

## PODCAST 5: PRODUCTIVITY, DREAMING BIG & MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES – WITH SEAN PLATT

**James:** You can win a scholarship to Mark Dawson's acclaimed premium course, Facebook Ads for Authors, by spreading the word about this podcast. Visit [SelfPublishingFormula.com/contest](https://SelfPublishingFormula.com/contest) to enter. Hello, and welcome to podcast number 5, from the Self Publishing Formula.

Two writers, one just starting out, the other, a best seller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson, and their amazing guests, as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James: Yes, hello. We're feeling refreshed. You're feeling particularly invigorated and refreshed, Mark, because you've just stepped off an airplane, haven't you?

Mark: I've been flying overnight from New York back to London after a weekend with my wife, celebrating her birthday in New York, which is wonderful. I'm operating on about four hours of sleep, so if I drop off, you have to give me a kick.

James:

Yes, I'll do that. Well, happy birthday to Lucy. You need your energy now because we've got a busy few weeks ahead of us, not least with the podcast. We're not going to dilly-dally at this moment, because we've got a really good inspirational interview coming up don't we Mark?

Mark:

Yes, it's Sean Platt, who most people in the indie space all know very well. He is typically full of beans, and inspirational, and just talking about a pretty wonderful life he's managed to build for himself.

James:

We're delighted Sean Platt is joining us. If you don't know, Sean is the founder of **Sterling and Stone**, an indie publishing phenomenon. It also houses the imprint realm in 'Sands,' 'Collective Inkwell,' 'The Smarter Artist,' and others. He writes with Johnny B. Truant, David W. Wright, and Garrett Robinson. He's enjoyed great successes with a series including 'Invasion,' 'Yesterday's Gone,' and 'The Beam.'

He's built a wide ranging podcast network including the very well known Self Publishing Podcast. He's lead the groundbreaking **Fiction Unboxed** project, and he's currently designing a **story building app** that met lofty funding goals on Kickstarter. He is ridiculously prolific, somehow seems to have extended the hours available to him on any given day. He's also one of the more, should we say unashamedly ambitious people in the indie space, with a series of goals that seem like they might be too ambitious until he goes ahead and does them anyway.

We've got a whole host of questions for you. I think we do want to start off with that whole thing about your work ethic and your approach. There's a lot going on in your life.

Your achievements, I've just listed a few of them there. How do you do this? How do you set about every day when you wake up? How do you order your life and these targets?

Sean: Well, I've been working since forever. I actually don't think there's a single person on either side on my family that has an actual job, where they go in and punch in. I think we're just allergic to it. My grandpa owned basically what was a junk store, but it was an awesome junk shop, on Olvera Street, which is the oldest street in California. He was Mexican. It was Ramos Imports. He just got a bunch of stuff from Tijuana and would mark it up, and it was a junk shop. He had it for 54 years and it was his business.

My parents owned a flower shop for 30 years in Long Beach, California. That was just awesome. From the time I was very, very small, I used to work there. I mean, I was ripped off, I was paid like a dollar an hour or something ridiculous. It still was money that I got to make from a very small age. I'd go in on the weekends and have to clean up the dried flowers and things like that. It was punching a clock at a very early time.

By the time I was in fifth grade, I wanted more than the \$1.25. I think that's what I made back in, what would that have been? Like, 1985. A \$1.25 an hour, and I wanted more than that. I knew I could make more than that, so I opened up a little business selling stuff on the playground. I would repurpose GI Joes; and take five of them and deconstruct them and put them back together, sell mutant GI Joes for a markup.

Garbage Pail Kids were really big at the time, so I had my mom drive me 30 miles to this Altadena liquor store that would sell them to me by the box. I would go through all of them and take out the most rare ones, and sell them individually. Then, make big giant bundles for a bargain price; and both would sell because people are different. Some people wanted the premium individual cards, and some people would want the bulk packs; but I would triple what I spent on each box, so that was cool. I just learned, and I learned to sell. It just seemed like a lot of fun. That kind of went away for a while, but I was always working in the flower shop.

I actually didn't have a lot of ambition from the time I was 15, 17. I just wanted to play, because I was in high school. That's what you do in high school, you play.

When I got a car, that was the deal. I went straight from getting my driver's license, I drove immediately to the flower shop and loaded it up with flowers for that afternoon's deliveries. That was the deal. Like, "Hey, you want to have a car, then okay, but you're going to do the deliveries and wash buckets every day after school." I did, and I enjoyed being around the shop a lot.

When I was 18, I dropped out of school early, actually, because I just was a terrible student. Once I had the car, I wasn't going to school very often. It was just a bad recipe. I just started really throwing myself into the store. Then when I was around eighteen years old, these two girls who worked for my family, really through a lot of my childhood ... One of them I saw as an older sister. They just stole from my family, and opened up a shop one mile, three-quarters of a mile away. They took a lot of our clients, and all of our standing orders while my dad was in the hospital. They just kind of snuck away in the middle of the night and opened up a shop. I was just

furious. I had all the anger an eighteen year old can have. That's when I think a lot of my ambition was born. It was just really misdirected because I opened up five flower shops in the next two years.

James: On either side of the two girls' shops.

Sean: Yes, yeah. The mandate was, "We have to break even." I didn't care about making money. I cared about putting them out of business. I had to juggle a lot of employees. I was 20 years old at the time. I was juggling 20-odd employees.

This is the nicest part of Long Beach. It was a tiny little shop, I mean tiny. The rent was \$5,000 a month. I just had to break even, just break even. I could do it, I could do it. It was ridiculous. It was so stupid. I seriously wasted a couple years of my life, but I learned a lot. I got to be really scrappy, and the ambition was born there.

There was a big divide between my father and I, and the way we wanted to run the business. I was making deals because I had to have such bottom line prices, and such great quality, I was making deals directly with the farms and buying from pretty much the best farms in the world; but I was buying direct and importing direct so that I could pay way less than I would downtown at the flower market. There were just ways that I wanted to keep doing that with the business and scaling it. My father was a little bit afraid of some of those directions.

Eventually, after working there for one, two years, I opened a preschool with my wife. Our children were very young. I was working like 70 hours a week, so I wasn't really seeing them. My son was one, and my daughter was two and a half. I just thought, "Oh man, this is ... This is rough. You know, they're growing really fast." We opened the preschool, I did that for a few years. That's when I finally started writing, so that was like eight years ago at this point, seven years ago. That was the first time I ever wrote.

Again, like I said, I dropped out of high school so I didn't really fancy myself a writer at all, but I'm verbal, clearly. I can tell a story. So I just had to slow down enough to get it on the page. There were a lot of false starts, but it was a little bit like the flower shop thing. Trial by fire, I learned really fast. I started out writing \$5 keyword articles.

Again, this is where the work ethic is there. I was used to getting up early. The flower shop business is hard. You got to go downtown and buy flowers at about two, three in the morning. You'd work seven days a week, and holidays, when everybody else is kicking back, are your hardest times. It's a little like owning a restaurant, or maybe having a farm as a family, where you just do what needs to be done and you don't bitch about it. I've always been able to just work. In fact, next week I'm taking a vacation. It's the first legitimate vacation I've ever had in my life.

James: Define legitimate. I mean, how much work are you going to do?

Sean: I'm actually not. I'm going to be on a boat in the middle of the sea, and I'm actually unplugging. Even when I got married, what 15 years ago when I got married, it was a three day weekend. Every vacation that I've taken since has been either business-related in some way, or a lot of family obligations. I went to California to visit my family this last summer, and we were just scheduled down to the minute. It wasn't really unplugging at all. We're taking a vacation to the Caribbean. I'll be gone for a period of time and actually unplugging. Yay for me.

Sean: That's the first time. It's always been kind of just relentless. When I realized, "Okay, I want to write. We're going to close our preschool," which was ballsy. It was really ballsy. I had a Southern California mortgage to carry, and I thought, "You know what? I'm smart. I'm driven. I can make this work." My wife has this almost unreasonable, unflinching faith in me. She championed me and said, "Go, go, go." Even though it was probably the wrong thing to do. I was writing keyword articles for crappy SEO companies. It was the worst job ever, and I would get paid \$5 an article. They had to be 500 to 750 words, but I would write 20 of them in a day. That still wasn't nearly enough to cover our mortgage. I learned to copy-write, and that's when the money came in. I made really great money as a copywriter. I lost my house, but got out of debt, at least a little.

James: Who did you copywrite for?

Sean: I was a ghostwriter, so a lot of people. I wrote a lot of info-products. I wrote a ton of sales letters. If you're a good copywriter for a sales page, you'll never go hungry, ever. You can double your rates from one job to the

next; and people will pay them anyway because a sales letter that converts, it's an ATM machine. I got really good at that.

Then, I started working with someone named Laurie Taylor. She paid me an absurd amount of money to work with her. She hired me as a copywriter, and then pretty much after three months working with her, I became her right-hand person and consultant. I basically became her idea person. She lived in Cincinnati. I was living in Long Beach at the time; but it was real convenient timing because I had just lost the house. She set me up in a house in Cincinnati and just compensated me really well, and treated me really nicely.

It was the first time I had ever been paid for my brain, which was very attractive to me, because someone was saying to me, "Hey, you're smart. I'll pay you just to talk to you." I liked that a lot, so I did that for a few years. During that time, I did a lot of underground copy. I did a lot of her sales letters. I did a lot of stuff, a lot of consulting.

I worked for a health insurance company and got onto SEO keywords. I was pretty ninja at SEO, and I ended up getting the number three results for "health insurance," on page one.

James: Wow, and that's competitive in the states.

Sean: Yeah, it's the most competitive. I think cigarettes and sex are both really high, but health insurance is right up there. That was pretty cool, but then Kindle dropped in 2010. I pretty much thought, 'I am never going to have client work ever again.' I left that really stupid lucrative job, stupidly lucrative, it wasn't stupid. It was stupidly lucrative. Just decided, "You know what? It's going to take a while, but long term, this is what's best for me, and for my family, and for my soul, and kind of for the things I want to do with my time."

I left that job, and I started publishing on Kindle with Dave. I had been working with Dave for a while already. In fact, when I first got my job with Laurie we shared money and he helped me whenever he needed to. Then, I squirreled away a little bit, and was to bankroll our early days of 'Yesterday's Gone' when we were writing that. Then, I moved to Austin, because I didn't really need to be in Cincinnati anymore. Even though at that point, Laurie had become one of my best friends. I'm godfather to her

twin boys, actually. I still didn't need to live in the city, and Austin is just so creatively vibrant. It seemed like a really good place to reboot my career and the things I wanted to do; so I moved out here.

Actually, the very first iteration of Sterling and Stone, I started with Laurie. I had Laurie, and I had one other partner, and we were writing non-fiction books. We were producing three books a week at the time. The first version of Sterling and Stone had three full time writers, three full time editors, a marketing director, which Laurie was, a guy named Matt, was our production manager, and then there was me. We would do really simple keyword books. Let me think of one ... 'How to do X,' right? How an author can set up a Pinterest profile, like very simple ... We were answering one question in about 10,000 words.

James: Is this is going straight onto Kindle?

Sean: These would go straight onto Kindle. We did, I want to say, just over 50 books. Then, I folded, because the two main partners weren't really getting along; that was Matt and Laurie. I got along with each of them individually really well, but they didn't really get along with each other and it just felt like ... my spidey sense was tingling, basically.

Also, it was getting away from what I really wanted to do, which was to produce fiction. I wanted to make fiction, and we were doing a lot of non-fiction books. The best thing that came from that early iteration is, I don't know if a lot of people know this, but there's a fully existing season one of 'The Beam,' that Johnny and I did not write together. That I wrote as part of this production model, which was kind of born with the first iteration of Sterling and Stone. I had mapped out the season, and I was acting like a show runner. Then, I would have a writer come in and write the show. When it was all done, I didn't think it was good enough, so I shelved it. Then, I took it back off the shelf when I started working with Johnny because I thought he would be better able to articulate the story. That was all really cool, and then we started a podcast right about this time. Johnny nagged us into it. I'm really glad he did, because it's been one of the best things in my life. Just the working relationship I have with Johnny and Dave, and it's been really, really amazing. That was a lot of talking.

James: Yeah, well I don't know about Mark, but I've got follow-up questions, straight away. I want to take you back, because I think everyone is fascinated with what makes an entrepreneur tick, and you gave us quite a bit of insight into that.

My two follow-up questions to that, one is what the two girls did to you, the two women, to your family business. I wondered now when you've been in the cut and thrust of business for a long time, whether you have any sympathy at all for them, just thinking from a business point of view, where you still think that's just not the way to behave ethically, and you still feel the same.

Sean: I absolutely feel the same way. I would never, ever treat anyone like that. Honor is really important to me. Now, I would never behave in the way that I behaved, because I think my behavior was equally wrong. It was really easy to justify at the time, but no, that was stupid. It was really, really dumb. I should have let karma take care of it.

James: It's not ethically wrong. I think I completely understand you, and I would probably have done something similar. It may not be, perhaps the most sensible thing, to have done.

Sean: Yeah, sensible. That's exactly right. It wasn't sensible. It really ended up just wasting a lot of my time, and that was silly. What did I benefit from that? I mean, some good, in-the-trenches knowledge, for sure.

James: Yeah, you learn some stuff.

Sean: But no, I would never be friends with somebody, and then turn around and do that. They literally stole. They stole, and I don't think there's any circumstances ever where that's okay. On the other hand, I don't think that I needed to open up five shops in a circle around them just try to squeeze them. That's a little bit silly.

James: It's who you were then, and it's partly made who you are now. I find that really interesting, because there are industries, the advertising industry, over the years, where everyone steals their clients and sets up their own agency the moment they can; where this type of behavior has long been part and parcel of it. I really love the fact that hopefully, and I think Mark and I consider ourselves in this space as well, where we operate in a different way.



I hate to use the '2.0 expression', but it's a new way of doing things where you do it because you enjoy it, and because you want to be with these people, and you want to make progress together. You don't do it at each other's expenses, certainly not to that degree, anyway.

Sean: I remember at the time I was complaining to my hair dresser about this. I really liked this guy. His salon was right next door to our flower shop, and I had gone to him since I was a kid. I just expected him to share in my outrage, and he just absolutely did not, because that happens in the salon business all the time. Yeah, I mean I can understand it, but I know I would never do that. If somebody did that to me now, I wouldn't sue anybody if they stole from me, which is maybe a silly thing to say out loud.

I feel like I'm a smart person and I'm great to work with. You lose the ability to ever work with me again because you wronged me. I can't trust you, and if I can't trust you, I'm not going to work with you. I feel like that's a big loss. The relationship is much more valuable than anything you're going to steal from me.

James: I'm going to let Mark speak in a minute. I've still got more questions. Sorry, Mark. I'm hogging Sean. My other question is about work life balance, because obviously by your own admission, you've been this workaholic. You get up in the morning, you beef up the hours every week; you're taking your first holiday soon. There's a lot of talk in this space ...

People like Pat Flynn and 'the passive income,' and Tim Ferriss and "The 4-Hour Work Week."

A lot of people saying that the idea of doing all this, of getting these income streams from various sources, and podcasts, and all the rest of it, is that you don't have to work. I always think that's a little bit contradictory, because the people who are able to do this, who are so motivated that they can forge these new areas, are exactly the opposite of the people who don't want to work and only want to work four hours a week.

Can you find a way where you can just sit back and start enjoying the revenue streams coming in without being at it all day?

Sean: I think that's a great question. I think that there's two sides to that. First, I do think that you're absolutely right. I think that the person who is going to enjoy those revenue streams is a person who, that's part of the art

for them, is creating those revenue streams. They're not just creating them so that they can sit back and enjoy them, they're creating them because that's part of what they want to do. I come back to this all the time. If I all of a sudden had 30 million dollars in the bank, I wouldn't be doing things much differently than I'm doing right now.

The company has grown a lot in the last year, so a lot of our infrastructure is taken care of. There has been a lot of stuff that's taken off of my plate for the first time in seven years since I started out on all of this crazy adventure. To my credit, I haven't filled that with more work, which is what I would typically have done. If I've just cleared ten hours a week off of my plate, I would add ten hours of new stuff. Lately, I've not. I'm exercising every day. I've never done that in my life. I'm exercising every day, every Wednesday I have date day with my wife. I started that in September when the children went back to school, and I haven't missed it one time, except when I had to travel. It's these other things that I'm putting into my life, which I think makes me a more complete, more balanced person, and therefore I'm refueling my tank, which I think makes me able to do even more.

I don't think it's about doing less. I don't get joy out of doing less. I find that I have work life balance because my work is, in a lot of ways, my life. I enjoy everything that I do. I think you find, for me personally, I find work life balance by not doing anything I don't want to do. I can work 70 hours a week because I get to see my children whenever I want, and I love all of the projects. As long as I put my love for what I'm doing ahead of other things like money. Because it's not that I don't like money, of course I like money; but I also am a very long term thinker. I tend to believe if I just keep doing what I do, I'm going to make more money than I can spend over my lifetime, so what's the point of hustling in ways that are incongruent with my passion?

Mark: I agree. I think I share that way thinking, too. I don't think I told you this before, Sean, but I was a lawyer when I came out of university in the city of London. Those would be 70 hour weeks, typically. The kind of place where people would leave their jackets on the backs of their chairs when they left at night so that the partners thought that they were still in the

office. Those are horrible places. Certainly not for me, but I've probably worked those same kind of hours now.

If on my Sunday night, I can go to bed excited about the next five days, I know I'm doing the right thing. For too long, for 15 years, probably, I would go to bed on Sunday and was regretful because I had another five days before I got to the weekend again where I could do my own thing. Yeah, it is hard. I definitely work hard. You work extremely hard. When you're enjoying something, it's not really work, it is a blend of work and life.

Sean: Yeah, it's life. I sit down on Sunday morning, and I'm pretty religious about this. I don't go to church, but every Sunday morning, I do sit down and I plan my week. I've done this for ever, really. When I was writing a lot of copy, or when I was juggling things with Laurie, it's other times in my life, or even the very early days of Sterling and Stone, I would have these big, long lists of to-dos when I'm planning out on Sunday. My week, it would give me kind of a sinking feeling in my stomach, like, "Ugh. So much to do. There's just so many Ts to cross and Is to dot, but I'll get to it."

Now when I'm planning my week, it's like "Aw, I can't wait to do that! Oh, I can't wait to do that! I can't wait." It's not like there's never anything that I'm not looking forward to, because of course there is; but by and large, almost everything that I'm doing at any point in the week, I'm excited about it. I'm looking forward to it.

Mark: In practical terms, what does your day look like? What time do you get up? What time do you fold the laptop up and finish?

Sean: I get up at 5:30, and that's pretty religiously. Sometimes a little before 5, but I cannot remember the last time I set an alarm at all.

Mark: Wow.

Sean: I don't need to. I wake up, and that's the time I wake up. I go out and I make coffee, and I get right to work. It's very easy for me. I do creative, so it's very easy to get lost in email. It's very easy to get slacking and just stupid, stupid stuff that all of a sudden, your day is gone and you're like, "What did I do today?" It's so, so easy, and I know that about myself.

I also know that, I think the best way to be productive is to know who you are, and trick yourself into being good, you know? If you like to eat cookies,

don't put them in the house, right? That's basically my deal. I really try to kill distractions.

I want to get four to six hours of creative stuff done before I do anything else. That means beats and outlines for new stories. That means editing stuff. That means writing, anything that is just actually producing work has to be done in the first part of the day. Right now, it's actually 9:30 for me, a.m., and I never, ever do anything at this time like this. I never do interviews at this time. I'm always creative. The reason we're doing this is because I messed up our last time. I got to own that. I wasn't going to make you guys do a later one, because I messed up the time.

James: We're very grateful. We do feel a little bit honored.

Sean: No, no. It's because I messed up, you know? That's the right thing to do. When we first made the appointment, I was "No, this is when I can do that." I think protecting your schedule is important. I think it's really easy when you're us, right? You're entrepreneurs, you work for yourself. We're creative, and we kind of are a little flopsy-mopsy with our day. Just say, "Oh, I can do it then, because I'm not doing anything else. I can do this other thing later." I think the more that you build routines into your life, and you're consistent with those routines, I think the more you're training yourself to be successful.

Mark: That's the morning, I'm with you on that.

I definitely do my creative work in the morning. Do you stop for lunch?

Sean: I do stop for lunch. I stop for lunch at the same time every day, which is noon-ish, when my wife comes home from hot yoga every. She goes every single day, and that's when she comes home. I step away, and we bond. We have lunch. Then, I take a nap, most days, because I used to not ever take a nap and I would just power through stuff. Now I find that if I take a nap, it's pretty great. I wake up really refreshed and I have a little bit more energy for that last part of the day. It's not a long nap, it's 30 minutes; but it's enough to just reset me. It's nice. I'm laying down with my wife, it's a very sweet time of the day.

After that, I get another little bit of whatever done, usually admin-type stuff, email, checking in on Slack, that kind of thing. Then, at 2:00, straight up, I have a meeting every day. It's either Johnny, Dave, Garrett, except for

Wednesday. Monday is Garrett, Tuesday is Johnny, Wednesday is date day, Thursday is Dave, and then Friday is podcast mania.

Mark: I'm really interested in the nap, because I think that's a big of a growing thing now, but it's still certainly in the UK, it feels massively unacceptable. I think even you hesitated slightly as you were saying it, slightly self conscious.

Sean: I totally did, yeah.

Mark: I would really struggle to do it, not because I'm not completely convinced. I think it's a really good health benefit. I think it would make me more productive.

I would struggle to do it because of the self consciousness and that nagging feeling that you're sleeping in the middle of a work day; and this is not what you're supposed to be doing, which is ridiculous, right?

Sean: It took me a long time to do it. What was funny is, I would encourage Cindy every day to take a nap. She's like, "I don't want to nap. You're not napping with me. I don't want to do it." I started doing it just because I wanted her to nap. I knew that she would if I did. It was kind of funny because I'll lay down, and I will literally be out in under a minute. Then, I will wake up 29 minutes later. It's amazing how like clockwork it is. I do set an alarm for my naps, where I don't for nighttime. I'll set a timer for 30 minutes, but I'm always up right before it goes off.

I think the brain is pretty amazing, if you allow it to be. If you give yourself the circumstances to allow yourself to thrive in those ways, I think we do, we surprise ourselves. I found that a 30 minute nap almost always is awesome. There are a couple of times when I wake up, and I'm more tired. I really wish that, "Oh, well I don't have a meeting now." I still wake up in the 30 minutes, but I wake up feeling really serene. I kind of feel quiet, and I'd really rather just do something quietly creative, or even just answer emails, rather than getting up and having my meeting.

Now, I started doing this midway last year. I'm not exactly sure when, but all of my meetings are walking meetings now, which is a way that I can be healthy. I know that between two and four each day, I'm walking for those two hours. We're writers, we sit a lot. It's not healthy, so I'm trying to build a

lot of that movement into my day, too. Since I have a meeting every day, why not walk during that meeting?

James: This is a headset or in a Bluetooth or something, so you're on the phone, I assume?

Sean: Yeah, correct.

Mark: Okay, so let's say you've had your nap, you're in the meeting until 4. What comes after that? How do kids fit into this?

Sean: Well, I walk them to the bus stop every morning. That's when I take my first little walk. It's not long, but it's enough to get me out because I've been working for two hours by that time. It's a nice little refresh, come back, and work. They don't come home from the bus until 5:00, and by that time, hopefully I'm done.

Usually I'm done with my meeting by 4:00. Then I come in, close up a few loose ends, and then I have dinner. We always have dinner as a family, every night, 95% of the time. We have a little bit of family time after dinner. Then usually, when they are going to do their homework, I either tidy up a few loose ends. If I don't have a few loose ends, then I take that time to read.

Mark: This is very helpful. I've got two kids, four and a half and two, and I've been kind of fogged down about this for a year now. It's a constant ... not a struggle, but it's kind of a constant re-calibration to try and get the work life balance in the traditional sense of what that means into a state where everyone is happy. If I don't stop myself, I would just keep working. I wouldn't stop, and of course, that's not something that is sustainable with kids, and a family, and happy family life. It's really interesting to hear how you've broken this down. Come back to me in six months time and there might be a nap in my schedule, perhaps.

Sean: I will say that with younger children like that, it's hard. The things that I'm doing now, I could not have done when they were younger. They're really independent now. My children are 14 and almost just ready to turn 12. It's different. They want a little bit of independence, and they have to do their homework, and stuff like that. It's a little bit easier to step away, but at the same time, I know that I need to absolutely make sure that I'm plugged in with them.

I wake them up every morning, because my office right now, is actually in my bedroom. It really sucks for me to be up at 5:30, tip-tapping on the computer while Cindy's sleeping. I actually go out into the front room and my first hour and a half, I'm just out there by myself on the laptop, standing, though. I am standing out there, because I'm trying to stand as much as I possibly can. Then, I wake them up, and half an hour later we go to the bus stop. There's all these little breaks in the day, but they're very short. I do believe in the pomodoro, where they say "you work for 25 minutes, and then you take a break."

I actually think I don't do 25 minutes, I do 30 minutes; but that really works for me. 30 minutes, 30 minutes, 30 minutes; but you do that one, two times in a day, you can have a very productive six hours if you're very efficient about it. I know that I need to stay plugged in to my children because they're growing, and they're growing fast. They have to know that I want to talk to them, and I want to see them, and I want to say good morning to them, and I want to say good night to them. I tuck them in every single night. I don't think they're too old for that. It is balance, but it's about really being cognizant of who you are and what you want to do, and what you want to model for your children because you can tell them anything, but they don't care about that. They care about what you do. Children, they do as you do, not as you say.

James: I'm like Mark, I'm fascinated by this. It's brilliant tips, so that those of us who work from home and work for ourselves. I think going back a little bit to what it is that we are advocating and when we talk to people, why we're enthusiastic about this. You're absolutely right when you say the earlier part about the money. The money's there, okay; but actually, do you know what I sell to people when I talk to people is the sorts of decisions you're making about how much time I'm going to spend with my family. How to divide up the day? How to make sure you're still healthy and stuff; because when you do a nine to five job, which in reality is getting up at 6:30 a.m. and getting in at 7:30, quarter to eight in the evening for a lot of the people who live around where I do, 60 miles from London. They would love to have the kind of problems that you're juggling with, "When do I

work? When I do meet my wife coming back from hot yoga? When do I have my nap?"

You don't become complacent. This is the dream. It doesn't actually matter though if you can pay your bills, that's brilliant.

The dream is this lifestyle, and it's addictive. Once you start, and I think any of the three of us talking now could ever work for somebody in a traditional sense again.

Mark: Probably.

Sean: That's exactly why I think that when people say, "How do you achieve work life balance?" I'm like, "Well, I feel like it's achieved. It's just a matter of like anything else, it's optimizing." Certainly I want to create more, and I want to make more money. There are things that I want to do, but I love the harmony that I have in my life. I love not just the amount of time I spend working versus living, but the emotional gratification I have on every single thing I put my hands on right now.

Yes, I do have to sacrifice some money because there are some very easy, easy ways that I could make money that I don't. I choose not to because it's just a longer term game. If I really cared about money, I would actually still be making more money as a copywriter as I would as an entrepreneur at this point. What I'm doing now will greatly eclipse my potential as a copywriter, for sure. It's just a matter of being patient.

Patience is a harder one for me, but the funny thing is it's actually easier now for me than it's ever been. When I was first writing those keyword articles, and then when I was copywriting, and then when I was starting Sterling and Stone. I was just working, working, working. I worked until past ten every night, sometimes past midnight, and it was just grueling. It was exhausting. I just needed everything to happen yesterday, because I just felt like I was Indiana Jones and that boulder was right behind me. I had to run as fast as I possibly could or I was going to get trampled.

I was just always running, and now I don't.

I have not met all of my goals, not even close, but I'm not hurting. I'm not struggling. I have what I need to live where I want to live, to send my children to the school they want to go to, or that I want them to go to, because let's face it: they don't want to go. Although, they do love their



school. To have the time with Cindy that I have, and basically have the life I want, and work with the people I want. Yeah, I want to continue to optimize that, but I think that's a natural thing. Now that I'm at the cusp of some many things, I'm actually more patient than I've ever been.

Mark: Let's just tie this back in ambition again, because you set out what your week looks like. I wasn't taking notes, but we've all got the same amount of hours in the week. You're building in some things that I probably should build in, that would mean I wasn't working during those hours. You probably work less hours than I do, but the thing is, you produce more than I do, which is irritating the hell out of me at the moment. If you just look at that week, you are already busy.

Let's turn it back six months ago. You're already really busy with your fiction, with the podcast, all that kind of stuff. Then around about that time, you don't just have a podcast, now you've got a network. When I heard about what you were planning, I thought, "How the hell is that possible?" James and I are just setting this podcast up now and that's enough work. You've got like 8, which is ridiculous. Then it's Story Shop on top of that, the Kickstarter things that you've done, scripts. You're so ambitious.

I don't know what the question is there.

I suppose it's when you looked at what this year was going to be like for you, did you ever step back and go "Holy shit. This is actually too much for me to take," even with the team that you've got?

Sean: Yeah, of course. I think that for me, it's not ambitious. It's in like, "I have to do all these things, or I'm not happy with myself," right? It's more like I just love aiming big and seeing how much I can do. I've been making those end of year lists ever since I had the flower shop.

I don't make resolutions as in most people make resolutions and then they, you know, "I'm going to lose 35 pounds this year." It's not really like that. It's just more things that I want to see that I want to accomplish. Who I want to be a year from now.

The end of the year is a very reflective time for me, and I really do like to evaluate everything I've done. Then, look forward to the things that I want to do. The magic of that is that year, after year, after year, after year, the things that I say I'm going to do, I do them. Even if it doesn't all get handled

that year, some of that stuff carries over, but it becomes part of my story.

For example, I have a lot of credibility with Cindy at this point, because she's seen me make these lists for 20 years almost, that we've been together. She knows that even if I put something crazy on the list, it ends up not being so crazy two, three years later. Yeah, I think that those lists are stupid obnoxious, but I don't mind aiming big, because even if I come 70% of where I aim for, that's still awesome. I think it's okay to aim really big as long as you're okay with falling short a little bit.

I'm never ever uncomfortable with failing, or falling short, or making a mistake. I just think it's all part of living a good life. We're storytellers. There's got to be conflict. There's got to be things that the hero wants that he just can't get. It's fine for me to want something, work for it, not get it, have to figure it out, work harder. With things like the podcast, it's just really looking at the whole picture and then taking it apart.

For example, blogging was very hard for me. Actually, that's not true. Blogging was actually relatively straightforward for me, and I was good at it, but I didn't really see a return. I'd been wanting to do that kind of thing. We've wanted to have SterlingandStone.net be a pretty cool place. Right now, it's not. It's actually just a mess, it's terrible. It's our biggest pain point right now is converting that site into something amazing, and we're a couple months away from where we need to be. I hate our site. I hate everything about it. It's so not what it needs to be, and especially considering we have this network.

There's two big problems with the network. One is, we don't have any place to send all of our traffic, which is ridiculous. We also hinged the network on a podcast that we've been working on for a year, and it's still not out. That's kind of a problem, too. We've been paying our producer, and we've been creating all this content, but it's really just running in place right now. It's not doing any of the things it was designed to do; but that's okay. At least, as far as creating the content, we're pretty smart about how we do it.

For example, 'Smarter Artist' runs every single day. That seems like stupid ambitious on paper. Like, "Oh my god, that's a daily. How do you do that?" That's actually only one day a month on my end.

I have all my prompts. I write them all out, and then I just record them all in one batch, and send them to Audra, our producer. Then, she takes care of them from there. From my end, I've created a month's worth of content in one afternoon, which would be great if I actually had a call to action and follow-through on that series. As far as creating the content, we're pretty efficient about that part.

Mark: You've positioned yourself very nicely in two spaces. You're aiming on the one hand at fiction, and at readers. On the other hand, you've built up you, and Johnny, and Dave, have built yourselves up as go-to guys when it comes for other writers.

I've told you this before, SPP was the first podcast I listened to when I started to get into this three years ago. It was amazingly helpful then and is responsible for a lot of the stuff I've done since.

If I had to say to you right now, what is your passion? If I said you could only have one of those things, so it's helping other writers, or writing fiction, or creation, what would it be?

Sean: It would definitely be being a story teller. I do love helping people, and that's why we do it. It's always been very important to me that we're a fiction first company. I've said this a bunch of times, the easy button for us right now would be to create some sort of course for writers. I don't want to do that.

In fact just recently, we turned down a very, very generous offer to put our faces on something. I didn't want to do it. The reason is because I'm a little bit uncomfortable at this point giving advice or charging for advice. I don't mind giving advice, but a lot of what we do is so maverick. Like genre hopping is something we do. It's clearly the wrong for almost every author out there to do, right?

I don't want to be responsible for other people's failures. That makes me very nervous. It makes me very uncomfortable to think that they would be buying a product that they might not ROI on. I don't want to be responsible for that, and part of that is just my own baggage. I was a marketing

ghostwriter, and I know what conversion rates were. I know how many people actually ROI'd on the stuff that they bought. I know that I had people who are very candid about how many people actually even opened the products they bought, because there is this thing in the information business where people ... they buy products because it makes them feel that much closer to their dream, not because they're actually going to do anything with the information. I just don't want to be in the business of selling help.

I think that being able to give information for free. I like that. I do feel like I'm a natural teacher, and I like helping. I spend a lot of my week answering emails, and helping people. I like the things like the Smarter Artist Summit that we're doing. I think that's awesome. I would do one of those every year forever. I think that's going to be great. The 'Stone Table,' which is our mastermind. I love that, because you're getting really, really ridiculously smart people in a room where they are sharing their best information. I feel like some of my best knowledge has come from those same types of masterminds. I really, really like that.

Ultimately, what I really want to do with life is to tell stories. I want to make movies. I want to make TV shows. I want to do all of that stuff, and I can't skip my steps. I have to pay my dues and get better and better at the craft. I do want to own the copyright, so I do want to build a studio very slowly where we can start making stuff ourselves. That's just a really incremental process. It is what I would want to do, so it's been more important to me to put fiction first and make sure that the lion's share of the money that we're making as a company is for fiction and not non-fiction.

James: I want to hear you about the industry now, because obviously a lot of our thoughts are occupied with how the industry has performed over the last couple of years, and where it's likely to go in the next couple of years. A lot of the authors who listen to your podcast, listen to this podcast, will be at the beginning of their career. It's relevant to them where you think things are going. Obviously you're so prolific, and the amount of books that you guys are putting out, you probably see the trends developing.

Can you give me a snapshot of what's working in terms of marketing at the moment, and in terms of writing, and perhaps what's not working? What is it you see?

Sean: That's a great question, let's see if I can stay on point here. What's working is the fact that people can publish. It's hard to get your books noticed. You can get out there, you can publish. Anybody can do that, but it's crowded, right? We had a much easier time a few years ago, because well, it was easy. There was so much less competition. Now, a lot of people are doing indie, and a lot of people who would otherwise do traditional are really second guessing their decision and are maybe going indie where they would have otherwise gone traditional.

I think that there's maybe better quality than there was a few years ago, that's continuing to improve, and the authors are getting savvier. Things like covers are getting better. There's a lot of shows, a lot of podcasts, a lot of advice, a lot of information products out there, that are teaching you better ways to do this. Not only is there more competition, the competition is better. I think that it's not enough just to write a book, and pray. I don't think hope marketing works at all.

James: No.

Sean: I think you need to identify with your audience. I think you need to do things like Facebook ads that tell people where they are going. Mark knows this inside and out. You have to communicate with your readers.

You also have to understand the way readers read. What I mean by that, and this is another one of those things where I don't think we're especially well-equipped for all kinds of advice. Writing to market is one of those things. We very much always written the kinds of things we want to write, but writing to market can be a very effective way to find your audience, and to actually make money as a writer. We've done it-ish.

For example, our 'Invasion' series, which did very well last year, I'm really happy with it; but there's two things about the 'Invasion' series. It's not the best thing we've written. I think 'The Beam' is a much, much better series than 'Invasion,' but 'Invasion' is much more commercial. It sells much better. It's not selling out totally because I still enjoy writing the 'Invasion' series, but if I could write anything, it would definitely be 'The Beam' over

the 'Invasion' series. Whatever, my family has to eat, right? That's important to balance those different things.

Even within the 'Invasion' series, we don't exactly write to market. We write to market with an overall concept that we know is really commercial, and we definitely have the product descriptions, and the covers that are very commercial, and they've made it easy for that book to be merchandised. Even within that, we do tell the story our way. There's a lot of stuff about that series that doesn't follow the tropes, and is definitely us telling the kind of story we want to tell even if on the surface, we're writing to market.

Mark: Without giving too many spoilers away, I love the 'Invasion.'

I've read them, Sean, and in the first book, there are no aliens.

Sean: Yeah, right. We definitely take our knocks in the reviews for that, but I'm okay with that. I'm comfortable with that because again, it's that whole thing we were talking about with life balance. I want to love everything I do. I don't necessarily like a lot of the stuff that's written to market. I want to write something that I'll be happy with 20 years from now as much as I am now. 'The Beam,' I couldn't be more proud of 'The Beam.' I think that 'The Beam' is a really good example of sci-fi with a lot of layers, and a lot of depth, but it's a little more challenging. Certainly as a reader, it's more challenging. As an author, it takes Johnny and I substantially more time to create a 'Beam' than it does 'Invasion,' and yet 'Invasion' far outsells it. What are you going to do with your hours?

I think that knowing your market and really pleasing that market is an efficient way to make money as an author, for sure.

Mark: Yes. It's a compromise. We spoke to Russell Blake about this, a very similar point. I agree with everything he said, too. It's basically if you think of it like a Venn diagram, on the one hand you've got what readers want; on the other hand, you've got what you want to write. That'd be where it intersects. That's where you should probably be aiming if you want to satisfy yourself creatively and pay the rent. I would probably prefer to write something a bit more literary than the books that I write, but I love writing the books that I write, and they do sell well; so what am I going to do? I'm going to keep writing them.

Sean: It's absolutely true. I think it's just about balance. We just finished, about a month ago, a book called 'Devil May Care.' Johnny and I finished it, and Our mandate for that book was it has to please us, not readers. It has to please us more than 'Axis of Aaron,' which was our most literary title to date. I do not care how many copies that sells. Of course I would love it if it blew up, I would love it to be slobbered on, and everyone just think it was awesome. That would make me very, very happy; but it's about knowing your why for things.

If that book had to sell a lot of copies for me to feel successful about it, that's setting me up for failure. If I have to love that book, and that's my criteria, then I've already succeeded. Where 'Invasion,' my criteria isn't "I have to love it more than 'The Beam.'" My criteria is, "It has to sell really well." We were successful with that book.

I think it's easy to be successful with each of your books if you set out knowing what you want. It's not what's hard about indie publishing right now, or easy about indie publishing. It's just a point that a lot of authors miss. They don't necessarily know what they want before they start a project, and knowing that books are different.

I think that there's this mentality where I think it's hard for authors to be patient. We touched on that a little bit earlier, but I think that's really true. I think that probably the number one question we get other than "How long should my episodes on my serial be?" Which, I'm so burnt out on that question.

"However long they need to be!"

The number one question we get is, "What would you do if your were just starting out and you didn't have any books?"

I would say, "I would write three books before I ever went to market with the first one," because I think that the worst thing you can do is have a reader fall in love with you and you have no where to go. Also, that gives you a funnel. It means that you have at least a hope of building a list, because you could do the perma-free, and then your second book to join the list, and then a third book for them to buy, or get excited about. I think

that's very painful for an author to hear.

"You mean you would write three books and give two of them away?"

"Well, yes, because it's a long-term thing." If you want to stand out among the competition, you want to get noticed. You have to find ways to get noticed. It's not just about writing a better book, because there's a lot of people who are writing better books.

James: It's a recurring theme, and I'm the author who's writing his first book at the moment, so it's most discouraging for me. Thank you, Sean.

Sean: I'm sorry.

James: In actual fact, you're in good company because Marie Force answered that question in the same way, and look at her success. She said, "Think of it as inventory on the shelf. Don't go to market with one stuck item, because where do people go after that?" Yes, that was her. You've chimed very well with a great, successful author in the market, and you've made me slightly more depressed than I was two minutes ago. That's okay.

Sean: Now, well just look at it long term and think that when you go to market, you're just really amping your odds. I think it's certainly hard to do. It's a bitter pill to swallow, but just the results are so worth it.

As far as what's coming, I think that the biggest thing that needs to happen for indies is some sort of great discoverability engine. Right now, it's all algorithm-based, I mean on Amazon, at least. We've got merchandising on the other stores, but something that is really recommendation-based on who you are as a reader, and nothing like that out there exists. The best recommendation in the world, right now, is on Amazon. It's kind of balls. It's based on a lot of stuff that we have no control over, a lot of stuff that's really in Amazon's favor and not in the reader's favor, because they're not necessarily giving you the best book that you would enjoy. All things considered, it's their things considered.

I love Amazon, they've totally changed my life. I think they're just a great company, but I also think that authors need to realize that Amazon is not on the author's side, they're on their side. Their job is to sell merchandise, not books. Books for them, in many ways, are a loss leader. They're going to continue to change the rules in their favor as it suits them, as they should, that's their business.



I have no ill will towards them doing that, but I do wish that the indie community at large was a little more aware of that. I think that Amazon has a little too much power versus the other vendors. KDP Select is just a juggernaut, and it's very difficult to say no to.

We just launched a series, and of course we put it in Select, but I hate myself for it, you know? I really wish that I didn't, because we do preach going wide. For most titles, we want to go wide, but then there's also the reality that going wide can be a very expensive decision for authors, especially brand new authors who have no other way to promote themselves.

James: Okay, couple of quick ones just before we do let you go, Sean, for your busy day. I mean, funny enough, you're just talking about there being a big gap in the market for this kind of reader index thing; but I don't know if that's a plan you're hatching in the back of your mind for Sterling and Stone in the future maybe to do that, provide that.

Where do you see yourself, and maybe Sterling and Stone, in five years? It sounds like an interview question, this one isn't it?

Sean: The discoverability engine, I think that's just a billion dollar idea; but I wouldn't even know where to start with that. No, my fingers are definitely out of that pie. It also doesn't sound fun to me. My ambition is firmly rooted with things that are fun.

Story Shop, for example, and this just to answer another earlier question, too, on how so much gets done. It's partnering with awesome people, and the right people. All of my partners at Sterling and Stone are amazing, and help me do a lot more in less time.

Same with Story Shop. It was on our 2015 list. Our big ambitious, 'What are we going to do in 2015?' We had 'build an app' on that list, but that had no shape. I didn't really know what that would take until I started talking to Seth, and I realized what Story Shop is, and what it could be. It went from this brain fart in my mind to something much more tangible as he gave it shape. Without Seth, that wouldn't exist.

Now, I'm super, super excited about Story Shop because it's basically an app built for us, and the way we outline our stories. I love that we can build that and then share it. To me, that's not an information product. That's the

perfect kind of product. I'm building something I want to use and then I'm going to sell it. That makes me really, really happy. That's the great equation.

It never would have existed without Seth. Seth has to carry that ball. I can tell him the things that I like, and would want in that app, but he has to build it. I can never do that with a discoverability engine. I wouldn't even know where to start or get my head around it, but I think Story Shop will be a pretty amazing thing. I'm really, really excited about seeing where that goes.

We will sell our first screen play this year. I'm very confident in that. I wrote four ... No, I'm on my fifth. I wrote four last year, threw two in the trash, and two are being shopped right now. Even if nothing happens with those, I'm okay with that. I'm in the process of writing and getting better at them, and we will sell one. Eventually, we'll be a solid enough company to start making our own stuff. We'll add other authors into the stable at some point, I'm sure, years from now. We have to be much more efficient than we are. I think that the podcast network will be really outstanding. I think it's still in it's infancy, and it's still missing it's flagship show. We'll get there.

Basically, I just want to continue to do what I'm doing, and get better at it. I want to become a better story teller. I think that I'm still at the very beginning of my story telling career. I think I get better with each book, but I still think I'm kind of a baby. I want to continue to grow there, and I want to make a difference. I love the work that we've done at 'The Self Publishing' podcast. I love the emails that we get. That's very gratifying, and I want to continue to make a big difference in the community. I love that we inspire people, and I love that. I want to make a difference.

James: I'm going to wrap things up now. It's been an absolutely absorbing chat with you. There's a joyful nature to your success, Sean. I think it's because you're so good at articulating it. We can, in a way, it just means we kind of share in your successes and failures as well. That's quite a special thing, it's a very modern thing. I like it. There's a whole area, by the way, of writing and collaboration, I think we could do another hour with you on, because I think your approach to writing has a lot to talk to us about. Your approach to collaboration is absolutely key to your success.

Sean: I love that subject. I could talk on it for years.

James: That's me tuning you up to try and get you back at some point. I know you're a busy man, but we'd love to have you back. I think on those two areas, alone, would be very beneficial. I'm just talking personally. This is just for my life, I need to hear more of you, but I'm sure everyone does.

Sean: I'd be happy to.

James: All right Sean, thank you so much for joining us.

Sean: My absolute pleasure. You guys have a great day.

James: Different interviews have different purposes with our podcast, and there will be interviews in the future where people will be making ... and we've had them already with Marie and so on. People making notes, and little actions that they're going to take. With Sean, really, it was about that energy, that approach, that's going to be your foundation for being successful. I actually find it really quite inspirational. I don't say that about every interview, but I did with him.

Mark: Yeah, Sean has built something pretty special with Johnny, and Dave, and Garrett now, as well. Just listening to how he structures his day, and how he's been able to work it around so he can spend more time with his wife, and just going to build the life that he's always wanted. It is inspirational. He's done lots of different things. He's got a lot of experience, and I certainly learned some things about Sean that I didn't know before he spoke to us. I hope everyone found that as interesting and inspirational as I did.

James: Yeah, I mean I haven't gone all the way in terms of having the nap, and doing the hot yoga and stuff, that he talked about; but I did, as a result of us recording that interview, I changed the way I order my day.

I've changed my whiteboard, which I have basically a board where I just have the long list of everything that needed to be done at some point. I now have it divided in two, and on the right hand side is what needs to be accomplished today. It really makes a difference to the way that I approach each day. I know that I can tick things off, and I know I've done that. I feel a lot more settled than before where it was just this vague feeling there was a load of stuff to do. I think that organization approach, which includes

organizing aspects of your life that are just there to make you feel healthy, and mentally healthy, I think that's a really good thing we got from Sean.

Mark: I agree. I work on a similar basis. I think it's fairly usual that you get a bit of a blast of achievement when you can cross something off a list. It's interesting that Sean's been doing that, and it definitely works for me, too.

James: Okay, we're going to the wild borderlands for the next podcast.

We've got a fantastic interview with Russell Blake, who's hugely entertaining, writes brilliant books, and he is a guy who is going to give you a lot of things that you will want to pick up on and do in your own marketing and writing experience. That's next time. Thank you so much indeed for joining us, and we'll see you then.

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