

## PODCAST 12: WRITING SYSTEMS, CREATIVE APPROACHES – WITH JOHN P. LOGSDON

Hello and welcome to episode twelve from the Self-Publishing Formula podcast.

Speaker 2:

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:

Yes, hello. Welcome to the SPF podcast. Here we are again, Mark and James Blatch. Have you had a good week, Mark Dawson?

Mark:

I have. I've been very, very busy James. We're recording this slightly ahead of broadcast date. I've been very, very busy with the final edits and working with my launch team for the launch of the new Milton book, which will be going out the day that this podcast goes live.

James:

Yeah. We should say we are recording this about six days, if my math works, ahead of Friday, which is the day that you are launching your latest book, which is exciting. The real exciting thing, and I know this because we share a DropBox file where we put together our audio for the podcast and I can see it filling up hour by hour, day by day, with you recording exactly what you're doing in your launch sequence, exactly the process you're going through. I'm quite excited, as a new author, to listen to the nitty-gritty of how you launch a book.

Mark:

Yeah, it's been good fun. Every step along the way I've kind of opened the file up and recorded a few thoughts, which it's been useful for me as well just to kind of put that down and think about it a bit. Yeah, it's going very well and I'm reasonably confident that it will be a good launch. I'm not going to kind of hang my colors to the mast and say where I think it will end up. I'm hoping for kind of within the top hundred and fifty on the Amazon.com store. Yeah, we'll see. It's been good fun. I think the episode will be very interesting for people who want to know how I launch books.

James:

Yeah. What number John Milton book is this?

Mark:

This is the ninth novel, so the eleventh book in total.

James:

Okay. You had to think about that, didn't you? You've written so many of them. For those of us who read Milton, can you give us a quick top nine? Is there something exciting that happens? You're not killing him off or anything like that? That would be a spoiler.

Mark:

I have to tell you I'm not going to be dropping any spoilers, but it's fun. It's called "The Jungle" so people can probably guess where ... Certainly Europeans will know where that's most likely set. He travels around France and Italy. He goes to Libya so there's a lot set in Tripoli which was quite fun to write about. There's a really good fight scene it that you'll remember James from when we were working at the BBFC ... If I said a famous David Cronenberg film with Viggo Mortensen ...?

James:

Yes, I'm aware.

Mark:

“Eastern Promises”, a fight scene in a Turkish bath where Viggo is completely naked and takes out two folks who have knives. Really, really good film and a great scene so that was the inspiration for one of the scenes in the Milton book.

James:

Naked fighting. A lot of women in love. I think there’s a lot of your ... What’s normally locked inside your head coming out here. You should be careful how much comes out.

Mark:

Yes.

James:

Okay, well you’re launching a book and it’s such a key part of marketing. It’s its own art form I think in the way that you launch a book. That’s an episode definitely to look forward to in the future. Last week we did a sort master class episode on mailing lists. We’ve got another one coming up in a couple of weeks. What we’re doing now is going to talk ... Actually, we’re going to be a little bit, unashamedly, a little bit about SPF now because today’s guest is somebody who Mark and I got to know through Mark’s course on Facebook Advertising for Authors. He’s turned out to be somebody who very quickly has become a help guru within the self-publishing community, SPF in particular but wider than that as well. He’s somebody who understands how systems work and makes them work and he’s very interesting about the way he applies this. We wanted to talk to him because A, to find out how he got stuff working and B, how he approaches writing ... It turned out he’s very interesting on the way that he actually writes as well.

I keep saying “he”. I should say it’s John Logsdon is the name of the guest who’s coming up in just a moment. I just wanted to mention a moment the community, the SPF community, but also the wider self-publishing community. We’ve mentioned this before, but it’s such a joyous thing to be in contact with other people going through the same things as you, having the same anxieties, but also finding the same solutions. I know you did your Facebook Q&A on Friday and I see that went really well, didn’t it.

Mark:

It did, yes. In a bit of context I did some Q&As on Periscope last year, which is Twitter's live video streaming service. That was great fun. The people who, some regulars came along last night watched as I drink gin and tonic and answered questions about self-publishing. Facebook's rolled out its live video more widely now so we decided, given that our presence is biggest on Facebook, that we'd do it on Facebook this year. I was on between 10 PM UK and ten past eleven and had loads and loads of people either along for the whole hour and a bit or popping in and popping out. People left ... I think over a hundred of questions were left. We got through a good number of those. It was really, really fun. I love doing that kind of stuff. There were some really interesting questions that had me thinking as well.

We're going to be doing that again ... We'll probably do it all the way through May and into June I think. Friday nights if people are around and they want to ask me a question about anything to do with self-publishing really ... Marketing especially, but I'll answer other bits and bobs as well. The place to find us is on the Self-Publishing Formula Facebook page. Not the two groups that we've got, the actual public page, which I think you can find at [Facebook.com/selfpublishingformula](https://www.facebook.com/selfpublishingformula) I think. If you're a fan of that page you will be notified when I go live, but it'll be around about 10 PM UK time which I think is 5PM eastern. James will correct me if I'm wrong on that one.

James:

Yeah, that's correct.

Mark:

I'm pretty sure.

James:

I know you get confused with time. Yeah, you had loads of people watching and loads of questions and that's a good thing. It is because we know that we need to assimilate knowledge to get things right in this field, but I really love the way that people help each other and you, Mark, in particular, I think you put a lot of stuff out there. We should say that we've created a YouTube channel as well over the last few months, which is a part of us

getting to grips with YouTube advertising. We're starting to upload some quite useful material to the YouTube channel. If you just search The Self-Publishing Formula, you will probably find it on YouTube. Again, there's a couple of help videos there now and there's going to be more in the future. Let's move on to John Logsdon and let me trail ahead a little bit because in a couple of weeks we're going to be speaking to Adam Croft, who's another student of the Self-Publishing Formula. This has been a huge year for Adam. He's a student who came on board with SPF in autumn of last year and has had just incredible success since that point. In fact, this week he has been posting on social media that he has been in the top twenty overall rankings on paperback for Amazon, Amazon using I think they're own imprint. Yes, I've got a copy of his book here so I should look, but I'm sure it's the Amazon imprints that's published his book.

Mark:

Yeah.

James:

Yeah, the overall top twenty. I think he's close to the top ten now. I think he's a couple behind the latest Harry Potter book and that's absolutely fantastic, isn't it?

Mark:

Yeah, he's done fantastically well. He basically leveraged a deal with ... I think it's at Thomas & Mercer, which is the imprint that I'm on with Amazon just because he got so much amazing visibility from the Facebook campaigns he was running to push one of his books right to the top of the charts. Amazon noticed, reached out to him, and the rest is history. This is a good demonstration of what happens when you have Amazon's marketing muscle, Facebook's marketing muscle, everything pointed in the same direction. The results can be really impressive.

James:

Yeah, so we're going to hear from Adam in a couple of weeks. Let's move on to tonight's interview. John P. Logsdon. He writes science fiction. They're all humorous. He has fantasy series as well. He's a super interesting guy to talk to and I think you're going to enjoy the interview.

Okay, so we are joined by John Logsdon. John, you're over there on the east coast of the United States?

John:

That's correct. I'm in the Raleigh, North Carolina area. It's about six hours, I should say, south of Washington, DC.

James:

Okay, six hours south of DC on the east coast in North Carolina. Your book world takes us beyond the lake and sea straightaway. In fact, I must confess ... Full confession at the beginning. I haven't read any of your books yet, John, but you are on my list because Douglas Adams was an idol of mine, my favorite writer of all time, and I can see lots of Adams' influence in your book, particularly the "Platoon F", which I am itching to get my teeth into. If you scan your mailing list, you will find a recent addition which is my name. I'm going to get into your books in the next few weeks, but what we want to talk to you about and one of the main reasons we've got you on here is because ... Again, full confession, the reason that we know each other and you've come into our sphere is because you actually bought into Mark's course that was launched last year. You were somebody who we noticed adopted things very quickly, got to grips with things quickly, and not just in our area on our course, but in other areas of self-publishing as well. You're a bit of a Mr. Help guy. Everyone sort of comes to you to get things sorted and you're very helpful at doing that.

Your own journey as a writer is an interesting one and I think you're at a stage where ... Probably a bit ahead of quite a lot of people and then a little bit further back from people like Mark and so on, but an interesting phase. You've got almost one foot into kind of full-time writing. You're not too far away. We're going to talk to you on the podcast about how you got there, about your approach to writing in particular because you're quite prolific, and little bits and pieces about how you approach the marketing side of things if that's okay.

John:

Sounds great.

James:

Great, okay. Shall we start with your background? I know you've worked in

IT and video games. You've got quite a history in video games. We haven't got time to go into all the details of that.

John:

That's where my background comes for writing is really television, movie and games. It's not necessarily reading other authors. A lot of people think that what I write comes from Terry Pratchett and such. Actually the truth behind that one is I released "Ononokin", the first book called "A Quest of Undoing" and the second book, "The Full Moon Event" and I also released "Starliner" before I'd ever heard of Terry Pratchett.

A friend of mine in Scotland actually had been reading "A Quest of Undoing" and he said that the wizard reminded him of "Rincewind" and he said I should check out Terry Pratchett. I said, "I don't know what "Rincewind" is but okay." I picked up the book "Thud" and then of course I'm hooked. At that point I read everything by Terry Pratchett. My books actually aren't influenced by Terry Pratchett. They are somewhat by Douglas Adams. I won't say that they're heavily influenced. Honestly my real influences come from things like Monty Python, Benny Hill, Naked Gun, Airplane, movies like that. Just the crazy over-the-top stuff from television and movies. That's really where it comes from. Of course now there's getting a little bit more when it comes to other authors, but primarily it's TV and movies.

James:

Comedy bigger than science fiction in your motivation, I think you quoted "Austin Powers" as well and "Red Dwarf" and "Futurama". These are all very comedic.

John:

Completely what has influenced all of my writing. Actually it's also what influenced my ability to write fast, which we'll talk about I guess in a little bit, but yeah. It all comes from that.

James:

Let's get on to that because I think that's one of the areas that people like to talk to you about and we certainly do as well. You can be a prolific writer. I think you consider five thousand words a day as kind of the lower end of what you want to do. How do you do that, John? You're still working, right?

John:

Yes, I'm still working full-time. It's tough. One of the things that I've learned to be very good at, and this all came from working in California at a startup, was you have to learn how to be very efficient. You need to learn processes that work for you. Everybody else has tons and tons of processes ... One of the points, for example, why I adopted Mark's course so easily was because his process worked for me. I tried many others but his was the only one that really clicked with me. That's just my personality type. Whenever I see something that can be done faster, more efficient, while still allowing me to retain quality because that's a big deal ... If it makes my stuff terrible, I'm not going to do it. It has to retain that quality. That's what I gravitate towards.

What I did was basically I'd started out writing the traditional way. I sat down and I tried to write this big outline. I had created character profiles. I went through all of that because every single book out there said this is what you're supposed to do so I did. It took me forever to do that. Then I wrote out the book and when I was done the book was horrible. I then tried it again with the book "Starliner" and after about a year and a half I finally got the guts to say, "Okay, I'm going to turn this over to the editorial department." They got it back to me in about ... I guess it was around three months later and essentially said, "Don't quit your day job." I was like, "Oh, great." Honestly I kind of put it aside for a couple of years. The ego was a bit crushed on that.

Then I said, "You know, I think the biggest problem is I'm spending too much time trying not to be me. I need to be who I am with what I'm writing." I was trying to write literature and I don't write literature. I write stories. Anyway, I said, "I'm going to go back to what I did in the games industry." Here's what I do now. There's a program out there that's free. It's called Trelby, that's T-R-E-L-B-Y. It is a scripting program, so for writing movie scripts or TV scripts and such. What I do is I start there. I basically just start scripting up some stuff where I put in character names and dialogue. You don't have to worry about description, you don't have to worry about setting up your scenes too much. It's just a quick one-line. "They're in a spaceship." That's it. There's your scene.



Then you just sit there and kind of go back and forth with the characters discussing things to each other. What that does for me is that allows me to say, "Who does this character sound like? Is it somebody famous? Is it somebody I know?" We all say in our books, "Anything is purely coincidental," but that the same time we all basically base our characters at least loosely on somebody we know or some stereotype of what we know. I'll sit there and I'll go back and forth between these two characters or three or four, whatever, and I start learning who they are, what they're like, everything else. This is when I'm starting a series, by the way. At this point now I get the idea of who does this character look like in my head, what do they sound like. I also do character voices. I'll sit around and I'll also start reading that script to myself so I can build that voice in my head. Even if you're not great at voices, just getting the voice in your head ... For example, let's say ... Are you guys familiar with Fletch?

Mark:

Yes.

James:

Yeah, yeah. Chevy Chase.

John:

Yes. Just imagine one of your characters and then you basically say, "You know what, he doesn't act like Fletch but he sounds like Fletch." Then you say, "Okay, now this person sounds like Gandalf, this person sounds like ..." You can just keep doing this. All of a sudden you start having this feeling of, "I know exactly who this character is." When I start writing that character, I can see the character, I can hear the character. I know what they're like. They might be Fletch's voice with Gandalf's personality, which is kind of weird, but you see what I'm saying. You've built this and it's all done through scripting as opposed to I'm building out this massive scene which you may just throw away. That alone allows me to get into the process very quickly. After I've done that then I say, "Okay, I'm ready to start the first book."

At this point I usually sit with my co-author and we just bounce ideas, but you can bounce ideas off of your friends or your spouse or whatever. Who cares? You're just bouncing ideas back and forth and you're having fun

doing it. He and I will sit there and do that. What we'll do is we'll do an outline but it's very, very loose. It's basically one or two sentences per scene, that's it. Just straight through one or two sentences. We have an idea of what the characters are like, we know how they're going to interact, so that's not a big deal. We just want to make sure the story arc works, that we're not missing anything. We go through that process. That takes me probably about, I don't know, I'd say two hours to write out a script, maybe three. I'm sorry, not a script, an outline. About three hours. Then I hand it off to him, he looks at it, I look at it and a few days later we come back and we tweak it a little bit and then we say, "Okay, we're ready to go."

At this point I go back into Trelby and I have the outline to my left and I start literally just writing the script. I'm not worried about details, I'm not worried about anything else. I can get through that script for a sixty thousand word book, which probably is going to be around a hundred and fifty to two hundred pages of script, is going to be probably about a week is all that'll take me to do. When that week is up, now I have a full script. At this point I can bring that script into Scrivener ... You can also write scripts in Scrivener, by the way, I just don't personally like their layout. You can bring that script into Scrivener and then that's when you start building your entire story around that script. Your script is not going to be final. As you're typing things away ... You've always written most of the dialogue, but you're going to have to change things based on when people come in and so on and so forth.

By doing it that way I'm able to focus on what I'm really good at and that is dialogue. I'm not fantastic at writing descriptions or scenes and everything else. That's not my strong suit. I can do it but it takes me longer to do that. It's really hard when I try to write those descriptions and then I'm just itching to get to the dialogue but I can't because I have to first write the description. This is what got me doing it scripting first. Again, I said I'm a TV/movie guy, so write scripts. Then I can make those scripts into full scenes, making a whole "movie" in the book at that point. Does that make sense?

Mark:

Yeah, that's pretty good and that's not too far away from something that I

do. Dialogue is always a good jumping off point for me. You just get conversation between two characters. I have a rough idea of where the story is set and I'll have a kind of a start, middle and end point so I know where I'm going, but if I wanted to actually get started, the best way is just to imagine that you're observing a conversation between character one and character two and then just seeing where it goes. Yeah, that's a really good tip. I've never heard anyone take it to that extent before, but it's working brilliantly for you so it's a really interesting system.

John:

The other thing, I don't know if a lot of folks are using Scrivener out there or not, but there's a tool inside of Scrivener that allows you to gauge how fast you're writing. I believe it's in the tools. It's around the project statistics area. You can set it up to see how fast you're typing.

James:

I don't look!

John:

This is really key because I was doing about I guess around three hundred to five hundred words an hour or something like that when I started and then I found this tool. Then I said, Okay, I want you to start working on throwaway stuff, nothing I'm going to use, but I want you to try to write as fast as you can and then see where you're making mistakes, where's your quality issues and so on and so forth, because it was all about quality assurance also to make sure to do this. Now at this point I can do between two and three thousand words an hour and at quality that I find almost acceptable. Not quite, but almost. I will go back and tweak and all that anyway, but I can do around two to three thousand words an hour, especially in a book where I genuinely know the characters. "Platoon F", no problem. Actually, the last book in "Platoon F" I was actually able to bear down and write on it. It was sixty-two thousand words I think it was and I wrote that in four days.

Mark:

Wow.

James:

That's because so much of it is already formed in your head. You're in the

universe and the writing part comes as a natural flow to you. It's interesting to listen to the two of you talk about that because Mark, you've developed a system in a way of getting into the writing process. Other people will do a little bit of what you're talking about, but your approach ... Is that almost something that you could write down and hand out as the Logsdon method or something, as something so people ...? It's almost "template-able", isn't it? The way you've set it up for us?

John:

Yeah. Actually it's something that we'll probably put up on our site at some point and talk to how to do it. We've talked about it on ... I run a podcast although with a friend of mine, Ben Zackheim who does books. He and I have done a book together as well so we've talked about it a few times there in the past, but we haven't talked about it recently. It's definitely different than a lot of people are used to, but once you get used to it it's actually pretty cool.

James:

Okay. Talk a little bit about your back catalog there. "Ononokin", is that how to pronounce the the title?

John:

It depends on where you're from. It's interesting. Everyone in the UK calls it that, which I find fascinating. Over here it's "Ononokin", but I like the way that you guys pronounce it better. Actually the gentleman who does my narration for the "Ononokin" series ... I'm trying to say it your way. He's the one who first pronounced it that way for me and I was actually kind of taken aback and said, "You know, it sounds posh when you say it. When I say it it just sounds American." I definitely prefer the way that you say it, yes.

James:

There is an English thing that we pronounce the back end of words more prominently than most European countries as well actually. I used to work in news and we had this with things like Slobodan Milosevic. We always used to say that until someone told us it's Slobodan Milosevic. What's the other one? Maria Sharapova. Sports people in the UK still say Maria Sharapova but she will always call it Sharapova because that's how you say it in Russian. Anyway, it's obviously inbuilt somewhere into us to stretch out

the second half of every word. Anyway, that's one series and the "Platoon F" is a separate series as well. How many books have you got in both of those?

John:

In "Ononokin" we've got four and we've got three more planned for this year. I'm not sure if we're going to hit three this year but we're going to try. For "Platoon F" I just released book number eight and we have one more planned for this year, which is going to actually take the story arc from book one all the way through book nine. That's going to be done hopefully in the next, I would guess, four or five months.

Mark:

Wow.

James:

That's some planning, right? That's the kind of planning that goes into "Futurama".

John:

I wonder if they pulled the same thing we're doing though because to be honest with you when we wrote books one through five ... Actually I wrote book one by myself. My co-author was just like, "I think that's not for me." When you get there it's somewhat juvenile and purposefully so. It was a situation where I had written "A Quest of Undoing", "The Full Moon Event" and then "Starliner". "Starliner" was a really hard book to write because we were trying to not go over the top but at the same time have a lot of characters, a lot of depth, a lot going on in that world. Frankly, to be totally truthful here, we've been terrified to write book two because we don't think it ever is going to stand up to book one. I was exhausted and I was like, "I just want to write something that I don't have to think too much about. I just want to have fun."

I decided to write "Platoon F" and I wrote that first book which is really just ... The first five episodes is what I call them because they're not really novels. They're barely novellas. They're like a hundred to a hundred and twenty pages each. Then now of course they're longer books, the later ones. Chris was like, "Yeah, I don't think I want to be involved with this." That book, the first one that I released, sold five thousand copies in three months. Then Chris was like, "Yeah, I want to be involved in this." It really

took off, which was surprising but there wasn't any plan at that point. It was literally just write what you think and who cares? Have fun with it. Then people started liking it. I was kind of surprised to be honest with you about. By the time I got to book five, we were thinking, "What are we going to do now? Is that it?" We said, "Well, no. I actually want to write a full novel of this to see how it does." We did. We wrote the full novel and at that point I said, "You know what, I can see an arc here that goes all the way through book nine if we step back." We stepped back and looked at it and sure enough we had something built by accident, completely by accident, but by the time it gets through book nine it's actually really neat. We just got to get there.

James:

Yeah, so the idea's there. Talk to us a little bit about how you co-write them. Your co-author, Christopher P. Young, the two of you ... I think you've written every book together as far as I can tell that you sell. Obviously scoping out the universe, which you've talked to us about already, I can see how that would work together, particular the bits where you just sit next to each other and fire off where you think characters are going to go, but in terms of getting on with the writing, is it simply a chapter each or how does that work?

John:

Actually Chris doesn't really write. He's actually an excellent storyteller, a very good storyteller, but when it comes to writing he'll sit there and rewrite the same paragraph for literally weeks on end. He's more of a hundred words a day kind of guy. We basically came up with a pattern that works for us. I'm very fast so I end up writing really quickly plus I do all these other things a hundred miles an hour. I guess I got ADD. That's my personality, but with Chris it's more a case of he's good at remembering details that I may miss because I'm writing so many books in so many different series and so on that I might accidentally miss "Ononokin" in with "Platoon F" here and he'll be like, "Hey, you just did ..." He can catch those things. He's good at doing the research on the history and all that kind of stuff and keeping things kind of together. He's also a fantastic sounding board because our personalities are extremely similar. Our comedy is both very

irreverent.

We'll sit there ... By the way, he's in California and I'm on the ... He's on the west coast, I'm on the east coast. We do this all via Skype. Really what it is I write it all. It's all me. I do all the outlines. He actually did the outline for one of our books, "Gappy's Gadgets" and we was like, "Yeah, I don't want to do that again." I do all the outlines, I do all the scripts, I do all the actual writing and everything else. What's great is is that Chris and I come up with the ideas together, I then outline it, we both kind of go over it, he makes sure that I'm not doing anything too stupid, then we come back. We work it out together.

Then I do the script and then this is the best part. I love this part of the process. We get on Skype, he's got the script, I've got the script. We pick voices and we just start going. Essentially it's three hours of reading the script from top to bottom and it would probably only take an hour except that we're laughing uproariously the entire time. It is so much fun. If ever you can get into a situation where one person ... By the way, I have written with folks where it's like, "You write a chapter, I write a chapter." Actually Ben Zackheim and I did that and it turned out okay, but I've tried with other folks and it does not always work out because, let's face it, we have egos. You might have a particular style of how you want to approach it, this person has a different style and so on.

With Chris it really is just a match made in heaven for us as far as that's concerned. Anyway, so we'll sit there and we'll laugh through things. Then I'll write the book and then I'll hand it over to Chris and I'll say, "Okay, you've got two weeks. Read it." He'll read it. He comes back with any suggestions, ideas and so on. By this point through really we're done. Our first draft is almost our last draft because we've done so much work ahead of time. Then I make any changes that we need to or if he says, "Hey, you know what, this whole chapter is just terrible and here's why" then I'll make any changes there. At that point he just kind of backs off and said, "All right, let me know when the next one's ready." From there I'm the guy in charge of all the marketing and newsletter and dealing with the launch team and the whole deal. He's got the better end of the deal, I have to say.

James:

It's almost like a dynamic editing process, isn't it? When you're talking out loud you're going through the scripts, you're reading it and presumably ... Do you record the Skype sessions? How do you make notes? How do you transfer that into the next draft..?

John:

I'd love to say eidetic memory. No, I don't actually do that. Usually what we do is real time. He's got the better end of the deal also here because it's 9:00 his time, it's midnight my time. By the time we're done it's three AM for me and midnight for him and he's like, "Oh, I got to go to bed. I've got to get up for work in the morning." I say, "I got to get up for work in like an hour." Most of it is just on real time as we're talking. I much prefer that as opposed to having to go back and record. I don't really work well that way. I'm the type of person that if you message me I'm more likely to respond to you than if you write me an email.

James:

Let's move on to the marketing side of it. Really interesting, the whole writing approach. I'm sure a lot of people will glean something from that. It's one area I think people are always on the lookout for some inventiveness and perhaps a new approach. In terms of marketing we know obviously social media advertising plays a fairly significant part I think in your mailing list building and your sales. Is that the main thing for you? What other areas are you using to sell your books now?

John:

Right. That actually is my primary focus, basically using Mark's system. The Facebook ads are my primary approach but I also find a lot comes from ... My launch team helps a lot with that too, just the sharing and so on. I'll tell you, I've got to say, if anybody out there doesn't have a launch team you're missing out. You need a launch team. They're awesome.

James:

Let's not assume too much knowledge. We've talked about launch teams before but let's pull this for a moment to just explain to somebody who doesn't know what a launch team is what exactly it is.



John:

Yeah. Essentially as I define it ... Some people define them as beta-readers or so on or street teams maybe. For me, a launch team is essentially a group of people who are super fans of yours. They really love your stuff, they like what you're doing and it's kind of like a support system. I have a Facebook group for them, I go in there and I talk to them almost all the time. I'm in there every day just saying, "Hey, what are you guys doing this weekend?" We're friends. They're people who love my books but we're also friends. I say, "Hey, I've got this new cover. What do you guys think of it?" I get feedback from them and so on. I say, "Okay, I've got a couple of sample chapters. I just want to send them your way." Kind of give them little teasers and things that nobody else can get, stuff like that. They feel like, "Wow, I'm getting some cool stuff out of this too."

When it comes time for me to actually release the book, before I send it to my editor what I do is I hand it to my launch team and I say, "Look, this is not edited but here's a Google sheet. If you guys spot anything please go in here and say where you spotted it, what you found and what you think it should be." They're basically bug-reporting for me. I ended up getting a hundred and twenty or a hundred and fifty reports of "You misspelled this, you did that wrong," whatever. It's basically pre-edited before I hand it to my editor which means it's going to happen faster for me which is good because my wife happens to be my editor and she gives me nasty looks sometimes. Anyway, after I do that I say to them, "Okay, now you guys are reading it not only with the editing in mind ..." They don't have to do that part obviously, "But also to formulate a review."

I don't actually look for beta-readers to be honest with you. Actually as we kind of pointed out I think with Chris, Chris is the uber beta-reader. He knows the stories better than most anyone but me probably and so he's a great beta-reader for that. The launch team does come back and say, "Hey, you know what, I noticed your character did this here and that doesn't seem right. Wouldn't he do this?" Then I, "Ah, you're right," and then I'll ... They're just fantastic that way. They really give you a lot of feedback. Then anytime that you're going, "Wow, I just got this message from somebody and I can't believe that they actually emailed me." The one guy

emailed me and said that I should never be a writer and all this kind of stuff, right? It's kind of like, "Grr." I don't share that guy's email with anybody but I just basically say, "I got this email." Next thing you know they're your support crew. They're in there saying, "No, your books are fantastic. I love these. Please don't ever stop writing." It makes you pumped up and you're ready to start writing again and just get back into it and everything else. I'll tell you, they're just the best thing that I can imagine having as a writer.

James:

I completely concur with that. About a week ago one of my readers ... He wasn't actually on my team. He may not even have been on my mailing list, but he contacted me and said the kind of military history, the background for one of my main characters was a bit off. This is a special forces soldier, so I had to him, "Okay, would you like to have a stab at collecting the mistakes?" He just sent me a long email today with a really authentic background that I'll probably now incorporate. Of course we can go back and change things and correct them as we go along. He did that because he loves my books which is, apart from being incredibly generous on his part, it's massively motivational on my part and it makes my books better. That's a small example I've had. I'm completely with you on the launch team. They're just fantastic and everyone should be taking steps to put one together.

John:

Absolute. It's so humbling too when you have all these people out there and you're just having maybe a bad sales day or whatever. You got two bad reviews on Amazon, whatever it is. Then you go in there and you see all of these people are making quotes and creating little stories in your universe. It's just unbelievably humbling. It's fantastic.

James:

I think it's definitely worthwhile covering that because you've done so well with building a list and then building a launch team from it. It will be useful I think for us just to hear where you were and how far and how fast you've traveled to get where you are now.

John:

Yeah actually I'd love to share this because I think this is such a cool story to

be honest with you. I released my first book, I believe it was 2013. Then the second one it was ... I don't know. The next year I released two more books. Then when I released the "Platoon F" first book and I get five thousand sales and I'm thinking, "Okay, I've made it." I'm literally at this point going, "Well, I guess I'll just go ahead and retire and start writing." Three months later I found out that wasn't going to work out. Anyway, I said, "I need to somehow capture these readers. I have no idea how but I'm going to try." In the backs of the books I would put links to my other books and all this kind of stuff. Then I said, "Let me try this MailChimp thing and see what I can do there."

Over the course of a year I added ... I think the actual number is twenty-seven. I usually just say twenty-five because it's easier but I think it was twenty-seven people and I would say that most of them are friends, family. Probably two or three of them were me from different email addresses for testing. Of course, thanks Mom. I'm sure she also signed up there and so on. Really over the course of a year. I'm just sitting there thinking that was normal. Then all of a sudden I tried all these different systems out there. None of them worked for me. They just didn't. I just couldn't find somebody who spoke my language I guess. I don't want to put any systems down. I'm just saying they just didn't work for me.

Anyhow, one day my wife ... Again, she's an editor. She also is an author but she's an editor. She says to me a friend of hers, Martha Hayes, said, "Hey you should check out this guy Mark Dawson. He's doing this teaching thing." This is a true story so be prepared, Mark. My wife said, "She's saying you should do this." I said, "I don't know who this guy is. Why am I going to do this?" She says, "No, come on." At this point I'm highly jaded, okay? I'm making maybe five dollars a month in sales if that. I still have the same twenty-seven subscribers. I'm going nowhere. Really, nowhere. Out of spite, out of pure spite, I said to my wife, "Fine. I will go ahead and do this system. I will do this system to the tee because I'm going to prove to you it is not going to work and then you'll leave me alone." That was truly what happened.

I sat down and I looked at your website and I copied your website. Sorry, but I did. Then I sat there and I put my books up just like you have yours. I

did the whole thing. Then I watched your videos and I did the exact same thing you said. Obviously I couldn't use your book covers, I had to use my own, but I did the exact same thing you said. It took me about a week. I busted my hump to get it done, but I got it done and then I said, "Okay, I'm going to spend five bucks on Amazon and I'm going to show you that this doesn't work." I'm sorry, on Facebook.

Mark:

"This English guy is an idiot."

John:

Exactly.

Mark:

"He doesn't know what he's talking about."

John:

Right, exactly. I'm sitting here going ... I said, "It's not going to work," but I just worked for a week and I just really wanted to rub her face into this, right? Anyway I spent five bucks on a Facebook ad and there it went up and everything else. The next morning I wake up and I had two subscribers. I was just like, "All right, so I got two subscribers out of a week's worth of work. Way to go, babe. That was awesome." The next day I had five more. I was like, "Okay, so five more." The next day I think it was around fifteen and then it went up to like thirty.

I'm not talking thirty since the first day. I'm talking thirty that day. The first day was two, then five, then fifteen or whatever and then thirty the next day. All of a sudden I'm getting between thirty and fifty subscribers every single day. I gave her a hug, right? Then all of a sudden I'm like, "Mark's the man." I started working on this and working on this. One day I just said to myself, "I can't believe this is happening but I'm going to put a hundred dollars into this ad. I just want to see what happens because this is incredible." I spent a hundred dollars and I got four hundred subscribers that day.

James:

Wow.

John:

Yeah, four hundred. It just ... Whoa, that blew my mind. Anyway, obviously what I was selling, the advertising that I had done ... Here was the kicker.

Other people who have come to me, what I find that they have done wrong is they don't do what you tell them to do. They all come and they say, "I'm going to put my spin on it." Don't put your spin on it. Do what he tells you to do. That's what I did and I did it out of spite, but it worked. It worked. Now every time I create an ad I literally go back and I look at your videos from the beginning and I basically say, "Okay, that's right. Yeah, I got to do this. Yep, I got to do this." I do it over and over again. Every time those ads are successful. When I sit there and create ads and I don't pay attention, "Oh, I'll just do this one myself," almost inevitably they are awful. They never do well at all.

That is the biggest thing that I learned, is number one, if you're going to do a system, do it with spite. Apparently that's a good thing. Number two, follow it to the tee. Now of course I've gotten to the point where I still will follow what you're saying but I also have to make some tweaks now and then because you just have to as time goes on, but yeah. That's where I came from. I have amassed around thirteen thousand subscribers in one year.

Mark:

What would you say ... I get this question quite a lot when I'm talking at conferences and things. I'm actually speaking at the London Book Fair next week and I'm fairly sure one of the questions I'll get because I always get it is, "I'm a new author. What is the first thing that I should do?" My answer to that is always ... I drop the ball on this and I didn't do this upfront like I should have done was focus on a mailing list. I worried about sales too much in the early days. It's more important to get subscribers. Occasionally ... In fact, more than occasionally. Quite often people, they just don't get it. They go, "Why would I want a mailing list? I don't understand that." What would your answer be?

John:

The primary thing is it's sad but it's true that readers don't care about you until they care about you. If you can get a person in by ... Either it's the only book you have or a short story that you've written or whatever where they can come in and they can actually take a chance on you by signing up to your newsletter because yes, that is huge, you have to have that ... Then at

that point they might care about you. If they read your stuff and they get what you're doing, you instantly have somebody who's going to come back and care about you.

This is why I say don't focus on sales at first to people because that's what I did for the longest time. Nobody cared about me so nobody's going to buy anything I've done. If instead I give them something and in return I say, "Give me your name, or your email address rather," at that point I'm giving you the opportunity to check out something of mine for free, which hey, if you don't like it it was free. What are you going to do? At the same time I'm getting the opportunity to hope that you're going to care about what I'm doing next.

That to me is where the relationship comes in. You don't have a relationship with a reader if all you're trying to do is sell. Building the mailing list, what you're really doing, in my mind, what you're really doing is you're building a relationship with the reader. If you build that relationship, at that point, every time you release something new ... Which is a little not true with me because "Platoon F" fans on one side and "Ononokin" on the other side. They're kind of separated there, but any time I release something with "Platoon F" fans I know I'm going to get sales from them. I know I'm going to get shares from them. I know I'm going to get all that. If all I did was focus on just selling and not focused on newsletter, all I would get is probably five dollars a month like I was getting before.

Mark:

I think you've put your finger on it there. I think the reason you've done so well apart from the fact that you've hit the ads really well and they've worked really effectively for you, the reason I suspect you're doing well is because ... We've never met apart from talking on the phone a few times. You're very affable and you're very easy to talk to and I think you get that it's not about, "Buy my book, buy my book." It's more about, "Tell me about you. Would you like to know about the problems I had writing a hundred pages?" That kind of stuff. The kind of the interesting stuff that it isn't all about selling. It's building relationships. It's turning readers into friends eventually and that's what you're doing with your street team. That is

probably the nub of why you've been so successful over the last eighteen months of so. Kudos. Keep going. You're really doing fantastically well.

John:

Thank you. I have to say this. Whenever anybody ever gets an email back from a potential reader or a reader or somebody who signed up to your newsletter or whatever, even if it's just through your website or whatever, always respond. Always respond kindly. I got an email ... This is a great example. I got an email from a guy who said, "I signed up to your newsletter. I just want to let you know I am unsubscribing. I don't like what you're doing. The humor, I just find it very childish in 'Platoon F' and so on. It's very juvenile. I don't like it. It's toilet humor essentially. Honestly I don't think you should be writing this stuff," is pretty much what he was saying. I replied back to him and I said, "Hey, I understand. Comedy is a very subjective thing. The problem with comedy is that no matter what you will always offend somebody. You can't avoid that." I said, "You know what, I really appreciate that you took the time to let me know how you felt about it and everything else because it's great criticism. I always learn something from everybody. I just thank you very much for taking the time to read my stuff and to check it out." He wrote me back a week later and he said, "You know, your email was so nice that I actually turned my brother and a friend of mine at work on to your stuff and they both love it." Basically turning a negative situation into something like that, that's just fantastic.

I also got another review from a guy a long time ago, terrible review. Just terrible. He said that he thought I must be on drugs. I replied to that, which is I know a big no-no, but at the time I was using a pen name which was ... I replied to that review and I basically said, "Thank for your response. I'm sorry you didn't enjoy it. I'm not on drugs." He responds to that review saying, "Sorry that I said you were on drugs. That was probably not a nice thing to say." Then he went into all this other stuff and then he says, "But I just don't understand how somebody could write this and not be on drugs." I said, "Okay, we're back to the drug thing again."

Anyway, we started having this dialogue and then I said, "You know what, why don't we take this offline and talk on email?" We did and I learned a lot about the guy. Number one, he was way out of my demographic. Way out

of it. He was almost eighty years old, so reading something that was written from me as a thirteen year-old's perspective is probably not the best book for him. Also he doesn't know about things like "Futurama" and "Family Guy" and "South Park". He's not familiar with any of that stuff so for him it was completely out of left field.

The guy actually was in the military for a long time. He builds airplanes and he also turns his own pens, writing instruments. He actually ends up sending me the last pen that he ever made before he could no longer do it because he has arthritis. I was amazed by that. Here's a guy that literally hated what I wrote but we still became friends. I just think it's awesome. It's all in how you treat people. It really is.

James:

Yeah, that's great tips. It resonates with some of the best, most prolific successful authors we've heard have a similar attitude. Marie Force comes to mind straightaway. Mark was saying earlier it's about a conversation with your readers. It's not about an old-fashioned business proposition. It doesn't work like that. No, it's great. Really great. You're good at it John as well. You're obviously a processes guy. We're coming towards the end of our time together and I fear we've almost just scratched the surface. There's been some really good value stuff in it as well from your approach to writing through to marketing and stuff from customer relations if you want to call it ... That sounds like a boring way of calling what I've just described as a conversation.

You're obviously a processes guy, which I like as well. The way you approached Mark's course, it reminded me of how I make recipes in the kitchen. I do not deviate. There's a recipe, someone's put some time into that, that's how it works. It drives me insane when people say, "A bit more of this, a bit more of that." I go, "No, don't do that. Do it the way the mail the says because that's how it should be made." There's something to be said I think for the way that your background has fed into the way that you approach writing. You come from a systematic world of programming. I used to be a computer programmer. It's actually quite a creative thing but also it's very procedural. I love the way that you've turned that into an approach to writing and marketing books and it's worked.



John:

Yes, absolutely. It's interesting. I'm also a musician and it also all stems from ... Actually if you look it up you'll find that statistically speaking a lot of programmers are either musicians or writers, which is kind of interesting because programming is a highly creative art. What you're doing is you're solving puzzles every single day incessantly, which is why a lot of programmers ... You might get burned out, but you rarely get bored. Every time you turn on the machine and you have a new project you have to work on, it's a puzzle you're trying to figure out. The same thing goes with music, the same things goes with writing. It's all a puzzle. One of the things that I find though is that if you're not enjoying the process of writing, you're doing something wrong. It is fun. If it's not fun, why are you doing it? I love to write. I love to program. I love doing music and everything else. If I didn't, I wouldn't be on this call with you right now.

James:

It's been absolutely fabulous talking to you, John. Thank you so much indeed for coming on to the podcast. It did turn into a little bit of an advert for Mark's course in the middle so I should say that other online courses are available.

Mark:

They're not as good.

James:

It's clear the podcast is a valuable asset in an objective market. Clearly we are part of a revolution in that are and you're a leading light in that sense. Both of you are in your respective corners in that. It's been great, John, from North Carolina. We may even see you later this year which would be great. We're going to probably have a little trip to the US ourselves and we'd love to drop in on you at some point and see a little bit of the Logsdon operation for ourselves.

John:

Awesome. That would be fantastic. I really appreciate you guys having me on. It was fun.

James:

John was a delight to talk to, and like I did say in the interview, he's a

procedural guy so he works out an approach. I know some people approach life in a slightly more creative, artistic, haphazard way and that works for them. Other people need absolutely procedures. He's probably somewhere in between because it's a creative industry that he's in, but I really like the way that he thought through how to construct a book, how to approach a story and make it a writing process that worked for him. He then applied that to Facebook advertising. Wow, he just got it right didn't he?

Mark:

Yeah, he's done extremely well. When it comes to subscriptions and growing a mailing list, he's probably the student that I point to as being one of the most successful and certainly the one to go to. Very friendly and generous with his tips. One thing I didn't mention in the interview, James, was Terry Pratchett was a big influence on him. Terry Pratchett lived about five hours from me. He lived in a village called Broad Chalke which is not too far from where I am in Wiltshire. I saw him a few times in Salisbury. Very nice guy. Always easily spotted with his big beard and the hat he wore all the time. Nice guy. Sadly missed.

James:

Yeah. There's a great photograph of Terry Pratchett at a fan event. He's wearing a t-shirt and if you squint your eyes it says, "JK Rowling wouldn't come. JRR Tolkien is dead. Douglas Adams is dead, Hello, I'm Terry Pratchett." A very modest guy, very humble, and sadly taken from us far too early. I should also say that I said at the beginning of an interview we spoke to John that I hadn't read any of his books. I've corrected that since then. I am now racing through his "Platoon F" series which I'm absolutely loving. It is quite puerile, it's quite silly, but it's an amazing little universe he's created of this slightly incompetent planet and system and military organization. It's laugh out loud if you like that sort of thing. It's laugh out loud. I thoroughly recommend it. I certainly have benefited from the way that he's put together his books with his writing partner.

Okay, that's it. As we mentioned before, there is a Facebook Q&A on Friday night, so if you're picking this up on the day of release, that is tonight, Friday, which it is at ten PM in the UK which is five PM eastern and it sits

there on Mark's timeline on his Facebook timeline. No, not your Facebook timeline. On the Self-Publishing Formula Facebook timeline. Is that right?

Mark:

Correct. Yeah, that's correct.

James:

I had to correct myself there. Good. We've got another episode in a couple of weeks. We're going to talk to Adam Croft, a very interesting interview. Someone who has had a stellar year and he's particular brilliant to listen to in terms of mindset that you need in order to be successful and he's got the kudos now behind that to back that up. We're going to do another master class in the next couple of weeks as well. Lots of good stuff to come. Thank you so much for listening. We're going to say goodbye, you from Sleepy Hollow here in Wiltshire and me in the flat plains of Cambridgeshire.

Mark:

Yes, bye bye.

James:

Yeah, thanks Mark. Bye bye.

Speaker 2:

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