

EPISODE 25: THE BIGGEST SELLING KDP AUTHOR OF ALL TIMES – WITH BARBARA FREETHY

James: Hello and welcome to podcast number 25 from the Self-Publishing Formula.

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: Now we've reached a quarter of a century.

Mark: My goodness, that's amazing. How did that happen?

James: I don't know. It's like 50 home runs in a season. Something like that, waving your bat for a quarter of a century. Even in Cricket, which people don't understand outside England and the Commonwealth, we don't even celebrate 25, but we're going to celebrate it today. It's been a blast. We're enjoying it.

We've had some great guests on. Every single podcast has been a good learning experience. I thought Depesh was great last week. Somebody who, obviously is a professional in the sense that we always say, "You should be professional and aim for high standards," but the truth is, we're at home running our businesses doing what we think is right.

This guy, Depesh, he goes into companies that have millions of pounds, millions of dollars invested in them. He sits there and he takes over the advertising campaign on social media and he's helped launch and make hugely successful quite a few companies.

I thought it really interesting hearing from him. That hot tip about advertising in the summer, right now, being a good piece. It does fluctuate, of course, through those weeks, but as we mentioned last week, we've definitely picked up some good bargains and bids online. Mark, talking of doing stuff online and getting some bargains, you've had a BookBub.

Mark: I did, yes. It's always interesting when you get a BookBub. I've had I don't know how many now, certainly double figures, maybe 15 or 20 over the course of the last 3 or 4 years. If you take time to look on the usual forums, they're often posts that suggests that BookBub ads are less effective now than they were. To an extent, that's probably true. When I started doing them, they probably returned slightly more in terms of the return on investment, but even saying that, they're still easily the most powerful form of advertising outside of social media advertising that you can have.

I had a deal for the first John Milton box set that went out and sold something like 5,000 copies on Amazon at \$.99 so that's 35% royalties, so not a huge amount of money, but still with everything combined was more than enough to make it a positive return on the cost of the advert.

The effect on rankings was very impressive. It got to number 11 overall in the amazon.com store, and a similar kind of level over here at Amazon UK, and also did really, really well on all of the other platforms. Nearly 1,000 copies sold on Barnes and Noble. I think 700 on Kobo, something similar on Apple.

I'm not a big one for checking the best-seller list, but I'm almost certain that that would have hit the USA Today best-seller list somewhere within the top 100. It's not impossible that it might have hit the New York Times list as well. That's a pretty good testimony for how powerful BookBub ads still are today.

James: Powerful in that sense that although you may have only made a couple of thousand bucks on the direct ad, the visibility you gained from it was even more hugely valuable.

Mark: Yeah, and there were other benefits too, of course. I had a big spike in sign-ups to my mailing list since that deal has run. Because I've got an offering at the back of the book; it's a 3-book set so it will take people a little while to get through those books, but I've already seen a spike in sales of the second book set.

That's something that I'd expect to see continue over the next few months because at the end of the day, there's, almost certainly, new readers that they probably haven't bought a John Milton book before because why would they have bought the boxed set.

That just means that provided the writing holds up and my click through rates seem to be pretty good, that should mean once they get to the end of the third book on the boxed set, they'll be looking for the second boxed set with their next 3 books and then the next 3 books after that.

What, hopefully, will happen is that that will continue the production line of new readers who'll chew through the rest of the series, then onto my other series too.

James: BookBub's still alive and kicking. Just a quick word on the BookBub ads. Have you been using that more since we first spoke to BookBub? I know you're one of the beta testers of that.

Mark: I have, yeah. I'm kind of winding them down a bit now. **The thing with BookBub ads is they're very powerful to start with when you're fresh, but you will chew through the audience a lot quicker than you would say for Facebook.** Facebook is obviously a vast platform compared to BookBub. My experience so far is that you'll get a really excellent return

on investment for the first couple of weeks and then it will start to tick down.

What needs to happen when that takes place, is you've just got to think, "Okay their ad is probably a little bit stale now. It's time to either change up the ad, offer something else, or wait until you've got something else to sell and then go back and advertise it again."

My experience so far has been very positive with those ads. It's a platform that clearly works. People who suggested that seeing those ads at the bottom of the daily may not want lead-to clicks. They're wrong because it certainly does and I've made a decent amount of money on those ads.

James: Good. Fresh projects works best in that environment.

Mark: Absolutely, yep.

James: Talking of best-sellers, how excited are we? We have, probably, the biggest Indie author that we've ever had on the Self-publishing Formula Podcast, an absolute giant, in fact a legend of this parish. Somebody who'd dominated with her books and we're very, very excited aren't we, to have Barbara Freethy?

Mark: Yeah, Barbara's been a really massive seller for a long time now. Very, very experienced author who's done everything really. We are thrilled that she was prepared to take time out of her schedule to talk with you, James. This is going to be an interview I think will be of a lot of interest to everybody.

James: Barbara Freethy is one of the best-selling Indie authors on the planet. She's had 18 of her books on the best-seller's list. She's sold millions of novels. In fact, Barbara is the Amazon KDP best-selling author of all time. She writes romance and after a pretty decent traditionally published career

in 2011, she moved into self-publishing. I think it's fair to say, Barbara, you haven't looked back?

Barbara: I have not looked back that's for sure.

James: Tell us a little bit about that start.

Just before 2011 then, you're traditionally published. You went through a couple of publishers I think?

Barbara: **Yes, I actually worked for 4 out of the big 5 traditional publishers** over, across many years. Certainly had my ups and downs in my traditional publishing career. I had moments of almost greatness, and then lot of mediocrity. I definitely saw the peaks and the valleys of that path to publishing. I was working with Pocketbooks back in 2010, 2011 when the eBook revolution sort of began.

I decided I had actually gotten some rights back to some of my earlier, traditionally published books, and I decided that I would start self-publishing some of those books. It was a definitely a lot harder back then. There was just very little information about how to do anything. I was looking, scouring the internet for any kind of how-to guide.

I think I read the Smashwords Guide, which was one of the first ones that was available. Then I took some Photoshop tutorials so I could learn how to make a cover, and learned how to make an eBook, and learned what DRM meant, kind of all the little things that really weren't being talked about back in the day. It was kind of a scary, new adventure to begin, but it was also very exciting.

James: What went wrong with the traditionally published career then? You say you had a rocky time, what were the problems?

Barbara: You know, **in publishing there's always little things called glitches.** That's kind of a popular term in traditional publishing. I was publishing right along but one of my last books had a distribution glitch, as they called it, in that it didn't get into one of the major retail chains the first 2 weeks of release.

I knew that that was going to be a huge issue because whenever you have a problem like that, when they try to sell in your next book, like 6 to 9 months later, no one remembers that there was a glitch, only they look at the sales figures and say, "Well, you know, she didn't sell very many books those first 2 weeks." I knew that that was going to be an issue going forward.

Quite frankly, I was very motivated by my own financial needs, as probably a lot of people are. I had 2 kids in college. It was very expensive and I thought things were a little bit rocky and I really needed to take charge of my career. I had some great publishers and worked with some great editors.

I know that some of these things are sometimes truly errors and glitches. Nobody's particularly responsible or maliciously trying to hurt your career or anything like that, but things happen. **The less control you have over something, the less opportunity you have to fix it.**

Back in the day, there was no opportunity to fix anything so if there was a glitch, I couldn't do anything about it. I was really paralyzed. I had no opportunity to speak with any of the retailers or distributors. When you work with a traditional publisher, you really can only talk to your editor, and you have to rely on everyone else in the house to do everything for you. **If your branding is off or pricing is off, or anything is off, you just don't have the control over it.**

James: Frustrating. It's amazing how many authors, traditionally published authors, will just deal with that frustration that whole time. For you, you got to a point, I guess you got to the end of a deal or you at least had some

commercial, some legal freedom to move into self-publishing and took your chance.

Barbara: As I said, I did start with some back-list books because I was, I guess, hybrid for a year or so back then. I had another book to write and to put out on my contract so I did that and met all my obligations with the options books but the first book that I put out as a self-published book was called Summer Secrets. It was a slow go. I think sometimes people think that everybody takes a rocket ship to the top really fast.

It wasn't that fast for me. It was a couple months. I was kind of looking at that title and I had, I think, 2 other titles up as well. Not much was happening. For me it actually started to take off first on Barnes & Noble surprisingly, not Amazon.

You never know where your readers are. That's something I really like to tell authors that you never know where you're going to kind of get your start. For me, it kind of started there. Then, for some reason, then Amazon started to pick up a little bit after that. That book ended up hitting number 1 on the New York Times. **It was the first time an Indie book had ever hit the New York Times, much less get number 1 on the Times.**

It was, I tell you, very shocking to my publishing house. They didn't know what to say to me. They were stunned. They were not happy. I remember asking, "Can we put this on my next traditionally published book?" I had one more to come out. They said, "We'll see." They just didn't understand it.

In fact, I think the New York Times attributed the success to my former publisher, who had originally owned the rights because they didn't know how to put a self-published author's name in that slot. It was really kind of ground-breaking and fun.

I think because I had that opportunity, I was playing around with it while I was still traditionally published. In some ways, that slowed me down

because it kept me from kind of really going fast because I still had all these obligations to meet. Then once I was finally free of those, I could really concentrate on the self-publishing side.

James: What an amazing moment in history of self-publishing. Almost the moment Titanic struck the iceberg and all standing around convincing each other the boat can't sink.

Barbara: One of the publishing vice-presidents I think was talking to me and he said, "Well, why didn't you give us that book to publish?" I was like, "I tried to give you that book. I tried to sell that book." **Back in the day, back-list books had absolutely no merit or value to a traditional publisher. They had nothing to do with it.**

It was kind of funny and it was ironic a little bit that I had originally gotten my rights back because I thought I could sell them to someone else, but I couldn't sell them to someone else. Fortunately I was able to take advantage of that revolution as it was beginning.

James: Let's mention money because you mentioned it yourself that it was one of the motivating factors for you.

You would have noticed straight away, I'm guessing, with that book the difference in revenue earned from a traditionally published book to a self-published book.

Barbara: **Oh, absolutely. It was very shocking. It was night and day.** I'll tell you when I originally started, I was not a full-time writer. I actually had a little side-job going to bring money in to help pay for our expenses. My first goal was just to be able to make enough to get rid of that other side job. That was ... I didn't have super high ambitions at that point. I just thought, "Oh, I can just bring in a little extra money."

I remember when I first started realizing what 70% was compared to what I was making on the traditional deal which was the 25% of the 70%. Then paying an agent because, of course I had an agent because I was working on traditional so there's just no comparison to the money. I didn't have to even sell as many books to make more than I was making. That was kind of a shocker there.

James: Today, you move in circles which would include lot of traditionally published authors. You've won fairly prestigious awards. Awards that include traditionally published authors.

Do you have that conversation with people who've excitedly just signed a 3-book deal with whoever and you quietly think to yourself, "Is that the right move for you?"

Barbara: **I try not to judge because I know that everyone has their own path and they have to make their own decisions.** I understand that for a lot of people, the lure of traditional publishing is very powerful. They really want to see their book on a bookstore shelf and they feel that that's the way to get to that shelf. It really isn't as much anymore because the traditionally publishers can't put everybody on the shelf.

Shelf space has diminished, so it's really difficult even if you do sign an traditional deal to get what you think you're going to get. I think there's also a myth that you're going to get a lot of marketing and they're going to do a lot for you. That's not really true either unless you're really at the top of the pile.

Publishing has itself from the top down, so if you're in the top 5 authors that they have on their list that month, then you're going to get marketing, but generally speaking, those new authors are much, much further down the list. **Unless you have a really big advance, which means they've invested in you, you're really not going to get that much from your publishing experience.**

I do talk to a lot of people and I do understand sometimes why people make decisions they make. A lot of people want to hedge their bets. I have many traditionally published friends who have taken a long time to decide whether they even wanted to Indie publish as a hybrid. I have a popular saying that I said to them is that, "You can't swim across the pool if you don't let go of the wall."

That's what a lot of people do. They've got their hand on the wall so they stay. They're kind of hedging their bets both ways, but it's really, really hard to see how successful you can be unless you commit to it. I know a lot of traditional authors will say, "Well, I'm just going to write a novella and test the waters."

It's just never a good test because if you're somebody who writes full-length books, traditionally, just throwing a novella into the Indie waters is not going to tell you anything. I think it's definitely a hard decision for people to make, and there's a lot of reasons to do whatever path people want to do.

I totally understand sometimes financial needs are demanding. There's a lot of people who are addicted to that advance. That's how they plan their financial future and so it's really hard to give that sure money up for an unsure thing. The risk versus the reward, and you know the reward is just huge on the Indie side of publishing.

James: Huge, but hugely satisfying as well.

Just by the fact that you were so frustrated of not having control that you must be somebody who's enormously enjoyed taking control of that side of the career.

Barbara: Yes. **I had no idea really how much I like being an entrepreneur until I got out into my own business.** I write in between the lines of romance. I write kind of a straight romance but I also add in a lot of

mystery and suspense. Sometimes it was really hard for traditional publishers to know how to cover me.

My books, they would always say, "Well, you don't really fit the cover of the day" which could have been the cartoon cover or it could have been really dark suspense, or it could have been small town America. Whatever was the cover of the day, I tended not to fit that particular brand.

When I was able to get out on my own, I was able to really look at my brand and decide, well, I still believe that people like to read maybe more than just straight romance. Maybe there is this whole group of people who like a little bit of everything or a little bit of extra in their books.

I was able to try to find a way to make my books stand out as uniquely mine and they didn't necessarily fit the trend of the moment, so that was one thing that was really freeing. Also just being able to write whatever I wanted to write. To continue series. I had actually been asked to stop a series after 5 books when I was writing for Pocket.

I wish now that I had 10 more of that series because people really want them, but on a traditional side, series are much more difficult because in the print space, it's very hard for book stores to keep more than 1, 2, 3 books by an author on a shelf. It's much harder to sell series in a print space.

The customer can't go to the store and find all the books. Whereas in the e world, you can definitely. Series have become the binge-worthy kind of series that take off because you have the ability to buy all the books. I think being able to come into the Indie space also allowed me the creative freedom to write what I really wanted to write even though it maybe went against the traditional sense of what you should publish.

James: It's funny how the constraints of the old industry and the advances of the new one actually almost diametrically opposed in places. But as you

say, series is such a natural thing in the eBook world to get to the end of a book and press a button and read the next one. Of course, that's why from a marketing point of view, it works very well as well.

Let's dive into a little bit of detail if you don't mind Barbara. Those early days when you were hopelessly typing things into search engines and not really coming up with very much because you were one of the few pioneers at that time.

How did you start? Did you understand what a mailing list was at that point and realize you have to do that? When did you come to the mailing list idea?

Barbara: **The mailing list idea actually came to me before Indie Publishing.** I think the irony for a lot of publishers is that in the last couple of years it was my traditional publishing career, more and more social media, marketing responsibilities were being passed to the authors. I was often sent an email by someone in the marketing department of the publisher telling me to do something on my Facebook page or set up this, or set up that or think about a blog tour.

They weren't doing it for me, they just weren't going to tell me what I should do. I did have a little bit of an idea that I did need to be collecting a mailing list. I will say it was definitely smaller back then. It was very organically grown and it was mostly people who wrote to my website or sent me an email and I would add them to my mailing list.

I did have the idea back then that it was important, but certainly not to the extent that I have it today of how really important it is to have the readers and the data and to be able to reach those readers directly.

Back then, when you're with a traditional publisher you really are prevented from using those kinds of relationships, not just with the

reader but the retailers and all of those kinds of partners that can help you.

I did have the mailing list idea earlier but it really took off even maybe the last 2 years. The very beginning I was so concentrated on how to really make the books and the brand and how to release them.

I think I really focused more on social media than my website which is ... I kind have gone back and forth over my career, is the website more important, is social media more important? It seems like it changes a little bit every few years, and the strategy behind it.

James: You said the last couple of years really the mailing list has been a bigger part of your time, but now people will use whatever, Aweber, MailChimp, and ConvertKit etc. In your early days, were you gathering emails in a spreadsheet and hand delivering email almost?

Barbara: **In the very early days it was probably the Yahoo Group was the email newsletter.** Then I did switch over and I had a couple of different systems. I think I had Vertical Response for a while, then I switched over to MailChimp. I was definitely uploading spreadsheets. I think that a lot of authors make the mistake of really using the contest to drive the side apps.

While that's really appealing, I found that a lot of those subscribers really pretty worthless in the long run, so I think in my early days I would do some big giveaways with big blog sites and then they would, "Oh we'll give you everyone for your mailing list." Then, you find out really that they're not particularly the best subscriber because they're really just there for the prize.

I think **I've learned a little bit more about the value of the subscribers on your list in terms of who's really there for your books**, who's just there for the free trip to Hawaii or whatever was being given.

I still do some of those multi-author giveaways, but I don't do a lot because I don't think that that's really the best value to building your list.

James: What has been the best value for you? Do you give away a book or two?

Barbara: **I do. I have done the giving away a free book in return for a sign-up or two books.** I think I've done the first 2 starter books in a series. Those have been really proven to be very helpful, and also to advertise those kinds of sign-ups as you and Mark have really opened up the world to learning about that type of way in to building a newsletter list and that's been certainly a big help in growing things as well.

Also just really making sure that the sign-ups to my mailing list are everywhere. They're in every eBook, they're on my webpage, lots of places, big bold letters, lots of intriguing offers to buy into my list. I have kind of a varied list so I have a lot of stand-alone books because I come out of traditional publishing and sometimes those are harder to sell in the Indie space. People come into my list a lot of different ways, whereas some writers they have series right from the beginning so it's very easy for them to pull people through their list.

I'll have somebody read the stand-alone book and then I don't know where they go next so I'm trying to find ways to capture them wherever they might be.

James: Mark helped you out with some campaigns probably last year was that Barbara?

Barbara: **Right, last year was the beginning.** We did work a little bit together and I've taken his course and really learned a lot about the whole advertising space which was not really part of my early plans because again, it was still early days and we weren't really focusing as much on the advertising part of it as more the promotional part of it.

It's been interesting in the last, I think, year or two to see the advertising space become more important.

James: Is advertising essential to you today? You doing a lot?

Barbara: **I'm really getting a little bit more involved in it, but I want to make sure that I really understand it.** I think that's really easy to lose a lot of money on the sites and so I have really kind of dug into it myself in the last 6 months and trying to do a lot more testing to see what works for me and for my brand.

It reminds me of the early days of self-publishing for myself in that I really find that **the more that you're involved in your own career, the better you will do.** Like when you focus in on something and you really learn it, it's empowering and it also helps you make better decisions.

I do have a great person who helps me a lot with making graphics and doing some advertising. I said to her, "I just really need to also dig into this myself because I think I'll be a better partner if I can really understand how it all works."

I think that's really helped me and **I really that's the success of a lot of the big Indie authors is that they haven't been afraid to sort of get their hands dirty and figure things out.** The more middlemen you have, between you and your end product, the less control you have and the less you're focused on whether something's working or not.

You can let things ride and you know that \$5 a day even adds up and all of a sudden you're like, "Wow, I just spent a couple thousand dollars and I don't even really know what I got for it." I didn't know how to measure it. I didn't know how to understand it. I think these courses are really helpful for authors in that it's not just about making the ad and running the ad, but really measuring it.

Is it successful for you and maybe this works for one person but it's not going to work for you because everything is so subjective. Your audience may respond to something else. I think that's really important.

James: That's a really nice point Barbara, that it improves you as a person by challenging yourself to learn something and get to grips with it. Funny, I often think the same thing about sports. I play a bit of sports and I know a lot of people that don't but I get quite nervous in some of the sports I play. I wonder why I do it and I think afterwards because actually you grow a little bit as a person and you put yourself out there.

I think this is almost the same thing because it is a difficult thing for lots of self-published authors to do. **A lot of people quite naturally are anxious about the difficulties of learning business and parts of business, but when you do it, as you say, you do grow.**

That's going to actually probably make you a better writer.

Barbara: I think it does. **I think it really makes you better in a lot of ways. I think it's all a little scary.**

It's funny because I've been on every retail platform. I know the back ends of every system because I've been doing it since the beginning. Then I'm faced with the Facebook advertising platform, I had that same like, "Oh, what do these words mean? What's a look-alike?"

Even when you feel like you're experienced, you still have that moment of like trepidation when you're going to push that button. There's so much in ePublishing everything is changeable and removable and easily fixed so I think that if authors can kind of get over that fear that they're going to do something irretrievably, irrevocably wrong, they'll be a little bit more daring.

It really is not that hard. It just feels like it's hard in the beginning because it feels new and strange. I've always felt like focus is super important and throughout my career there have been moments when some of the retailers, the newer retailers who've kind of come into the book space, I would think to myself, "I'm going to find a way to get on that platform and do better. I'm going to meet that rep. I'm going to research that website. I'm going to see what features they have. I'm going to put my books up for that."

Whenever I've focused in on that, I've really seen a lot more success. That's why I try to encourage authors if they're feeling stuck or plateaued and they don't know what to do next, is to really pick one thing and focus on that whether it's advertising, or meeting retailer, or learning how to make your book look better as an ePub, whatever it is.

I think if you focus in on it, you'll just do so much better in that space and then you'll move on to the next thing.

James: Do you have a team now Barbara? Do you employ people to help you out with the business side?

Barbara: **I have a couple of freelance specialists.** I have someone who helps me with social media, and advertising on my website. I have a formatter who does strictly all the formatting. I will say it does help because I do know a lot.

As authors, sometimes we're kind of running a little last-minute and it's Sunday night and you know that book really needs to be uploaded and gee these other people have a life and don't really want to work for me at Sunday night at 9:00 so it's great when I can actually format something myself and throw it up if I have to.

I have built a team of freelance people. **I don't have employees, but I have independent contractors that I work with that are great and**

terrific and I'm really happy that I found them. It takes time. I've had people who've moved on over the years and suddenly I'm by myself again for something. It's definitely up and down proposition. I think if you can get some help to do the things you don't really have time or inclination to do, or to free you up to do more writing, that's great.

James: I guess in any business it's good that the boss knows how to do everything right?

Barbara: Right. I think it helps. I think you are a better partner and you're not relying and hopefully you have great people working for you, but sometimes you don't. **I've had some really big problems in the translation space, especially early on.** I hired a bunch of people and had horrible problems.

Found out they would farm out chapters to be translated by different translators. Again that was a world where I couldn't get that involved because I didn't speak the language. You're back to trusting someone to do it right for you. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. It helps to be kind of hands-on and know what's going on.

James: Barbara, one of the big differences I guess between traditional publishing you alluded to earlier really was the contact with readers, which becomes much more important and much easier and a part of being a writer when you're self-published.

Where are you now with your relationship with readers? How close is that?

How active are you with your readers? How important is it as part of your marketing strategy?

Barbara: **The reader relationship is really the most important to me of all the relationships and I'm definitely much more involved with my readership now.** I have a private Facebook fan group. They go by lots of

different names. People call them street teams, fan groups, or discussion groups, or book groups, or whatever you want to call it.

They're the super fans who really want to come and talk to you, and talk about your books and talk with each other. I think that's what's been really great watching evolve over the last couple of years is that I've got this great group of people who it's not just about promotion or doing promotional activities.

I'm not an author who's very strict about anything. Some author have rules for whether you can be in their group or not, but I'm pretty open. If you want to come in, come in. It's more of a fun place for people who really, really love to read. Then, of course, I have the public Facebook fan page that also has lots more people on it.

I try to also use my website a little bit more interactively these days. I'm starting to do a little bit more, I don't want to call it a blog because I don't really blog, but I do try to do a few more posts about behind the scenes of a book so it's where I kind of tie the reader a little bit more to my stories and understanding where I'm coming from.

I think it's easier to have a reader relationship too when you can control what books are coming out when. I can actually respond to the readers as an Indie author so if they say, "I want another Calloway book in my popular Calloway series," I can tell them, "Yes, you're getting it and it's going to be this character and it's going to come out on this date."

I can let them know things way in advance and I can set up the pre-orders and I can really respond to what they want. If they have a question about a book, I can respond right away. It was just a little bit harder in traditional because I wasn't published frequently and sometimes there would be a year between books and it was really hard to keep the reader engagement up in between times.

Sometimes I couldn't write what they wanted. They wanted the next one. "I'm sorry but my publisher doesn't want me to write that, I'm going to write something else." Of course they'd go to that too because they're pretty loyal readers, but it's really nice when you can respond.

I have some readers who really like the suspense so I think I'll bring out another suspense title because I know I have that group of readers who likes that. I think developing that reader relationship is really, really important. **I don't think you have to worry as a newer author if you're not getting a lot of fan mail. I think it's really about a very slow build and growth.**

Sometimes some authors and what they write really develop a rabid kind of a fan base. I've noticed over the years that the vampire authors just have the most rabid fans. Are very vocal online and very engaged. Then I'll see super huge, best-selling authors who have very little mention online because maybe they're readership just isn't that readership.

I think it's really important not to measure your success by a vocal group on the internet. Sometimes I think that becomes an interesting thing. I'll hear authors, especially newer authors say, "My readers think I should do this." I always am asking myself in my head, "Who are your readers and how many are there? Are you listening to 5 really vocal people in your group or are you looking at your whole reader base?"

Not everyone who talks to you online is your average reader and they don't necessarily represent the thousands of people who might be buying your product. I think it's really good to engage with readers, but not to be too controlled by kind of a vocal group who may love you, and that's awesome, and it's flattering, and it's wonderful, but sometimes it's not as big as your whole group. If that makes sense.

James: It does make sense to be aware of. You mentioned there was one element that you realized that there was an appetite for more suspense so you're going to do a bit more of that.

Do you think without taking that caveat into account, that they don't represent everyone who's buying your books, but do you think you're writing has changed subtly or not subtly since you've had a closer relationship with those readers?

Barbara: **I think what's changed is that I really trust myself more.** I really trust my own instincts. Because I do engage with the readers and I do know what they respond to in my books.

I think I was saying, "It's not so much about a particular character, it's more about the kind of story that you're telling." Really people are always responding to an author's voice and the way they tell the story and the things they find interesting.

I love to do family secrets and I love to do stories about identity or stories about people being reunited. I can kind of add more suspense or less suspense, or make it sweeter, make it sexier, or whatever. It's like honing in on what are the core things about your books that people are really responding to and then being able to do that.

The reason you can do that as an Indie more also is because you're not being governed by a couple of big, national book buyers who've decided what should be in the romance shelves across the country, and that's truly like four people who really influenced those trends.

A lot of authors will say to me, "Well, how come I heard the romantic suspense is dead." In fact, I was told romantic suspense was dead when I first started Indie publishing and some of my greatest success books were romantic suspense. They're only dead because in the print world, the buyers didn't want to buy them anymore.

I understand, they have a different audience and they have limited shelf space, but **in the Indie world, you don't have the trends as much because there's always an audience.** Some audiences are bigger and some audiences are hotter.

I always laugh because the vampires come around about every five years so I tell my friend who writes vampires, who's now sad that it seems like sales are dwindling a bit, that, "Vampires will be back, just hang on."
James: They never die.

Barbara: They never die. They're immortal and they come back in fiction all the time. Same with erotic romance. Super hot, then not, then 50 Shades comes out and the world changes again. Small town romance, hot then not. Trends do come and go, but I think you have to kind of just ride them out and keep focusing in on your core story and that's what you can do in Indie because you know you can find some readers out there.

James: Do you ever meet your readers?

Barbara: Sometimes. I don't do a lot of book signings just because they take a lot of time and I don't always find them to be that productive. I meet them more at conferences probably than anywhere else. **Probably I have the biggest relationship online.** That's probably true for a lot of people.

James: I'm just thinking there's 1 or 2 authors who are starting to have these weekend get-togethers which becomes a part of their experience with their readers. It seems to work well. I think Marie Force has started doing that sort of thing. That's not on your radar yet.

Barbara: No. I think it's great. I know she has a lot of success with her reader weekend and I think that's fantastic. I think sometimes too, it depends on what part of the country you're in and if you have a kind of a strong romance reader base where you are.

In the San Francisco Bay area which isn't as super romance oriented. I've seen much better results when I do big book signings in areas that are heavily concentrated with more romance readers. Sometimes there are pockets around the country that are a little bit more. Everything's very expensive out here so accomdation here is costly.

I think it all depends on a lot of different things. I really enjoy meeting the readers, but I think the relationship is with the books as well as with the author so if they love the books, and they don't need to meet me, that's fine too. Kind of whatever works.

James: Barbara, I also want to talk to you about productivity because you have produced a lot of books. I know you use some of your back-list since you turned Indie.

What's your approach to writing? Do you have word counts per day? Do you have a fixed period of time or a fixed period of the day when you write? Are you disciplined about that?

Barbara: **I'm much more disciplined as a writer now as an Indie because I am controlling my own calendar.** I generally write about 4 books a year, sometimes 5. I'm not one of those people who's writing a book a month. Good for them. Just can't do it. I generally feel like that's pretty much a good pace for me. To meet my deadlines, for the first couple of years of Indie Publishing, I probably worked harder than I've ever worked in my life.

I was really working through every vacation and every weekend so I've tried to be little bit better in the last year. I've actually put together a spread sheet and I put all my vacations down. I put my deadlines down and I try to be a little bit smarter about not putting a deadline right after a trip so that I'm not panicked trying to get something written.

I've also changed my thinking a bit more. The retailers really do need two weeks for your books to get up. In the early days we were throwing

them up and they're up the next day. The weight of material of books that come into these platforms has really slowed down the process of course. Hundreds of thousands of writers are now uploading compared to the early days. I've tried to build in a 2-week time period to have my book ready before it actually comes out. That has actually really helped a lot because then I have those two weeks to also really plan my marketing, promotional strategies instead of just being like in a panic.

Like the book's coming out tomorrow and I just finished writing it. For me, that's been a big change. I will sometimes put on my spreadsheet word counts. It does help me a little. I'm probably one of those people that like to lie to myself. "If you just go one more lap it'll be great."

Then you go one more lap and then maybe you go a lap and a half so sometimes having that word count down, psychologically I look at my word count and I go, "Well, I only need 500 more words. I can write 500 more words." That helps me keep on track. **I'm definitely a little bit more a seat-of-the-pants writer. I do a lot of re-writing.** Sometimes it's like get some words down and then you can go back and fix them.

James: We all have our own little psychological tricks, don't we, to get us by. Word counts work for some people. That's just to pick up on that last point before we round off.

You're not a great planner for books? You're a pantsier I believe they call it in self-publishing circles?

Barbara: Yeah, right. **I do do a lot of advanced planning. I know the major points of a story, but I always find my best work, really comes out of being in the moment,** being in the story, being in the character's head, trying to figure out what's the worst possible thing that could happen to them at this possible moment.

For me, that just is kind of the process that works. I've tried everybody else's strategy at least once I think. Over the years you think, "Oh that would be a lot faster. I'll do a character chart or I'll do this or I'll do that.

I found a lot of pre-writing actually makes me feel like I've already written this story and I don't want to write it anymore. It becomes like a little more boring for me so I want to sort of discover the story as I go along. The map makes it harder too.

Every writer has to work out their own process. There's certainly no right or wrong way to do it.

James: It's been great, Barbara. Absolutely brilliant talking to you. Before we actually sign off, a lot of listeners are at the early stage of their career and most of them including myself, usually paralyzed with self-doubt about everything. Nobody wants to read your book and not knowing really where to turn.

You're not even remotely complacent about that. I can hear from the way you're talking, but with somebody with an incredible track record now, the KDP Best-selling author of all time, I believe, according to Amazon.

What sort of advice would you hand out to somebody who looks up to you and says, "Where do I start and what are the key thing I should be doing or thinking about now?"

Barbara: **I think the main thing from the writing standpoint for the newer author is to write at least three books.** You just don't know what you don't know until you get through that whole book. That's probably true of a lot of things in life. Usually the second book will be easier.

A lot of people say write what you know, but I found that I ran out things I knew pretty early on so sometimes writing what you don't know is actually a

great, creative spur because you get to research something new and you get excited about it.

I think there is paralysis in writing. **Fear is the biggest problem for writers in all ways.** It's fear of writing the wrong thing, fear of writing something not good enough. I remember when I first got probably my first big contract in traditional publishing, I thought to myself, "Well, I have to write a better book now because they gave me more money."

That's how writers think. That's not true. You're always trying to write a better book whatever the reason you give yourself. "I have to write a better book because now it's my second book or now it's my third book. I think, really, writing a couple of books and really getting your creative, your craft down and really concentrating on the quality of your books is super important. Then start to get into all the craziness of all the developing relationships with retailers and promoting and all of that.

I think people write one book and then they spend like the next three years trying to sell it. If they just wrote another two or three books, it's so much easier to sell the 3rd or 4th book than to sell the first book. People read one, they want to read another one, and you want to grow and you want to build.

Fear is always there. You can't tell me there's not one author who 40 books, 50 books, 100 books in, still doesn't have some fear in the writing process and also once the book is out in the world, it's very subjective and then you have to let readers have their opinions of your work and you can't let that drive you crazy.

Trying to get past the fear and just write and trust your instincts and if your instincts are steering you wrong, then go out and talk to more people and get help. Writers are such a great network right? There's just so many places to go where you can talk to other writers and share your frustrations and get help and get support.

James: Barbara Freethy. What a pleasure talking to Barbara. I was struck with how completely down to earth Barbara is. There's no highfalutin attitude from her despite her enormous sales and her status in the industry. Very, very down to earth, very hard working, very admired in the practicalities of what to do.

It turned out to be not just an inspirational interview as we knew it would be listening to someone like Barbara, but actually a practically valuable interview I think. Particularly in terms of the attitude that you need getting on top of the detail and making things work.

Mark: Yeah, I know something that she shares with a lot of the more successful authors and especially the authors in the romance genre. They tend to do the best these days and it's not because they're writing in a genre which not only because they're writing in a genre that has a lot of voracious readers interested in it, it's because they are incredibly smart, and incredibly hard-working.

Success just doesn't fall out of a tree, it's something that has to be worked and they've demonstrated. Barbara is really key when it comes to this demonstrating the hard work does lead to success.

James: Yes, it's the whole thing isn't it? When you have hugely successful people and you're looking for what is their magic ingredient and you hang on their words trying to work out what this magic thing is that they do that you don't. **It turns out they just do what you do, but they don't give up.** They keep working at something until it works.

All the things we talk about day-to-day, week-to-week is just what they do better. There's no reason why you can't do it better. Can't lift yourself and elevate yourself to get on top of stuff. I'm always reminded, I think it was Gary Player's probably just attributed to him.

Gary Player the golfer who heard somebody muttering about how lucky he was when he holed a long putt and he was walking off and he said, "It's funny, the harder I practice, the luckier I become." He's absolutely right. Really excited to have her, Barbara, on. So kind of her to join us and it's thrills all around really to follow her career as she goes from strength to strength.

We're going to go, next week, back to sort of more practical level and something that I think is going to be of interest to people who are building up their mailing list now and looking at doing the sort of thing that Barbara does very well.

He's a guy who's founded a new mailing list service and competition to MailChimp and the others. Out of frustration because he was an author and he felt they didn't really address what he wanted from it. His name is Nathan Barry. It's called ConvertKit and it's getting huge applause.

This is an incredible story. He's very open about his figures as well. Jaw-dropping figures when he talks in an interview next week. Stay with us for that. We're going to be podcast number 26. Until then, hopefully with fresh inspiration Mark, from Barbara, we can all get writing right?

Mark: Yep. That's what I'm going to do right now.

Speaker 2: 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.