there are pain points or inefficiencies from an author perspective, we would always be looking to see what we can do about those.

So, yeah, I think the key thing with those kind of questions is sort of sign up, give it a go, see how it works for you, let us know what you think, and we'll continue to sort of build on it over time.

Mark Dawson: Okay, so, you have an unusual position in that you have this birds eye view of indie publishing and have done for some time. Obviously, I was ... When I was on the radio, though Amazon very kindly have put me forward for press things, and I was on the radio, not too long ago, and one of the first questions I got was from the host, it was very polite, but it was basically, "I don't know who you are."

And I could have answered that in a number of ways, but I answered as politely as I could.

How do you think perception of independent publishing has changed over, say the last five years?

Darren Hardy: It's really interesting, because I think as an industry we talk a lot about the difference between traditional publishing, independent publishing and all of those kind of things. From a reader's perspective, I don't think there's a huge amount of awareness or concern to be honest, about that sort of split.

I think the key thing is, can I read a good book? Is this an author I particularly like? And how that author chooses to publish the book, I think, is relatively immaterial. I think we, as an industry, spend a lot of time discussing these things. I think from a reader's perspective, actually, it's not really that important.

But, I think what is becoming, sort of growing awareness, is just how easy it is and how much impact you can have as an independently published author. I should imagine many aspiring authors will always ... You're thinking, "Okay I'm going to write a book. How do I go about it?" From various searches, you'll read various articles and all of those kind of things.

And I think you can see a real sort of sense within that sort of commentary that independent publishing is becoming so successful. That many authors are just sort of getting on with it and almost not spending a huge amount of time debating about which way to go. It's like, "Well, I can do this now, I can do it really quickly, independently publishing, so that's the route I'm going to try."

I think that sort of helps build that success. Clearly, your appearance on the radio show, whilst they may have said, "Well I don't exactly know who you are," figures that you no doubt talked about in that interview spoke for themselves, I think in terms of the success that you found.

Mark Dawson: Well, I was reasonably modest. I was tempted not to be.

James Blatch: I mean, the biggest area of lack of knowledge is in the traditional publishing area because there, it's not everywhere within it, but we've certainly had a couple of voices in the last few months, sort of been ... A very common one I get, independently publishing it says, oh, you talk about an editor, "Well, where do you get an editor from?" As if anybody just goes to a word document, uploads their book and there's a lack of understanding and the trad industry that they go through the same process. Books go through the same process.

We've had a little bit, and I wonder how you'll react when you hear some of the traditional voices saying that the loss of the gatekeeper is a bad thing for readers, because it's exposing them to books that haven't gone through that long process of long lunches before the book finally arrives.

Darren Hardy: Yeah, I mean, it's interesting, cause I think for many ... Certainly the authors I speak to, this has been hugely liberating. It's actually something which has enabled them to sort of just get on with publishing.

There's a classic example, and you hear so many examples, authors talking about the fact that they were trying to get published, there were people saying, "This isn't the right genre for this time," or "We've already published these particular books, we don't need anymore." All various reasons, which probably make perfect sense for those particular people, but from the author's perspective, it's "Well, why is that holding me back? I just want to get on with it and let the reader decide who becomes successful." Because it's all very well for one or two people to make a judgment, and they probably have a huge amount of knowledge and experience, but actually the people that really matter are the readers. So, being able to get on with it, I think has been incredibly liberating for many authors.

And as you say, actually, certainly, the events that I go to, most independently published authors know very well how to find an editor or they know who to ask when it comes to cover design. You can go to events, you can read blogs. There's all sorts of ways in which you can find out about those things. I don't think from an independent publishing authors perspective, any of this is a secret. I think, actually, it's just a fact of life when you're publishing.

James Blatch: Yeah. I mean, I was on Radio 4 as well faced with this, on You and Yours a little while ago, faced with this exact argument and I flipped it on its head and made the point that every J.K. Rowling, every Ian Rankin will tell you how many rejection letters they got.

Mark Dawson: Absolutely.

James Blatch: **Now, those people had the tenacity to get through it, but how many brilliant writers fell at that stage?** How many we've never heard from, never seen their books, but actually in this day and age we now do, so for me it was, as you say, liberating, is a great word for it I think.

Darren Hardy: Yeah, and I think that the processes, the tools that you have are so simple now.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Darren Hardy: It's so easy to be independently published. Probably the biggest point of debate is, "Am I going to do this as an author? Am I going to spend the time to write this book, to dedicate a lot of time, to crafting something that I want to publish?" Because once you get to that point of thinking, "Yes, I am. And I have now got a finished product," the rest of it is relatively straight forward.

James Blatch: It's actually quite hard, writing a book, isn't it?

Darren Hardy: Exactly, right.

Mark Dawson: Let's not get Darren started on that one. Darren has been telling me he's going to write a book for a couple of years now. I always bug him.

Darren Hardy: Yes.

James Blatch: It's really hard.

Darren Hardy: It is, exactly that. I learned from Mark's example, sort of being on a train, commuting in to work, you think, "I've got this time to write a book." Whereas Mark was very diligent and got the book written, I tend to fall asleep, so that's obviously what slows me down.

James Blatch: He's an outlier.

Mark Dawson: Okay. So, we mentioned kind of a "when", so we go to London Book Fair and other events. There's a great event in Dublin, not too long ago, which had a big audience. It's easy for us in our little self-publishing bubble, if you'd like, to assume that everyone knows what we know. And to assume that everyone knows that it's possible to publish in a

way that has nothing to do with vanity publishing and all of that kind of stuff. So, how do ... How far do you think the message has spread? I would ... Do you think we've ... Let's say there's 100 writers.

Do you think 10 of them now know that this is a viable option? Or more or less?

Darren Hardy: Yeah, it's a really interesting question. I think it's one of those things where awareness continues to grow, but I still think there's more that can be done. I think the really interesting thing is the way that the tools and the processes are becoming so simple.

Actually, and to the point you sort of made, there are many people who have probably only had in the back of their mind the idea that they might become a writer. They're the people that actually be incredibly enthused by the ease of the process and just by actually taking up the opportunity now.

So, you sort of think about the author community, as it is today, then yes, there may be different levels of awareness. Whether you're traditionally published, whether you're independently published, whatever it might be, but actually there's a really interesting opportunity for lots of different types of people to publish stories for them.

And it's not always about becoming a Number One Best Seller, it's not always about getting to a chart or making 1,000,000 pounds or whatever it might be, it's just the incredible sort of sense of achievement to publish a book and have some people read it and ideally leave some great reviews. You know, why not?

There's this terrible cliché that we always mention, "Everyone's got a book in them." Why not? You know? As long as you're realistic about what you want to do, and how you want to be involved with it then why not?

James Blatch: We shouldn't be afraid to talk about the money, as well. Keeping a significantly larger percentage of the sale price of the book is a quicker route to the kind of liberation that Mark's enjoyed of quitting his job. And it is more difficult to do that, traditionally publishing. You have to sell, the math is simple, you have to sell a lot more books to have that kind of income.

Darren Hardy: Yes.

Mark Dawson: Absolutely, so, again you've got a lot of experience, and you've been on the ground for a long time now, so **what's the best story from an author's perspective, that you've heard?**

Darren Hardy: Wow. There's so many. I mean, yours.

James Blatch: Don't mention him.

Mark Dawson: Come on.

Darren Hardy: Sorry, sorry. But, yes, I mean yours is one that I'm constantly referring to because it is one of those that, clearly, you've put a huge amount of work into this and you shouldn't underestimate just how much focus you've had on the writing and on the business side.

But that classic situation, somebody on a train commuting in to work, sort of having some thought about wanting to publish a book and making it happen is incredible.

And there are so many others. Somebody we've spoken to many times, Louise Ross L.J. Ross, is a classic example of being on a train looking out a window, seeing, in her case, Lindisfarne Island thinking, "Somebody should write a book set there. Actually, why don't I write that book set there?"

That's fabulous story because it's just something that everybody will, no doubt, have done in their lives. Just looked out a window and thought, "Hmm, that's interesting."

And there are many, many others. I think the great thing is that these examples, it's not like there was some sort of unique epiphany that only you could have experienced, it's the sort of situation that anybody could have been in.

Now, it takes a certain tenacity to make it happen, but anybody could be in that situation. I think that's what's really inspiring, and that's what's really inspiring for me in the work that I do. I get to meet people like you, and many other authors, every day and every story I just think, "Yeah, isn't that incredible? That person's taken the opportunity and made it work for them."

As I say, it's not always necessarily about saying, "Great, thank you, I've got to Number One." It's just, "50 people have downloaded my book, isn't that amazing?" Yeah, if that's what you're looking for, that is amazing.

Mark Dawson: I even remember very vividly, actually, this is going back to 2012 now, I remember the first time I had a sale that I didn't think was from someone who I knew.

James Blatch: Your Mum.

Mark Dawson: My Mum, yeah. Buying lots of copies, that was a pretty amazing moment. Then the first time someone I didn't know signed up to my mailing list or left a review.

Those are small way points along the journey, but they were, at the time, they were as exciting as getting traditional deal or seeing my print books on storefronts and that kind of thing.

Darren Hardy: And I think that's one of the key things as an author, as a and aspiring author, as a budding author, to think about what it is that you want.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

Darren Hardy: Because, yes, you could think, "I want to be the world's most famous author." That's clearly a very big challenge to set yourselves. It may be, "I just want to sell 10 copies to people I don't know and get maybe one or two customer reviews." There's obviously a myriad of things in between those two points. Just sort of work accordingly. And that will determine part of your strategies, as it were, in terms of publishing. What do I want to get out of this as an author? Therefore, what am I prepared to put into it?

James Blatch: Yeah, that's something we often refer to on the podcast, isn't it? And J. Penn summed it up with that key question you have to ask yourself is, "What does success look like to you?" And once you've answered that, a lot of things become easier. It brings a focus to where you're going.

Mark Dawson: So, you mentioned a strategy. So, we have to take ... I'm going to stand in for James here, this is where James gets his money's worth. So, James is a new author, just working through his first book, hopefully he'll get it, he's very lazy, but he'll get it ready by the end of the year. What would your advice be to writers like James who are thinking now, "How should I publish my book?"

Maybe a common or traditional, and also then what the options are available independently.

Darren Hardy: I think one of the key things to bear in mind is to spend that time getting the book right. I think because the publishing process can be so quick and so simple, there's almost like a tendency to want to get to that as quickly as you can. But you really have to spend the time making the book as strong as you can and being really proud of it. I think that's one of

the things that we often hear from authors is making sure you've got the edit right. Making sure you're really happy with the cover design. And just because you can put it somewhere very quickly, don't think that the speed is the real aim. It's to put something out there that you can be proud of. So, I think yes, make the time, get the book right.

And then, as we've said, actually think about what your priorities are. Think about do you want to do certain things yourself? We often hear from people who've written a book, but maybe they have a background in marketing, maybe they have a background in graphic design or whatever it might be, so therefore they want to do the cover design.

Or they want to do their marketing plan. But equally, if there are certain areas that you are less comfortable with, do you want to try and outsource that? Do you want to hire somebody? Do you want to get some advice for those sorts of things?

The author community, especially the independent author community, is incredibly generous with its time and advice. Spend the time to think about what you want and get lots of advice about how best to go about that. Because I think there's very rarely one solution that fits for everybody. It's usually a question of well this is the bit I want in this area, this is the bit I want from that area. That is the package that's going to work for me, and that's what I'm going to go with.

And then learn and try and test. One of the great things about independent publishing is you have so much flexibility. If you try a certain price point and you don't think it's working for you then you can go back and change it. If you put up a product description and you think on reflection maybe that's not quite saying to my readers what I want to say, you can go back and change it. So, constantly see it as a learning process and calibrate it in the ways that are going to work for you.

James Blatch: The two strands to the business and the author both have their challenges, you must come across people ... The way you described yourself at the beginning as somebody surrounded by books and from a family that were readers and had books everywhere, I think some people might be a little surprised to think of you in Amazon. Probably the detractors think that it's full of young kids who don't care about the ... They see it as a product. It's digital business and some people do look at it rather negatively, actually. You obviously adore books and you come from that area and you almost represent the person who might struggle with the business side of things. Might struggle with all the technology. You obviously don't. You worked in the heart of it.

But that must be something your readers talk to you occasionally about but just don't understand it.

Darren Hardy: From a readers point -

James Blatch: Sorry, I meant writer's just ... I don't understand it.

Darren Hardy: Absolutely. With any profession, you have people in all sorts of different backgrounds. Looking at how they work in that profession. I think we're ... It's certainly something we're very mindful of is we're always looking to try to make the tools and processes as simple as possible. And try and explain them as clearly as possible. But of course, you have to deal with people with a lot of different backgrounds, and so it's not like a finished process where you think, "Okay, that's done, it's really simple we can now move one." We're constantly listening and trying to see how we can make things even better.

I think again as an independent author you have the choice. So, if you're thinking actually I want some technical advice about how to design a cover, let's say, then you have that opportunity. It's not that you have to do it in one particular way. Similarly, with the marketing side of things, there are plenty of people out there who will give you lots of advice about how to

market. Now, you can listen to that advice and decide whether it's right for you, but there's lots of help out there to help you make those decisions.

Whilst you're independently publishing, and there's that sense that you think, "Okay, I'm an individual publishing on my own," actually there's a huge community out there that you can engage with. Equally, if the idea of talking to any other person about your book is something you definitely don't want to do, then you don't have to either. You can work on your own and make it happen in the way that you want. It's one of those things where, again, you decide, it's for you to make that choice.

Mark Dawson: A few closing questions now, just in terms of best practice, what would you say is the error that you see most often in terms of books that are coming up on the platform?

Darren Hardy: I don't know. In terms of errors? I think the advice that we often hear is, make sure that you have spent time researching what you're doing. Treat it as a business. Mark, this is something that you've said many times. Treat it as a business and treat it seriously if you want to make a big impact or make a big impact with your publishing.

Think about your cover design, think about your product description. How's that going to work with your readers? And is it sort of conveying the messages that you want it to convey? I think the other thing is, again, think about how much work do you want to put into your publishing? We have all sorts of tools and processes, we have programs like KDP Select that you can use to try promotions. Many authors now are very busy, active on social media.

If you are serious about trying to become a Best-Seller in however you choose to define that, then it's going to take some work. So, you need to think about how that's going to happen. You can't just publish the book and then sit back and think, "Great, I'll now wait and then next week I will be at Number One and an International Best-Seller." So, if they're the kind of

things you're aiming for, then think about the plan. Put a plan together and structure it as you would a business.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, that's very good advice.

How many books are on the platform now, live?

Darren Hardy: That's a very good question. Millions. I mean, when you look at the Kindle store in the UK, there are millions of books on the website and clearly it continues to grow.

Mark Dawson: That's one of the things that I think quite strongly, that there's almost certainly been the next great British novel has probably been published in the last five years, has probably been published independently and probably, or might not, be noticed because their author isn't comfortable with the marketing side of things. You're right, it does need to be treated in a business-like fashion, if you want to sell significant amounts of copies.

Let's just say James is published, and he wants to get Amazon's attention, what would be the best way of doing that?

Darren Hardy: Well, I think the key thing is to get your reader's attention and build a readership for your book. So, I think the best ways of doing that are, again, assuming that you want to, is to start talking to your readership, create a mailing list, if that's what you want to do.

Create a Facebook page if that's what you want to do. We're always looking, as everybody does, we're always looking at the charts. You mentioned earlier around the nature of the people in the Amazon business and in Kindle Direct Publishing, there are many, many book lovers here and we're constantly debating the great new read that you've read or having an argument about a book that somebody loves and somebody else didn't

quite sort of warm to. So, we're always looking at what's in our charts and we're always looking at those authors that are seeing success.

The way that the Amazon website works is so much of it is driven by recommendation that's sort of tailored to the individual reader, the individual customer. So, if your book is being looked at by readers, is being bought by readers, that will enable our recommendation systems to then recommend that book to other readers.

You can sort of see the snowball then building in terms of getting in front of even more readers. Thinking about whether you want to participate with something like Kindle Unlimited, so joining KDP Select. Having that 90 day period of exclusivity in return for participating in KDP Select, having access to promotional deals, those sorts of things. All of that helps build that momentum and drive sales. It's well worth thinking about those.

James Blatch: Does the business, the way it's set out with the algorithms etc., lend itself more to clearly define genres than the kind of genre indefinable book?

Darren Hardy: That's a very interesting question. I think, the whole idea of having genre-based readers is becoming much more blurred now. I guess that idea that if you walked into a bookshop, or into a library, or into a physical location you'd have to have a certain organization to your shelving to make it browsable.

Online, you have infinite shelving. As a reader, you get recommendations based on all sorts of different parameters. I don't think it's as important, perhaps, but I think as an author if you're trying, especially if you're starting out, if you're trying to find a readership for your books, then you probably do need to have a reasonably clear idea of what type of reader you're aiming for. And that might be genre-based, it might be lifestyle-based.

It may be that you have written a book that you think would be really interesting for young Mums or retired people or whatever it might be. So, then your marketing strategy or you approach may differ, if that's the sort of area that you're going for. Genre's part of it, but I wouldn't say it's all of it.

Mark Dawson: James is pitching for RAF Veterans from the '60's. He used to like Vulcan bombers.

James Blatch: It's not as narrow as you think.

Mark Dawson: I should actually warn you, we spoke to Alex Clarke from Wildfire from Headliner, and James pitched his book and now Alex wants to read the damned thing. So, I'm sure before we leave the office today James will be in your ear about getting it in KDP.

James Blatch: Inundated with offers, yeah.

Mark Dawson: It's been really generous the time you've given us, Darren. We've been speaking for about an hour, so I think we'll wrap it up there. So, thank you, once again for taking the time.

James Blatch: Yeah, I meant what I said, it's really heartening to know that at the center of this big, digital, transformational business is somebody who loves books and sees the technology as an enabler of matching readers to writers. Which is how it should be. So thank you for your time.

Darren Hardy: No problem at all, thank you.

James Blatch: So, Darren Hardy at Amazon in London, obviously, one of the key guys in the UK for a large company. As you say, laid back guy and fascinating to talk to him. To talk to the horses mouth.

And they are such a large organization that for most authors, they never get that kind of personal relationship that you've got with them. And obviously

for people like Adam Croft and yourself, and people who've risen above the rest, if you like, the rest of us, that's a unique thing. But very good of them to come onto the podcast and share some of that background with us.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, they don't do it very often. I've only heard Darren on one podcast before, and I've keened to get him on because there's obviously lots of things that we can ask him.

Before we did the interview, I put a message into our Facebook group and asked for people to send in questions they'd like us to put to him. I think it's reasonable to say a fair number, perhaps half to 60% of those questions, could have been termed negative questions.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: Frustrations and why is it like this? And why can't Amazon do that? Which is fair enough.

What I think about, when I think about Amazon is they are the dominant player in the market, but I think they deserve that. They took a chance on the Kindle, however many years ago it was now, perhaps even pushing eight or nine years ago.

They developed the technology. They developed the best self-publishing platform and the KDP is a very, very easy platform to use. It's much easier than almost all of the other ones. They've got the biggest reach, you can publish worldwide with the click of the button. In literally 10 minutes really, once your assets are in place. That wouldn't have come cheap. Taking a risk on a piece of new kit, especially when you see people saying, "I'm never going to swap, I love my print book." I'm looking at my book now with print books and I love the smell of a book and I love the feel of a book.

I was one of those doubtful, very late adopters. I didn't get to Kindle until quite late. But Amazon gambled on that. Okay, so now they're the biggest player, but they deserve to be, when no one else was putting their neck on the line and developing something like that.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's always, always the case. Particularly, I think, it might be a British mentality. Often, I think of Coldplay as an example of this. If you do become a huge thing in your field, suddenly people decide they don't like you. It's an odd thing about Coldplay, you probably don't know them. But if you mention Coldplay within 30 seconds someone around you will say, "I hate Coldplay."

Mark Dawson: I hate Coldplay.

James Blatch: Yeah, there you go. I think it's because they're successful, because if I mentioned Jesus and Mary Chain, it's unlikely someone would say, "I hate Jesus and Mary Chain." They just wouldn't say it because they're not successful. When you are ... And Amazon are dominant and successful. You're always going to get some detractors because that's part of human nature. But they do it well. And as you say, they had a vision. I'm probably one of those people who sat around the ... Where we used to work in the BBFC, when they said people aren't going to be buying DVDs and Blu-Ray's in the future and I took a while to be convinced that you should invest in this area. There was no hesitation in Jeff Bezos's household where he decided this was almost certainly, as far as he was concerned, going to be the way it's going, and they put their eggs in that basket, and boy, it's paid off.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, as we say in Salisbury, "Haters gonna hate."

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: And that's fine, Amazon is an enormous company, obviously. Let's say something blindingly obvious. They're an enormous company with

enormous revenues. I've been to see their distribution center in Milton Keynes, and it's absolutely, it would blow your mind how big it is. It is so vast. Almost impossible to describe. And with that kind of success, inevitably, will come questions, and authors who are frustrated that they can't make their book sell. Sometimes they'll lash out and blame the platform rather than perhaps blame the book. Maybe it's a book problem or maybe it's a marketing problem.

So, I think, Amazon doesn't get everything right, there are issues with KU. I'm not in the Kindle Unlimited, for a number of reasons. The system has been scammed a bit recently by people uploading garbage, basically. And then click-farming all the way to the end of the book so they get their per pages read thing. Unfortunately, Amazon is trying to deal with that, it's a difficult problem to solve and in the sweep up some innocent authors have been caught up and had their books pulled. That's not great. There have been cases where slightly unpleasant emails have been, automated emails, go out when perhaps it wouldn't necessarily have been the thing to do.

That's an economy of scale thing. It would be very difficult for Amazon to employ a 100,000 customer service helpers -

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: To deal with those problems. I think a level of automation is necessary. You can usually get things appealed, you can usually reach a person by replying to those emails and get things fixed.

James Blatch: Yeah, it is without question, it is the number one struggle for companies that just grow to that scale is keeping some sort of personal ... You can deal with the routine, it's dealing with the things that are slightly outside the routine that becomes very people intensive. I've been in the wrong side of Ebay a couple of times. Innocently trying to sell something.

Mark Dawson: Oh, yeah.

James Blatch: Innocently selling something. Sellers decide to return it on spurious grounds, even though the description was accurate. And on both occasions, they immediately have ruled against me because they've just made this blanket decision that they're going to ... I don't know, if you Google this, I'm not the only one. I won't sell on Ebay anymore, and I think they have struggled to do that, struggled to bridge that gap. Why are you laughing?

Mark Dawson: Just thinking about your James Blatch adult toys.

James Blatch: That was not what I was selling. It was a MacBook Pro.

Anyway, so, but my feeling with Amazon is that they make earnest attempts to try and do that. I know it's frustrating, and there will be people who listen to this podcast who have had their accounts shut down through no fault of their own, and then struggled to get repairs, but, um -

Mark Dawson: Probably not. You don't hear that very often. That kind of draconian shut down is very unusual. They may have had issues that have needed to be remedied. One thing to say is, a really good way, if people are in London and they're going to the London Boat Fair, obviously, we'll be there.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: One thing I would recommend is, Amazon will be there, probably, I haven't had it confirmed yet, but I think it's in the author HQ. They have a lot of stuff. Darren will be there, and they are very approachable, very open to people going up to the stall, introducing themselves.

Come and meet us, I'd be happy to introduce anyone to the guys at Amazon. It's really good way just to, you know, get some advice from Amazon.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: They're very happy to reach out -

James Blatch: There's an opportunity to have a personal chat with someone from Amazon.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Yeah, so talking about LBF, the London Book Fair, if you're coming over to the UK, or you're in the UK and going to visit, we will be there for the three or four days of the week. And we're going to have a little get together on the Wednesday night. So, we're going to announce the venue in our Facebook groups, if you join, "Ads for Authors - Self Publishing Formula" and "Ads for Authors" Facebook group, or actually, we'll put it into all the groups, we'll give you the venue as soon as we resolve that. But we will go out and buy some drinks for people who've come up and said, "Hello" and identified themselves as SPF community members by, what do you say, one trouser leg rolled up and the secret handshake?

Mark Dawson: I need to work on that.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: One of James' elicite products ... You can wave your James Blatch love doll.

James Blatch: This is libelous. Do you know a lawyer?

Mark Dawson: I do. I am a lawyer.

James Blatch: Yeah. Exactly. Sue yourself.

Mark Dawson: It's not liable if it's true. Anyway ... Move on.

James Blatch: That's one of the defense ... Actually, that's not a defense of liable. The defense is you've got to be able to prove it whether it's true or not.

That's like course work.

Anyway, getting bogged down. Brilliant to have Amazon on the SPF podcast and thank you very much indeed to them for taking their time. We'll definitely revisit that in the future. We've got some exciting stuff coming up, we're going to really delve deeply into some paid advertising areas including, AMS, the new platform on Amazon, but also Facebook ads, in the next few weeks. We've got a very exciting Author interview coming up in the next few weeks, as well, with Holly Ward. One of the biggest selling romance authors on the planet. An absolutely lovely woman who does not do interviews very often, and did a brilliant interview for us, for SPF. So, very exciting. Thank you so much indeed for listening. You can get all the podcasts back on our website, selfpublishingformula.com

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Please do join our Facebook groups, our growing array of Facebook groups, whether they are specifically for your genre, or generally for advice, so Ads for Authors is probably the main one. What's the other one? Not genius because that's links the course, it's called 101. Is it called 101?

Mark Dawson: Yes.

James Blatch: So, if you're just starting out like me, the 101 Facebook is probably the place to go. If you're established, you've released one or two

books, you're getting into paid advertising, Ads for Authors is a very, very useful form to have your covers critiqued, your blurb critiqued, and you dive in quite often, I notice. Including on some quite big authors who post their covers, and you say, "Yeah, I don't love any of them."

Mark Dawson: Which is the only useful way to be in that form.

James Blatch: What's the point in touching someone up, be honest.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: But it's very useful. And that's one of the things we're most proud of, really, with SPF is you can do all of that for free. It can really help your career.

Thank you for listening. We'll be back next week.

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