

EPISODE 86: HOW TO ADMINISTER YOUR ADVANCE READERS – WITH CHRIS LEIPPI

Speaker 1: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a bestseller. Join James Blanch 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: Hello, and welcome to the Self-Publishing Formula podcast with James and Mark. The third edition from the new studio for our self publishing formula, and we have a special guest in the studio, if you're watching on YouTube.

Actually if you're listening, you may hear some snuffling.

Mark: That's John.

James: That's John. If you're watching, we have in the Blanch household a gorgeous puppy.

This is Pandora. Dora the Explorer, onto the podcast. She's so sleepy. I think she wants to go to sleep. Do you want to go to sleep? She does. You can hear her little snuffling on the audio, and you can see her on the YouTube channel. This will drive people to the YouTube channel. She's our beautiful little Labrador.

Mark: If that didn't work, John's taking his clothes off.

John: We tried that before.

James: Hi, sweetheart. Anyway, let's move on to more serious things, and I should let Dora go and have a little sleep in the movie. Yeah, welcome.

We're going to be talking Booksprouts. I love the name. That's a great name for a service, isn't it Mark?

Mark: I don't love it actually.

James: Don't you?

Mark: No, I don't know what sprouts have to do with books, whether the books are sprouting or ...

James: Well.

Mark: Don't know. We have to ask Chris that.

James: Well we do ask Chris that, and Chris Leippi, it's his brain child, and his service. It's an interesting concept.

I think it's something you're going to find useful. I'm going to hand it over to Chris in a moment and let Dora have a sleep, and when Chris has spoken, we'll come back and have a chat with you.

Chris: I grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan for most of my life. Eventually I went off to university in the city close by.

I started getting the desire to travel after that. I did some work experience programs in the west coast of Canada. Then eventually I went to Australia for a student exchange.

Following that, I started working in the government work, doing IT stuff. Got kind of bored. Eventually discovered self-publishing. Started writing books. Started making money to live off of.

Eventually I started Booksprout to start getting rid of some of the automation problems that I was running into.

James: You said very quickly that you started writing books and then started making money from it. So just give us a little bit of background on that.

What sort of books are you writing and how did you get going to the point where you could live off it?

Chris: Well these ones are actually erotica books. This was back in 2013, when nobody knew that you could make a pile of money at them, before Kindle Unlimited changed the market and everything. It took off really quickly for me. Yeah.

James: I think I read in your notes that you then moved over to romance from erotica.

Are you still doing a bit of both, or erotic romance?

Chris: It's mostly erotic romance now. Since Kindle Unlimited changed the game completely, I had to move over to something else, because it's tough to make the same kind of money as you were before.

Writing is my main bread and butter at the moment while I get Booksprout kick started. You still need money and stuff to eat, so that's what I was doing.

James: You said that you had some issues with some of the automation side of things. You had this brief background working in IT and the government, so you started thinking about ways of making the job easier.

What were the resistance points you were meeting that you thought you could solve?

Chris: So the big one when I transitioned into the longer form romance type books, was the ARC programs that you'd have to run.

If you want to hit the top charts, you've got to start giving people review copies. They've got to give reviews for you on the launch day and stuff like that. These are important obviously to instill reader trust and everything.

I found it quite time consuming because the way I was doing it, is I'd have a huge spreadsheet of my ARC team, like two to 300 members or whatever it was at the time.

I would send them all an email blast, say hey, do you want this latest book, here's the cover, the blurb, all that stuff. If you want it, reply to me, and I'll send it to you.

I did it that way because I didn't want my ARC team to turn into a free book service. I didn't want there to be a bunch of people sitting on there getting all my books for free just because they joined the team. I wanted to hold them somewhat accountable.

As soon as they would reply asking for the book, I would attach it individually to each email, and I would send it off to them, and then I would mark in my spreadsheet that they took it.

Obviously, as you can imagine doing this with 200 people, that takes a quite amount of time and is very repetitive. Those are basically the good points to automate really. Repetitive and tedious. Things can be automated quite easily. So that's what I did.

Then on every successive ARC, how I used to do it was I would just look at who took a book and who didn't review or give me a reason why they couldn't. I like to be lenient, so if they give a good reason, like their dog was sick or something, that's fine, really. Just something to keep me in touch, you know.

So if they didn't tell me why they couldn't review the book or if they didn't review the book, I wouldn't send them any further ARCs.

But now, Booksprout does that automatically for me. So readers, they download the book through Booksprout, they leave their review in Booksprout. They provide an Amazon review URL in Booksprout, or they can cancel their review promise right in Booksprout.

James: Before we go into some of the details about Booksprout, just explain what this is.

This is an app or is it a website you log into or how does it work?

Chris: It's actually both at the moment. There is an app. It's not for the ARC thing yet. The ARCs are completely on the website. I want to get them into the app obviously eventually. But things take a little time, and I thought it was better to launch it on the website, refine the process and stuff before putting it into the app as well. Right now the ARC is just on the website.

James: Okay. So Booksprout, and we'll come onto the business side of things, but once you're a member of Booksprout, would you upload your ARC team to that, and then what options have you got?

How do you actually manage them?

Chris: Actually, how it works is you sign up for Booksprout, you add a book, you give the details, like the blurb and stuff like that. Then you create an ARC for it.

You tell us where you want the reviews, when you want the reviews by, and then after you create the ARC, we give you a link to that ARC. It can either be private or public depending on your needs as an author.

Then this link you can share it with your team. They just come. They can create an account, get the ARC, and then it's all in there from then on.

James: That sounds really cool. Genuinely I can see straight away how useful that would be particularly as authors get busier.

I suppose the first book, we're all happy to do things by hand. It's that personal touch. It's second, third, fourth book and in Mark's case, gazillionth book where some kind of automation could be a bit of a life saver.

You got this up and running when? How long has it been going?

Chris: The ARC assistant, it's been up for eight months now I think. I don't even remember when I launched that. I started really promoting it though in June, actually of this year.

James: So quite recently.

Chris: Yeah. I was focused the first few months on it. I was doing just beta testing with a few authors, a few bigger authors. They're in there, ARC teams of like 200 people just to make sure everything's working.

Fixing all the little bugs and stuff because you don't want to launch to a whole pile of people and get 600 ARC reviewers in there right away and discover like what I did was that the emails, they would send, I sent, I think 10 emails to each ARC reviewer for the same thing because there was too many of them on one of the teams, and it caused an error, so it didn't know that it sent them before.

James: Okay.

Chris: But all that type of stuff is cleared up.

James: The beta testing.

From a member of the ARC team's perspective, what does it look like?

Chris: There's a demo I can send to you later if you want to take a quick run through it, but basically what it is is you get the link the new author sends you. It shows you the book cover. It shows you the book blurb and the genres that it's in.

Then if you like the sound of it, and you want to participate in that ARC, you can click the 'Get This ARC' button. That takes you to the download page where you can choose to send it to your Kindle.

You can download it directly from the website or you can send it to your email. Then after that, you get the book, you read it, you can leave your review right away, right in the Booksprout website.

Then when the book goes live, the author will enter the Amazon URL.

James: So on that first email that delivers the book, there's also the link to leave the review and so on.

Does the system automatically chase people out, does it know when they've left a review?

Chris: Yeah, it keeps track of who's left a review, who hasn't, and on which websites. What it does is once the author has the book published, it sends everybody a reminder email who hasn't already reviewed the book. Then it follows up again two days later.

James: I really love this. It sounds like a really cool way of doing things.

How much does it cost?

Chris: Right now, it depends on how many ARC reviewers you have on your team. So I'm keeping the pricing pretty low right now to get word of mouth kick started.

It's 10 bucks a month if you have less than 50 reviewers on your team. It's 20 bucks a month for unlimited reviewers. There's also a free plan, too, if you have less than 20.

James: Oka, so very small team.

Do you sign up for a period of time during a launch and then let that subscription lapse until your next launch, or do you have to keep it going the whole time? How does it work?

Chris: It's up to the author. You can obviously cancel or resubscribe at any point if you want. It's better for me obviously if you keep the subscription going, but that's for the prolific authors I should say, the ones who are writing one per month. They got the subscription. They just leave it going.

But if you're only releasing for a month, subscribe for a month, run your ARC, unsubscribe right after. That's fine.

James: So there is an option for people, particularly if they're just starting out, really looking at keeping costs low, and then you and they will both be delighted when it doesn't really matter to them that they keep the subscription going because they're doing bigger business and 10 bucks a month, it's a coffee and half at some of the places I drink coffee at. Great.

Love it. I love the idea of it. It sounds simple, and a good solution to what is a problem for indie authors.

We've talked ARCs right from the beginning, but we haven't really explained what that is. I am conscious that not everybody understands all

the lingo, the way that you and I and Mark talk about running your indie publishing world. But we're talking about an advanced reader.

What does the C stand for actually?

Chris: Copies is what I've always used.

James: Okay, Advanced Reader Copies. An advanced reader team.

I know lots of authors absolutely swear by them, not just as you said in terms of getting visibility for your book and then getting a good launch, but actually in shaping the book.

We've got a first time author, Andrew, who lives quite close to me here in the UK, and he's just posting on our Facebook groups at the moment about finally getting his book, *The Last Nazi*, published, and he's fantastically got into one of the Amazon charts, so well done to Andrew.

All excited having seen him picked up the 101 course and followed that through, but I noticed that he mention how important the advanced reader team was for him in shaping the book in the last part of that, in feeding back on that stuff.

That's the general gist of it. I mean you are a user of advance reader teams.

Explain to us how it's affected your writing and business.

Chris: Actually, for me, it was mostly about publicity on launch day. I really liked having the reviews to have this person said this about the book. It gives really good social proof as well when you got 80 or 100 reviews on your book.

But one thing I've noticed lately is people are leaving their reviews early for me, so if there's typos or the color of somebody's eyes change or

something like that, I can go back and fix that before I actually publish, so it has started to shape my books as I mature in my writing and everything like that.

James: Yeah, really useful. Have you used them right from the beginning?

When you started, you say you started before KU when there was a bit of an explosion of particularly erotica because I guess there was the whole Kindle thing, wasn't it?

It was sitting on a train rather than sitting there with a big book and very obvious picture on the front of what you're reading. The Kindle made it possible to be a bit more discreet about what you're reading. I think that was probably the starting point for the growth in that area.

At that point, did you right from the beginning work this stuff out about using advanced reader teams?

Chris: No, at the beginning, I was actually lucky with my computer background. I was able to figure out the Amazon keywords thing, so back then it was not really known very well.

Not many people knew how to do the key words properly. A lot of people would just leave them blank, but they were the most important thing in my whole publishing process. I was able to leverage those, and I didn't need the ARC teams until I moved to longer form books.

James: Okay. And so you got going, and started to work out one or two of these other techniques in the area, and then you say KU changed the nature of the business for you.

In terms of your author business, has that taken a big hit you haven't recovered from or are you still making money, living off your writing?

Chris: Well to be honest, it kind of took it back to pre KU levels, before KU even happened.

But the first iteration of KU was a really big gold mine for those of us in the erotica area because people were just borrowing the books like crazy, and you'd get two bucks for each borrow. So that was fantastic.

But obviously, Amazon saw that there was a problem there and they fixed it. So that didn't last too long.

James: Right. That was a shame for you. So where are you now?

Chris: I'm sitting at around a livable income. Me and my girlfriend, we still travel and everything, so I'm still able to support myself on it. I'm not living the go down to the restaurant and drink a glass of wine or something every night anymore. I am comfortable enough to be keeping doing it I guess.

James: But here you are now with another venture business on the side, which is increasingly what we do see quite a lot of authors do and particularly if they've got some kind of expertise in the background, such as IT, and they think they can make life easier for each other.

It's one of the things actually I love about the community is that people like you see a problem and think well actually, there's a synergy there because starting a service that might bring me in some money and help other people with their jobs and with their careers. That's great.

So we've talked about the advanced reader team, and I think it's a really important area, probably one we could pick up and just do a single podcast on at some point in the future. I'm glad we've covered it in some detail today.

You're probably thinking a bit broader than that as well for your app and the website?

Chris: Yeah, there's a few different features on it. Two of the major ones are the app.

As of right now, there wasn't really any way for authors to get mobile notifications, so that would work out like 10,000 bucks or something. The other guy that you had on the podcast is trying to bring that price down as well.

The Booksprout app comes in for the authors who don't want to forego any money on an app and don't want to take time to regularly put out content on the app.

If you don't keep people engaged in an app, it's just taking up space on a phone, and it's going to go bye bye. It's going to get uninstalled.

By having a bunch of authors in one app, people are less likely to uninstall it. They're more likely to keep it.

You can still send the same push notifications whenever you release a book, have a deal, it's completely free, the app. I decided to keep it that way because it just didn't make sense to charge for it while it's still in its really big infancy.

I would actually like to keep it that way. I don't plan to charge for the app to send messages to your followers because well, it made everybody upset when Facebook made that you got to pay to reach people who actually like you. It kind of seemed stupid. So I want to keep that free.

But yeah, lets authors send push notifications for their books to their fans.

James: How can people get started?

Chris: You just sign up on booksprout.co.

- Create your author profile.
- You add a pen name.
- You add a book you want to create a promo for, and you create a promo when you are running a 99 cent or free or really any promo, if you're doing any kind of a push on a book, you can add it in there.

The more people that view your book, the more it gets discovered in the discover section.

Right now, I'll be honest, it's mostly the erotic romance type readers in there. So if you're in that genre, it can probably be of some benefit to you. There's not a lot of other genre authors who have picked it up yet.

I would like to see that start happening, obviously, but just for full transparency, I don't want people to jump in there and get disappointed that it didn't help them at all. So yeah. You'll get a few extra views and a few extra clicks on your book for no extra charge at all.

James: It's early days so you will expand genres, I'm sure.

Chris: Yeah.

James: So in terms of Booksprout, how have you divided this up?

Is it a single subscription that covers all of the services or the advanced reader control group?

Chris: Yeah, so right now it's just the 20 or 10 or free dollars a month. You just pay that. Everything is included. The free plan includes the app.

You just can't run two promotions on a single day. That's the main limitation of that. If you're just a new author, this isn't going to affect you, but as you get bigger, you might want to run a few promotions on the same book.

Then it's also got the give away feature in there as well, so everything is bundled into one price.

James: Okay, great. Well, intriguing that you've set this up. We'll be very interested to get some feedback from our listeners, the one who are taking this up.

It's one of those things I think people do in different ways. Some people have spreadsheets. Some people do it from Mail Chimp in segmented groups and so on, their mailing list.

Chris: Yeah, definitely.

James: I think one of the great things about this is this automatically chasing people up who haven't posted reviews yet.

That's got to increase your chances of getting reviews because a lot of people may well have good intentions when they take the book to do a review, but it's a prompting down the line that's actually going to bring the review out of them.

Chris: Yeah. Actually, **I noticed my own review rate increased from around 50 to 60% when I was doing it myself to about 80, 83.** So that's the average that all authors are getting on the Booksprout.

James: Wow, that makes perfect sense. I can imagine that happening. Great, well Chris, it's been really good to talk to you.

We don't talk to many male authors who write erotica and erotic romance. I'm sure you're out there.

Chris: Oh we are. There's a ton of us.

James: Yeah. The ones who end up on the podcast that we meet tend to be female writers in that genre. But it's a successful bountiful genre.

We've got several people who've bought courses from SPF or have come on to the podcast who I know make very good livings from it. I'm pleased to hear it's still going well despite some of the challenges that have been thrown at you.

Chris: Yep.

James: Great. Chris, thank you very much indeed for joining us today. Just give us a final plug for the website and how people can get there and where they need to go to have a look at it.

Chris: Sure. So the ARC team automation we talked about; that's basically just manage your ARC team. You can be hands off, do your ARC's in 10 minutes.

There's the app, which you can go in there, send push notifications. Apple and Google have done a good job of making those pretty urgent, so people are going to check them. They're going to look at your book right away. Then there's the give aways.

We didn't really talk about that too much, but readers, when they sign up to your newsletter or follow you in the app, you can choose whatever you want.

They can choose any book they want from you in exchange for their email or whatever. It's free if you're just an author starting out, 10 bucks a month if you're kind of a mid range author, and 20 bucks a month if you're doing pretty good.

You can find me at booksprout.co. I can personal be reached at chris@booksprout.co. I look forward to hearing from all of you.

James: Chris, it's been brilliant to have you on. We had a couple technicals that you heroically got over right at the beginning, so thank you for that. Good luck with the venture. What a great idea.

Chris: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure being on, and thank you for having me.

James: Chris Leippi. So that's another example isn't it, Mark, of people who are authors who work in a community or it is a community, of the wider community of self published authors who just think, do you know what this would be useful, I'm just going to do it.

Chris has got off his backside, and he has created a service. I mean the advanced reader team is an important part. Oh he's opened the door in the middle of our ... I thought that was a strange noise there. John made a magical appearance without the puppy.

The advanced reader teams are an important part for most self published authors. I'm guessing quite a few don't use them at all, but a lot of people do. We've talked about them before.

Not only are they very useful in marketing terms. They can be useful in editorial terms and shaping your book. The all important launch sequence. So to have a way of managing that, and I love the automation aspect of it.

I loved the little prompts that members of the team get if they haven't read the book, haven't clicked on the link and downloaded it.

And suddenly, as Chris said, he was seeing, instead of a 30 or 40% take up of people reading his book, that was doubling, and while that's only going to add value to your book, isn't it?

Mark: Yeah, it is. Chris emailed me originally to see if I was interested, and I actually wasn't. I do think it's a good service, and Chris knows what he's doing.

He's put together a really nice product, but philosophically, I approach my advance team in a very laissez faire, hands off fashion. I give them a book, and really if they want to review it, that's great. That's a bonus. If they want to buy it when it comes out, that's a second bonus.

But I'm not one of these authors who will remove people from the team if they haven't left a review. I feel that's slightly not really what the deal is for me. I don't like to put obligations on like that.

But you know, horses for courses, there are plenty of other authors who do it the other way around and will be fairly ruthless about cutting those teams to take people out who don't leave reviews. I don't think there's a right or wrong answer.

James: Right. And you don't have to do that with Chris's service, but it gives you the data you need if you do want to do some cutting.

Mark: It does. This is just for me. I love stats, and obviously, I'm pretty big on numbers and spreadsheets and things like that.

But when it comes to the relationship between me and effectively my super fans. I personally don't want to reduce that down to statistics. It doesn't work for me.

But I do think it is a really good tool, allowing things like mobile notifications is a really good idea to cut through lost emails and stuff like that. So it's a really good tool.

I definitely recommend people look at it. It won't be for everyone, and it's not personally for me. But that's not to say that it wouldn't be for plenty of authors out there.

James: Okay. All right. Thanks, Mark. Good luck to Chris. We'll see how that develops in the future.

You heard the address in the interview, but if you just google Booksprout, you will get to the site, if that's something you want to have a look at.

I have to say, from where I'm sitting, it's a little bit ahead of me. But I like that idea of it. I like the idea of having a system that's going to control the advanced reader team for me, so I think it's going to be horses for courses, and I think some people will really like it, and as you say, some people will have a slightly different approach to it.

But good luck, Chris. He's a good guy, and he's entrepreneurial, which we like as well. He's done that with his approach to writing as well as his approach to this latest service.

Now, we like entrepreneurial people, and we like them to be well equipped, and that's why we have a series of books available to you, you dear SPF listener. We talked about editing maxims last week.

We've got something called the vault, which is a collection of these podcasts. I mean that covers every subject under the sun to do with self publishing and including some great author interviews, but tactical advice on things like social media, advertising, and organic social media, tactical advice on book cover design and so on.

All of that is in text form so it's searchable and you can reference and search for it in your own time. If you want a copy of that book, it is selfpublishingformula.com/vault, V-A-U-L-T the sort of thing you were

forced to jump over as a child in gym at school. Is that a vault, or is that spelled differently? Everyone's looking confused.

Mark: You vault over something. You vault over a box. It's not called a vault.

James: That's called a horse, isn't it?

Mark: Oh my goodness.

James: Is it called a horse?

John: Yeah.

James: You vault over the horse. You shouldn't pummel the horse. This is an animal friendly environment.

Mark: We start with puppies, we're ending with horses.

James: This is a safe space. Is Pandora back in her little cage? Is she happy? Good.

John, I'm definitely going to have to search you on the way out because there's a decent chance he's going to take Dora with him. I hope you enjoyed the little appearance from Pandora.

Thank you very much indeed for listening. We'll speak to you again next week.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to the self publishing formula podcast. Visit us at selfpublishingformula.com for more information, show notes, and links on today's topics. You can also sign up for our free video series on using Facebook ads to grow your mailing list. If you've enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. We'll see you next time.