

EPISODE 28: SECRETS AND WORDS – WITH THRILLER AUTHOR RACHEL ABBOTT

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

Narrator: 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: Mark, you've been a busy boy this week. You just got off a webinar with author Nick Stephenson, how did that go?

Mark: It was great, really good. Nick had a great webinar presentation planned and loads of people turned up and almost all of them stayed until the end, which was great. We spent about half an hour answering questions on book marketing. That was fun and, as usual, I learned some stuff as well, so all good, really.

James: I think having you and Nick available together to answer questions covers a huge chunk of what you need to know to get on with self publishing.

Mark: Yeah, we covered pretty much everything, so I hope people got good value out of that. I think they did.

James: Good. Was it quite advanced?

Mark: No, not too much. Reasonably basic, looking at how to find your first ten thousand readers, that's Nick's thing, of course. Reasonably basic level, a good webinar for everyone.

James: Good. Because one of the things we're thinking a lot about is new authors. I think a lot about it because I'm just getting towards the end of drafting my first novel and I'm really starting to get into the next stage now. We're building our 101 course, which we're very excited about. You, me, and John all doing elements, mainly you, it has to be said, as the man who cracks the whole model.

But we should mention that we've opened up the list, the waiting list for 101 and also the waiting list to become a beta tester, not everybody on list is going to get to be a beta tester, we'll make some selections at some point when the course is ready for testing. That will be an opportunity to take the course for free and to feed back information to us, so if you're an author, you've got either your first draft and you're just moving into that next stage of marketing, or you don't know where to start on it, or possibly you've got a couple of books but you haven't really got the commercial set up right yet, this is aimed at you. You can get onto the list by going to selfpublishingformula.com. In fact it's on our homepage, a big banner at the top and if you click on that you'll get an email from us, you'll be there and you'll be invited into the Facebook group, et cetera, et cetera.

It's a really big thing for us, isn't it? Because we think this is such an amazing industry at the moment, it's an amazing opportunity and an amazing time to be a writer, but you've got to get those steps right in the first instance to get yourself set up properly for success.

Mark: Yeah, exactly. In the main course that we've done, I've suppose I've become best know for is the Facebook ads course. That's reasonably advanced, not completely advanced, but you do need to be a little bit down the road really before you start to implement that. We've definitely come to the conclusion that there's a massive demand for something

below that, more of an entry level, almost nuts and bolts. Everything you need to do from the moment you finish your manuscript to the moment you're ready to start selling it. Then beyond that with the second book and the third book. Your optimum sequences, mailing lists, social media, all of that kind of stuff that, to be honest, I kind of take that stuff for granted these days, because I've been doing it for so long now. When you actually step back and think about it and try to put yourself back into how your shoes, as you were five years ago, kind of where you are now, James, you realize quite quickly that there's a big demand for that kind of resource.

We are excited, I've cleared my calendar for September to start recording that. We're hoping to get that at least in the can by the end of September and then we'll start testing it in October and we're thinking about opening doors in November.

James: That URL again is www.selfpublishingformula.com, there's a big banner at the top of the page. You cannot miss it when you're on there. One other thing I want to mention, we're very excited we have a fantastic interview by the way in just a moment, so we're going to rattle through these parish notices, as we say in old England. The other thing I want to mention is coming up in September is Mark, I, and the third person who you don't hear from in SPF, John [inaudible 00:04:03] all going to be in the United States. Most of our students are in the US, we have students around the world, Australia, Europe, here in Blighty, but the majority, the biggest percentage is the US. We're going to drop in on a few of our students, particularly the ones who started at the beginning with us and have had great success, meet them.

We're going to converge together at NINC, which is the annual conference down in Florida and we are going to host a little get together. Have a drink on us and come and say hello. We would love to hear from you. If you listen to the podcast regularly and you're anywhere in the Florida area, or within driving distance of Florida, that's going to be on Wednesday, the twenty-first of September in the evening. We'll put out some details on our

Facebook page near the time, when we've sorted out actual venues. It's probably going to be about seven o'clock in the evening and will go on til late. I don't think we're going to buy the drinks all night, Mark. We should make that clear at this stage.

Mark: [laughter] We'll get John to buy the drinks.

James: Get us drunk, basically, and drinks will be yours. We would love for you to come up and say hello to us. It's always, absolutely brilliant. London Book Fair was the highlights for us this year was meeting so many people who listen to the podcast or have been in our Facebook group or even taken the course. It would be lovely to see you if you're going to NINC. If you're in our Facebook group, you should know about this already, but if you're not in our Facebook group, do drop us an email at support@selfpublishingformula.com and we will send you an invite to come to the Facebook group and that will give you the details of where we're going to meet. It's going to be very close to the main hotel which is the, what is it called again? It's on St. Pete's beach, isn't it? In Florida.

Mark: Tradewinds?

James: Tradewinds. A bit resort hotel, Tradewinds. I'm not giving a venue detail yet because I'm speaking to the hotel and we're trying to work out what the best thing to do, it might be at a nearby bar, it might be somewhere in the hotel. We don't want to step on the toes of other things that are going on NINC. I think there's a BookBub reception that night and absolutely you should be able to go to that and then come to us will be the plan. That's a bit of SPF live in September in Florida, so we're looking forward to seeing you then if you can make that.

Right, time to get on with our interview. You know that earlier this year we spoke to the biggest selling KDP author on the planet and today we have the biggest selling KDP author in the United Kingdom, Rachel Abbott. She has something very much in common with Barbara Freethy in that she is

very down to earth, once you start listening to her talking in a few minutes there'll be no surprises to why she's successful, because very much like Barbara, she puts her head down, she understands how things work and if they don't work she keeps at it until they do work. It's a methodical approach, brilliant interview, very inspiring, very valuable. Without further ado, let's move on to Rachel and we're going to pick up when I asked Rachel in the beginning to talk to me about how she first got into writing.

Rachel: I didn't actually start writing until I had taken early retirement from work. I published my first book in 2011, at the end of 2011. Through a lot of marketing efforts and tired work, I managed to get to the top of the charts and since then it's been all systems go, really. I've not stopped writing since.

James: Rachel, I can't believe you're retired already, because we have met and you don't look old enough to have been retired from another career.

What was your other career?

Rachel: I used to run an interactive media company. I started that company in 1982, we used to produce software and originally it was floppy disc software for schools mainly. Mainly for the education market.

James: Okay, so a little bit of crossover. I suppose you're quite ahead of its time, interactive media in the 1980s. You've got one foot in the digital space coming up to this point of writing. What motivated you to write, was it the idea of self-publishing, was it the idea simply of writing, you had no idea that you'd be self publishing at that point?

Rachel: It was really strange actually because I'd never thought about it, I've always been a voracious reader, but I'd never really thought about writing a book, until I was thinking sometime in the late 90s, probably, I was talking to the chairman of my company and saying that I would quite like to sell the business because I'd been doing it for a long time and it was very

exhausting. I said I'd quite like to sell it and he said well what would you do? I said I think I'd probably write a book. Everybody looked at me and I thought, yeah, I'd really like to do that. But it was quite a long time after that before we actually did sell the business, and even longer after that before I actually gave up work, because I carried on working for the holding company for another five years after I'd sold the business. I used to drive to work plotting murders, basically.

James: [laughter] You wanted to write, that was your motivation? You liked the idea of it and you enjoyed books and then how did you make that transition? Because lots of people read books, not everybody writes successful books.

Rachel: I think it was because I had all this time driving to work and back, because I used to drive for an hour each morning, even though it was only fifteen miles. I used to think about how the murder might actually take place. Because I wanted to work on the principle of what set of circumstances could be so bad that a woman would have no choice but to murder a man. Once I got that idea into my head, I used to plot all these murders. Then when I'd actually given up work, I found that I was bored. I was at a loose end, I didn't have enough to do. At that point, it was one winter, the weather was pretty vile and I went to the office and sat down and thought, I'm going to start writing that story and see what happens. Once I started writing I found I couldn't actually stop.

James: The same with you couldn't stop reading a good book, you couldn't stop writing a good book.

Rachel: That's right, yeah.

James: Always a good sign. Rachel, when you think about the story and you think about the situation and that's obviously quite a compelling beginning for your books, when you write them are you ... Because you can't just ... We all know as writers you can't just prosaically tell a story,

right? Because that could take five minutes to tell somebody what happened. When you write a book, you really write about something else, don't you? You write about the affect on people's lives or the character. I'm still intrigued as to how you made that transition. Having the idea of the story is one thing, isn't it?

Turning it into a book that has a greater impact on you is something else. How did you do that? Where did that come from?

Rachel: You're right about that, that is quite difficult because sometimes when I start to write a book I think, this is going to be really short. Because you actually start to think that the story's very simple. But it's the relationships around the story that I find particularly intriguing. Most of my stories are slightly relationship based, some of them are very relationship based. It's the impact not just on the protagonist, it's the impact on the people around as well and the whole family dynamic and what's going on with the rest of the family. I try to get myself into the position where I'm thinking from the points of view of each of the individuals and telling their stories separately.

James: Okay, and the relationship of course is what as drives us as humans really, isn't it? When we go through our own lives, that makes sense. You got to the point of writing and you found that came to you and when did you, did you approach publishers at that point? Did you start writing the letters? Did you finish your book first?

Rachel: I finished the whole thing first. Then I wrote it again, because it just wasn't right and I gave it a few people to read. I gave it to my mother to read, she was always perfectly free with her opinions.

James: [laughter] As mothers always are.

Rachel: Yeah. Sadly, she's no longer with us and she wasn't around when it was finally published, so that was a shame. But anyway, she gave me her

opinion as did several other people, and I still wasn't going to do anything with it because I'd done it for my own enjoyment, really. Then my step children came on holiday and they said could they read it? I printed it out chapter by chapter so that they could read a chapter and pass it on to the next one. It was really fascinating because they were so intrigued by the story and we're having dinner in the evening and they'd say, I really wonder what happened to this person and I wonder why she did that and I wonder who did this and ... I thought, well it such gripping them, so maybe there is something there.

At that point I did send it out to a small number of agents and I got a reasonable response, but generally they felt it wasn't the kind of book that the market was looking for at that time. I didn't want to [inaudible 00:12:54] around for years and years and years, sending it and re-sending it to agents, so I didn't do anything. I put it on the virtual shelf for about a year and did nothing with it.

James: Right, it's the old gatekeeper thing. Somebody else decides that people don't want to read your book.

But we've found a way of smashing through the gatekeeper, haven't we with self publishing. When did that happen?

Rachel: It was probably September, 2011. The book had been started sometime in 2009 and probably finished in 2010. I'd had a look before to see about self publishing, but initially if you were in the UK, it was very difficult because to start off with you needed a US bank account and a US tax code. I thought I can't do with all that, so again I put it on the back burner. Then I noticed that you could actually start to self publish for the Kindle if you're in the UK, so I thought, well I'll just have a go at this then. That sounds all right. It was actually more complicated in those days, but because of my background I understood about HTML coding and so converting the book so that it was ready was relatively easy for me.

James: That was a useful thing to have in your back pocket, a bit of HTML coding. You were quite hands on obviously in those days, twenty-eleven doesn't sound that long ago, but actually it was eons ago in self publishing terms, you're probably almost alone as well.

I doubt you had much contact with anybody else who was self publishing, did you?

Rachel: Well, there was a little band of people, actually. Mark Edwards and Louise Voss had been self publishing, although at that time they'd probably just got a publishing deal because their book was so successful. Now they're kind of between, a little bit hybrid now. There was Mel Sherratt as well and there were a few people around and we used to talk to each other and support each other. But it wasn't anywhere near as difficult, I don't think. Technically it was more difficult then, but in terms of the competition, it was less difficult than it is now.

James: Did you start to see success straight away?

Rachel: No, because I took it upon myself and I thought, all right, there we go then, that's it. That was in November, I published it November the fifteenth. Christmas we went to England, we were living in Italy at the time, we came across to England and we were staying with one of the step children again. I felt sick on Christmas day and I was delirious, I thought this was fantastic, then I realized I was being a bit pathetic really, because I used to run a company and I've done nothing to market this book at all. After Christmas I came back and I wrote a marketing plan, it took me two weeks to write the plan and after that it took four weeks to get to number one.

James: Tell us, Rachel. What was in this plan?

Rachel: [laughter] It was twenty-seven pages long, so I don't ... I think what I was trying to do is I was trying to identify the ways in which people would become aware of my book. Building awareness is the most important thing

to start off with. When you start to market your books. I tried to look at ways of making people aware. What I'd been doing up to that point, I'd been online and I'd think, oh I'll do a bit of this and a bit of that and a bit of the other. There was nothing that was a concerted effort.

The things that I did then don't work so well now. I did a lot of chatting to people on forums. They'd only just developed the Meet Our Authors forum and people were very supportive and chatted a lot. Whereas now when you go to those forums, people just seem to cut and paste an adware for their book and then move on. But I built quite a lot of relationships that way. It was all about awareness, every single aspect of the original marketing plan was making people aware. How could I get my book cover in front of many eyes as possible.

James: You used forums and I guess some social media, organic social media as well at that point?

Rachel: Yeah, for what it's worth, when I started I had nine followers on Twitter, so that was impressive, wasn't it? That was one of my things was building up my Twitter followers. Again, it was easier to do then because there were lots of things you could do with Twitter that you can't anymore.

One of the things, I had a piece of software that allowed me to choose other authors, obviously you could do this in any industry, but I chose other authors who I thought were in a similar field to me and I automatically, using this software, followed all of their followers. A lot of them had got auto follow back switched on so they all followed me back. I was able to go from nine followers to four thousand followers in about two weeks.

James: You put your twenty-seven page marketing plan into action and then you say within four weeks ... Did that include any paid advertising?

You use one or two tricks here, in this bit of software for Twitter, but was their paid advertising at that point?

Rachel: Nothing at all. It was all done ... I worked fourteen hours a day, seven days a week for three months, actually. Because I carried on after that, so January, February, March, I just never left my computer. And ate vast quantities of chocolate biscuits. It was not good [laughter].

James: So far as ingredients. Coffee, obviously as well.

Rachel: Coffee and chocolate biscuits, yeah.

James: And then this fantastic moment, you saw yourself on the best seller list.

Rachel: It was unbelievable. A lot of that happened because of the forums, suddenly it started to leap off the charts and I posted on one of the forums, I don't know what's happening. Somebody said, check out this forum, and it was a reader's forum but a few people had noticed my book and had started to read it and were talking about it. That really made a massive difference.

I went onto the forum with hundreds of people actually talking about it. Once you get a big leap in sales one day, then you become much more visible and you're much more likely to be picked up by the Amazon algorithms so that your book gets promoted to people. It all kind of worked from there, really.

James: Yeah, and that's true today, I think. It's difficult to get a start, but you'll be surprised when you do get some momentum rolling things become a little bit easier because of those magical algorithms, they reward success, don't they?

Rachel: Absolutely.

James: I should say, this is "Only the Innocent" I believe your first book?

Rachel: Yes, that's right.

James: Yeah, so this is your first book and you've got at least five other books, Rachel? I should get it up on my browser, now. I'm trying to do it from memory.

Rachel: I've got five full length ones and one novella.

James: Okay, so you had your success. You obviously got a bit of self confidence about your writing at that point as well, because we all like that at first, don't we? But there was some affirmation for you, that people genuinely wanted to read what you were writing.

Did you make money from the first book before you moved on to the second and third books?

Rachel: Oh yeah. I originally priced "Only the Innocent" at one pound ninety-nine. Which at the time was a pretty reasonable price because of course, the vast majority that had traditional publishers were selling eBooks at pretty much the same price as a paperback. So a one ninety-nine price point at that point was quite reasonable. I sold a lot of books, when it was at number one it was selling between three and four thousand copies a day. Yes, I was doing quite well out of it.

James: Yes. You were making money from it, I can tell.

You've moved on since then, how frequently have you written?

Rachel: I usually produce one book a year. Last year it was a bit different because I'd written "Strange Child" in 2015, it came out in February, and I was really pleased with the ending, I thought it was absolutely the right ending for the book. But there was a character in it who my readers obviously began to care about quite a lot and they wanted to know what

happened to her after the end of the story. Although I'm not a great fan of novellas myself, I don't often read novellas, I thought well, if they really want to know then I need to write what happened to her, and so I wrote a novella and it's done incredibly well.

James: Which one's the novella?

Rachel: "Nowhere Child"

James: Oh yes.

Rachel: It came after "Stranger Child."

James: Okay, well it's a good job you didn't kill this character your readers too to.

Rachel: Absolutely, well I have thought every now and again about killing somebody off, but I resist.

James: You'll get hate mail. Rachel, it's quite inspiring to hear from a standing start, but you've spoken quite quickly about some of the detail, the amount of work and study that went into this and you're, clearly having run your company, into the detail, you understand that you've got to get the details right to make the whole thing work.

Before we move on to where you are today and how you operate your marketing in today's environment, for people starting out, what would your general advice be?

Rachel: In terms of marketing, I tend to work on some basic principles. There is a basic principle in marketing that you have to get awareness, interest, desire, and action all sorted out. When you get people, as many people as you can, aware of your book and they reckon that you have to see the cover seven times before anybody would recognize it. What you

want is you want people to see your book on Amazon and think, I think I've heard about that, I think I've seen that somewhere before. Then that sort of generates the interest.

When they're interested, what are you going to do to create the desire in them to buy your book? You can do that by the way that you write your blurb, for example, that's really important that people get hooked when they read the blurb. Also, if you've got lots of good reviews from reputable reviewers, that helps enormously because they can see that other people have also enjoyed your book.

It's a whole process really from thinking the most you can do to make people aware, so I wrote to every blogger that I could find that did anything to do with thrillers or crime novels and said, can I write you an article? Can I do an interview? Will you review my book?

Most of them wouldn't review it because it's my first book, but they would accept an article or an interview. People said to me, everywhere I go I keep seeing your book cover. That was a really good thing, that was raising the awareness. That's the main principle.

The action one isn't quite so applicable in terms of marketing terms. That means make it easy to buy, but it was already on Amazon, it's pretty easy to buy anywhere. Sometimes people even now will send me an email and they say you can find my book on Amazon and I think, where's the link? I've got to look that up.

Some might, most just won't think to click on something, and there it is. Those are the kinds of basic principles and the other thing that is of critical importance, and you know all about this, that is maintaining a really good database of your readers, having a mailing list and using it sensibly.

James: Okay, let's move on to the main in just a moment, just to sum up that bit in terms of attitude. You worked really hard, but in a very focused

way. Obviously, when you got those refusals from people, you must have got a few of those in a row, there were no points at which you threw your hands up in the air and walked away or gave up. You just took it in an almost ...

We often say to people, you've got to be unemotional about the marketing side of things, you've got to treat it like a day job, a business, and that seems to me one of the secrets of your success is that sort of plodding through, if you like, plodding meticulously through it.

Rachel: Yes, I think that's a very good description. Sometimes, in the early days it did feel like plodding through it, you know I've got to do this, I've got to do ... There weren't so many things automated either, so it was much more hands on, you had to be constantly thinking of new, interesting things to say to people.

James: Okay, let's talk about the main list.

At what point did you start gathering the email addresses of your readers?

Rachel: Not soon enough.

James: Everyone says that.

Rachel: Probably by book three. I don't think I did it ... At the moment, in all my books now at the end, there is a "if you want to find out more about Rachel Abbott's books please click here" and it takes you to the website. I get quite a lot of people who sign up everyday, people who have read the book and think, oh yeah I want to be notified when there are more books. Now of course on Amazon there is a follow button as well, so if you look under an author's description, there's a yellow follow button and if you click that you'll also be notified when that author writes a new book. There's lots

of different ways now, but building my mailing list is something that I cannot believe that it didn't think of it, it's really, really bad. But I didn't actually think about it until the third book was coming out.

James: But you have started building it since then, how important is it to you today?

Rachel: It's very important, for me the important thing is keeping in touch with my readers. That's something else I've not done as well as I should have done. Because now my marketing concept have got two strands, one is keeping the existing readers happy, and the other one is finding new readers. Because my existing readers are such a great bunch, they are so supportive.

You just have to go onto Facebook and post something and you get loads of responses and loads of positive feedback. It's really important that I do things with my mailing list, with my newsletters that is going to appeal to them and not just all about trying to get new readers. When I do my marketing plan I think very much about existing readers and they're the ones who I approach through my mailing list and through Facebook.

James: Rachel, you sell a lot of books, you potentially are the biggest selling UK KDP author. I don't know, is that, do you know that for sure? Have you confirmed?

Rachel: Yes, confirmed over the previous five years that I was the highest selling author on Amazon UK.

James: Yeah, which is amazing. Congratulations on that.

Rachel: Thank you.

James: As we're hearing in this interview, not an accident. Something that you've worked at and got to this point. What I'm getting at, I suppose, is

you sell books well beyond your list and your profit points are well beyond your list, but the list is an important, particularly for a new book being launched, and that's one of the reasons why you're so careful about your existing readers. They are there to get your book that initial push.

Rachel: Yes, it is really important that. I do a lot of things around the launch. I have a fairly large launch plan which is in a spreadsheet and there's so much stuff that goes on, as well as using the mailing list to notify all my existing readers, which is great, I also obviously use Facebook and Twitter for that, but I do quite a lot of stuff leading up to it, you know, little teasers and things and here's the cover, here's a bit of the blurb, here's a bit of the story. Just to try and get people interested so that when the book actually is available to buy, people have already shown some commitment to buying it.

A lot of people say how are you doing this? But every year when I do a launch I do a Facebook party and that's really for the people who have consistently followed me throughout the year. It's full of deft quizzes and prizes and competitions.

I get really good feedback from that and it's again, it's a relatively small number in relation to the size of the database and the number of followers, but it's the people who have been most consistently on my side and have been supportive. Who've come along I'll chat to them all day, which is great.

James: That sounds like quite a lot of work, Rachel.

Have you got a team now?

Rachel: Yes, I'm afraid I couldn't do it all myself, no I just would not be able to cope with that. I have a PA who works with me here in my office. She just comes in a couple of mornings a week, but she also works from home an hour or so each day just doing some of the background stuff that needs

doing. I also have a virtual assistant who actually is the same, Joanna Penn put me in touch with her, so we both use her. She's in Canada and she does quite a lot of work on the data base and builds the newsletters and all kinds of other things along those lines.

My PA here has to organize all my travel because I'm very rarely in one place for more than two or three weeks before I have to go somewhere. I've now got a publicist and I've always, I've got an agent since I first produced "Only the Innocent."

James: A publicist? That's quite interesting. How long have you had a publicist and what ... because we did an episode on that recently and Mark's recently invested in a publicity company. In fact for our company as well, for SPF and we've been quite pleased with the results and seen them as quite important to get to the next level. Not necessarily important at the first stage, but if you want to wrap things up we've found that's been very useful.

Have you found the same thing?

Rachel: Definitely, I think it's very difficult, I've heard a few conversations about this at various talks that I've given, the same with an agent, but we'll talk about that separately. In terms of the publicist, the thing is it's very difficult to quantify what they do for you, because my publicist now has got me some fantastic reviews in magazines, magazines like Good Housekeeping Magazine and Red Magazine and the thing is if you actually look on the publication day of the magazine, the sales promptly don't go up so people say, how's that work then?

Again, it's all about awareness. It's making more and more people aware of who Rachel Abbott is. She organizes me to speak at festivals and again, people say going to festivals doesn't sell you any books, but it's all about being out there and being seen and being taken seriously.

James: So similar I suppose to raising awareness that you did in the stage, but on a smaller scale in the forums where there were readers, some readers active in online forums, whereas now you're popping up around the world in different places.

The magazines that you mentioned certainly in the UK, Red Magazine I notice it appearing in our house, so that's quite a well read magazine and I always say to people when I used to work in PR before it is a drip-drip-drip thing, you can't ever look at a single PR event and think that's going to do things for you. What's going to do things for you is twenty-four months of popping up all over the place.

As you say, people then connecting the dots and that leading them at some point to click buy and try one of your books.

Rachel: That's absolutely right. The thing is, the people that you get through forums and Facebook and Twitter, they're only a relatively small fraction of the people who read books.

If I think about my friends who really love reading, most of them don't have a Twitter account at all, the vast majority of them don't have. Most of them do have a Facebook account, but a lot of them don't use it very often, so you have to make people aware by as many means as you can. For some people that might mean if you can get a publicist who can get you an article in the Sunday Times, as my previous publicist did, you know it makes a big difference. People know who you are, they've heard of you.

James: Okay, let's just talk about the role of an agent, Rachel. Then I want to talk to you a bit about productivity and your approach to writing. For those of us at the beginning of our writing careers, you don't really know what an agent does when you're self publishing.

Can you explain that?

Rachel: Yes. A lot of people have said to me, well, what on earth do you need an agent for because the agent's job is to sell your books to a traditional publisher. They don't understand why I've got one if I'm going to remain independently published. The fact is that my agent, and not all agents are created equally, it has to be said, but my agent gives a massive amount of editorial input.

When I come up with an idea for a book, my agent asks me to send a synopsis of the book that I want to write and she comes back with suggestions, like are you sure you've got this right? Et cetera, et cetera and then I write maybe the first twenty thousand words and she has a look at that and gives me some feedback from that and so it goes on, so she's actively involved in the process of making sure that I am writing for my audience, so she's got a very clear idea in her head.

Because as a writer it's quite easy to go off on a bit of a tangent and you need somebody to be able to pull you back to where you want to be. She does all of that, but she also is constantly thinking about my future, do I want to remain independent, do I want to do a hybrid deal, how do I want to work, what about other countries? My books are now translated into over twenty languages and that's all through the agent.

James: That's really interesting, the editorial role, almost like the role of a structural editor who would give you some consultation advice. I wonder how many writers, particularly self published writers, have that type of relationship with an agent.

Rachel: I think it depends on the agent. Certainly, my agent is Lizzie Kremer and she works for David Higham Associates and I'm fairly certain that all of the agents there give editorial feedback, because I do know people who work with other agents within that company and they all get editorial feedback. It's key, one of my writing friends is now with David Higham Associates, who was previously with another, which obviously I won't mention, and never got any editorial feedback at all. Never. I think

having the right agent is really important, having an agent who just sends your book out to publishers, which is fine if you want to be traditionally published, that would work great, but unless they're actually actively selling your translation rights as well, in some cases I think people don't need an agent. For me, because she's actually helped so much in the whole development of my career, and encouraged me when I'm feeling really, oh it's not going very well, you know sometimes the stories don't come together and she helps, she puts forward ideas and it works really well.

James: Great.

Rachel, when do you get a chance to write? Because you seem quite busy.

Rachel: I am busy. I do tend to work seven days a week, but that doesn't mean to say I don't take any time off. For example, this afternoon after we finish talking I'm going out for the rest of the afternoon.

James: You swimming?

Rachel: No, I'm not going swimming, no. I was going to go swimming, but some friends are having a barbecue so I'm going to that instead. I do tend to try and work at least a fair part of every day, and most days I'm in the office for about seven or eight hours. The days that my PA is in, I do admin when she's here because I can't really right very well because obviously we've got a lot of things to discuss and I would lose my concentration. But I do set myself a word count once I start writing, because I've got deadlines in my head by when I need to finish things. I work very hard to stick to that word count.

James: Can you give us an idea of what that is?

Rachel: It depends on the state of the book. At the moment, it's about two thousand words a day. Sometimes it's more, sometimes it's a lot more.

Because after I've published a book, my last book came out in February, March, and April were pretty much spent doing the marketing and tying up loose ends, doing the stuff that needed to be done and putting forward some ideas for the next book.

Then I started writing in May, but I've started a completely different book, and then changed tack halfway through and went back to a different story, so I lost a month or so there. It goes on like that, those sort of things happen all the time. I will go back to the original idea in the future. There's been a bit of dodging around from idea to another at the moment. That's why I'm on a fairly tight schedule and I might have to up the ante to three thousand words a day.

James: These are deadlines you set yourself, effectively, as opposed to your agent, who is probably in your ear a little bit, encouraging you.

Rachel: No, she never pushes me at all. The problem I have, obviously is that when I've written something and it goes to her, she's got so many other people she's got to look out for that I have to obviously make sure that it fits in with her timing as well, so there's no point me sending her something when she's about to go off on holiday, for example.

I try and work around that as well and she tries very hard to accommodate me. It takes quite a bit of backwards and forwards and quite a lot of ideas. Like you said, the structural idea has to be done and then there there's the line idea, and the copy idea, and the proofreading and it all takes time.

James: When you start your book, how developed is the structure?

Rachel: When I actually start writing, the structure is quite well thought through. When I come up with the idea, first of all, I just took a kind of one page synopsis, but then I work really hard on the characters and I have very comprehensive character descriptions and location descriptions. Also, I have a plan of the time so I know what time of year it is so I know when

somebody's going out at six in the morning is it going to be light, is it going to be dark? What sort of weather they might be getting, you know if you're writing thrillers, there is a temptation for every single scene to take place on a dark, winter's night when it's raining or snowing. But that gets a bit tedious, doesn't it?

You have to think about all of those things, so I do a lot of work in advance on that. I have a pretty comprehensive structure on the story, although it does tend to divert from that structure as the story goes. But I don't like writing into a vacuum. I like to think I know where it's going, even if it does actually go a bit off piece along the way.

James: What tools do you use? Microsoft Word or Scrivener or one of the others?

Rachel: I use Scrivener a lot, actually. There's a lot of things I really like about Scrivener. For example, if I'm using Scrivener to write, which as I say, my first draft is always in Scrivener but once it goes off to the editor it goes into Word because the edits don't work in Scrivener. I use Scrivener, I can easily find the chapter that I want to go to because down the left hand side of the screen you've got the folders with all of the chapters and then the text sections with all of the scene names, so it's really quick and easy to find the bit that you're going to.

But it's not just that, I can also use key words so that if I'm tracing, if I'm following for example of the story, let's say somebody's mobile phone goes missing, I can actually tag every chapter where the mobile phone is mentioned with a key word and then I can just read those chapters to make sure that story actually is consistent and nothing gets lost along the way.

I use Scrivener a lot and I also use Scapple, which is by the same people as Scrivener, and that's a kind of mind mapping tool, and I use that a lot to work out what I think might happen in various scenes.

James: The key word is functionality which is something I'm aware of but not used. I think Mark uses it, but that's something I definitely need to get into. As you say, you write something then you realize you need to check it for consistency from something five chapters previously and it can be a bit of a pain having to wade through working out where that stuff is.

The key word seems to be like a good way around that.

Rachel: We can create collections and that works really well, so most of my stories have got lots of different strands, so there's always a policeman in my stories called Tom Douglas and he is not the main character, believe it or not. He's always there because there's always a crime to be solved, but the main characters, in my head at least, are the people who are either the perpetrators or the victims of the crime, and it's there story that I'm telling and then Tom Douglas comes in and does his bit.

There are normally, the one I'm working on at the moment, there are sort of four stories that are running side by side and of course they will all converge at some point. It's really important that I can check all of those stories individually, so any scene that relates to any one of those stories, I can actually just read all of those scenes sequentially by using collections and that really helps me make sure that I haven't done anything ridiculous like somebody's already dead and I've got them in a conversation or something.

James: Yeah. [laughter]

Rachel: Which I don't think I've ever done, actually. But you know ...

James: We'd all think that's clever and deliberate and you're playing with us if that happened. Rachel, "Kill Me Again" I think was your lovely, fantastic title, by the way, "Kill Me Again" I think was probably your latest?

Rachel: Yes.

James: And you've got the next one in the pipeline?

Rachel: Yes, I have.

James: Okay, just so. Because I think those that haven't come across Rachel Abbott's work yet will want to investigate it, I'm sure having heard you talk about it indeed. One final area, Rachel, before we let you go for your barbecue, is Facebook advertising I know is something you've been increasingly interested in. It's how we got talking earlier this year.

Is that something that's a feature for you now?

Rachel: Yes, I don't do as much of it as I would like to, actually. And that comes down to time. I am trying to get other people in my team involved in doing it because I do think it works well. I use the Boost host facility quite a lot so that I can actually boost a post to certain sectors. I have started to follow the course, Mark's course, and I think he works really well and there're so many brilliant tips in that actually. But it is one of those things that I would do a lot more of, but I just need to find the time, and that is to get other people up to speed so that other people could do it on my behalf, really.

James: Yeah, there's some detail there to master, isn't there. Well Rachel, it's been a real pleasure talking to you. It was great fun to meet you in London earlier this year and it's fun to think back to you and Mel Sherratt earlier in 2011, around then and sort of pioneers really who led the way and here you are now with a fantastic catalog. As you say, it's just confirmed, the UK's best selling KDP author which is an inspiration to all of us.

Rachel: Thank you very much, James. That's very kind of you.

James: I loved talking to Rachel. She was over there in Jersey, I think it was Jersey or Alderney, one of the ...

Mark: Alderney.

James: Alderney, that's it. One of the Channel Islands, which is a group of islands in between Britain and France, a very, very lovely, very beautiful and she works away in her office and she talked to us a bit about that, obviously about how she does her writing, alone and then does a bit of admin with her PA.

She has a nice life, does a lot of traveling as well, I should say Rachel, but I absolutely loved talking to her. I love listening to the fact that she gets on with business. This is not, again we come back to this theme, Mark, you don't sit around waiting for magic things to happen.

You make them happen, right?

Mark: Yeah, I've tried the first approach with my first couple of books and surprisingly, that didn't work for me very well. It was only when I realized that you need to be more than just a writer these days if you're going to make it that things started to pick up steam and ... Yeah, you're right,

Rachel is a very, very good example that takes a career by the scruff of the neck and just shakes it and shakes it until things start to go right for her. So you get completely inspirational. And for you too, James. You're getting to the stage now where we're going to be finishing your book, or you're going to be finishing your book soon. Then I'll be publicly shaming you and you'll get that book uploaded and start selling it, that's the plan.

James: Yeah, well I'm properly into the finishing stages now. I'm at that point now where I'm obsessing about it all the time, so I went out and cut the cricket strip at our ground for an hour this afternoon, it's one of the things I do a couple of times a week, I just find it quite therapeutic, just

thinking over and over again about the wording and how the whole book's going to finish and sell, but I guess you have that all the time. You professional writers, you. Actually that reminds me ... That still smarts, doesn't it? The person who decided you weren't a real writer because you did your own marketing. You still mention that in your emails.

Mark: I do still mention that because it's the most ridiculous comment I've ever heard. The fact that I do fifty percent marketing, fifty percent marketing and she thought that meant I wasn't a full time writer. I don't know where her books are though James.

James: Yeah.

Mark: Funny that.

James: And Rachel Abbott's not a proper writer because she does her own marketing.

Mark: Exactly.

James: Ludicrous. Okay, thank you very much indeed for listening. Just to remind you, if you want to get on the waiting list, and opportunity possibly to be a beta tester and get the 101 course from SPF for free, go to selfpublishingformula.com and click on the banner at the top of the page and sign up there.

And if you're going to be in the United States, in the southern part of the United States in Florida next month, September on Wednesday the twenty-first of September in the evening, we're going to be in the Tampa area, St. Pete's beach, details to come later on, but we look forward to seeing you if you can make it til then. You're going on holiday for a week, but we will be back next week with another exciting episode. Have a nice break, Mark.

Mark: I will do and I'll speak to you next time.

Narrator: 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.