

PODCAST 74: PURSUING AN INDIE CAREER WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE – AUTHOR BRETT BATTLES

Speaker 1: 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 Blatch: Hello and welcome to the SPF Podcast with James and Mark with you again. This week we have an author who has been trapped hasn't he, Brett, I believe?

Mark Dawson: He has, yes.

James Blatch: Yeah, and is finding his way. We'll go into it in a little bit of detail in the podcast, but he's one of those authors who found himself with some of his books locked in old deals and writing new stuff as well. Lovely guy, a very early riser. Gets up very early, works in the dark.

Mark Dawson: Oh, dear.

James Blatch: Even in California where you'd think he'd probably want to be ... I think he is trying to sort that out in his life. He's trying to sleep in later and use up more of the sunshine, sort of vampire existence.

I always love hearing when we get feedback, but you do as well, hearing how peoples' routines differ and what they do to get the words done and how they write and so on, so that's what we always ask our authors and Brett was a good example of that.

Before we get to the interview, just a couple of house notes.

We mention every week if we can that we have Patreon.com. If you want to become a bigger part of the podcast, you want to help us preserve it and keep it going, go to Patreon.com/SPFpodcast and you get an opportunity to become a subscriber with some goodies available to you.

You can pick up a book from us. We've produced quite a few books now and there are more coming out. These books are designed to help you navigate the world of self publishing. They cover various subjects. The most exciting one perhaps, AMS Ads, which is the new all singing and dancing ads platform for authors has been extended, at least to the .com domain so far.

Mark Dawson: We have more coming, yes. I've heard some rumors that others will be coming soon, and that book was co-written with me, actually mostly written by Joseph Alexander, who is an alumni of the course and also I think said at least two Fridays or three Fridays ago he expected to go through one million pounds in royalties for his guitar book. He does know what he's talking about. He is very big on AMS Ads. I've seen some of his numbers and frankly it fills me with jealousy to see how low his ACOS score is, his average cost of sales tends to be very profitable for him, so he is a really knowledgeable guy when it comes to those books.

Also I think one of the giveaways or a giveaway that we have also with that book is a video course with me, going through my Amazon ads and some tips and tricks to get you cracking with regards to doing that better.

James Blatch: Yeah, so if you just visit SelfPublishingFormula.com you'll see links to the books and where you can get them, and they're all free of course to you.

Mark and I are both in the lab at the moment with new services, and Mark, you mentioned the messenger bot, which is the Facebook Messenger service, automated messenger for people who click on words.

You just initiate it with a click on a link, don't you?

Mark Dawson: More than that, James. I've got an ad running at the moment for my books where it's a contest. I ask a question, "Which do you prefer: Character A or Character B?"

Let's say Jack Reacher and Alex Cross. It doesn't really matter what people say. You encourage them to leave a comment with their answer. Whatever they say, they are automatically sent a message through Facebook Messenger thanking them for their comment and asking them whether they would like to get a free copy of the first in my Milton series.

The engagement on that is through the roof. You can run those as a Facebook ad, you can run that and set engagement as your objective, which means that Facebook will try and optimize the ads so that you're looking for likes and comments and shares and that kind of thing. You're getting very, very cheap interaction with the ad, and then every person who interacts with it gets a message whereby they can get that free book.

Then automatically after a couple of weeks I'll ask them whether they enjoyed the book and whether they'd like another free book, and at that point to get the next free book they have to sign up to my mailing list. I typically find once people start reading my books, they're quite addictive and people will then go on to the books that they have to pay for. Early days yet to see exactly how profitable those ads have been, but the tech is really, really cool and no one is doing this yet. It really is the Wild West out there at the moment.

Still trying to work out what the rules are. Facebook is a bit vague on what you can and can't do, so basically I'm the crash test dummy for this.

One of the things that we'll be doing, I'm 99% sure I'll have a module for this when we relaunch Ads for Authors in November.

James Blatch: Yeah, and we will also have a module on Pinterest which is what I'm in the lab experimenting on at the moment.

We look at these platforms both for advertising self publishing formula courses as well as for authors, and I think Pinterest is one that's really going to suit authors perhaps more than other businesses, particularly if you have a specialist area.

Let's say you write in a particular area, fantasy or in my case military fiction, in your case I don't know.

Mark Dawson: I was going to say I don't want to get into your specialist areas of fiction again.

James Blatch: Because it's a visual medium, so anoraks like me will go on and look at Cold War jets and fighters, and the internet is full of these really interesting pictures.

It might be an area of wizards and witches or fantasy characters, and Pinterest are great places for these pictures to go, and that is a perfect place for you to advertise your book, a free book giveaway or whatever it is that you want to do.

Pinterest looks really, really exciting. I can't get them to take my money at the moment, but they always have hiccups like this in the laboratory.

Mark Dawson: I'll take your money.

James Blatch: Yeah, you always take my money. Okay, that's enough waffling from us. Let's get to beautiful California, or slightly dark interior of California, and talk to our featured author for this week who is Brett Battles. Brett Battles: I've wanted to be a writer since I was in grade school, and it just took me a long time to get there.

I was in a writers group that I wrote a few novels in there, sent them out, got hundreds of rejections of course. Finally, I think it was my third book I had written which I was sending out, I had gotten tons of rejections on that. I was about to put that on the shelf and start a fourth book when a friend of mine, who had once been in the same writers group with me, introduced me to a small publisher that he was at. Or he said, "Send them your book. I'll let them know you're coming."

I sent them the book. Didn't hear from them for 11 months and in that meantime I wrote another book thinking that that was never going to happen. Then all of a sudden they called me and said, "We want to buy your book," which was great except that six months later they ended up going bankrupt and my book hadn't come out yet. I thought, "Oh, no. I've got to start all over again."

Then they did the cool thing. They had a contact at Random House who they contacted, showed them my book, and Random House bought my book from them and gave me a three book deal.

That book that they bought is *The Cleaner*, my first book, and the beginning of my Jonathan Quinn series and I ended up doing five books for Random House. I would have loved to do more.

My first book came out in 2007. I finished my next book, *The Deceived*, and that came out in 2008, and at that same time I've got my contract for my next three books which was large enough to allow me to quit my job for a couple years.

I thought, "Okay, I can quit for at least two years on this and I can try to write full time." I quit my job and that was in ... Actually I have to back up timing wise.

The first contract was three books. I quit the job in September of 2010, like one week before Lehman Brothers went under. God, I'm getting all confused on my dates. 2008, 2009, whatever.

James Blatch: I spend several moments a day doing exactly this. Someone asked me how old I am.

Brett Battles: Yeah, I've lost it all. I've lost it all. Actually I think it was 2008 and then Lehman Brothers went out of business a week after I left my job and the whole crash happened.

But I had my contract so I was cool. My third book came out the following summer and I was still writing the next two books on my contract, but then things went crazy in the publishing industry as well at around this time. This was 2009, going into 2010.

My editor ended up leaving for Penguin and then Bantam Dell and Ballantine, two imprints at Random House, were merged and the head of Bantam Dell was a big supporter of mine.

She was ousted because you can only have one head of the label, so all of a sudden I'm at this new Bantam Dell Ballantine combined label with nobody that had asked me to be there in the first place. I was put with a junior editor who we did not exactly see eye to eye on things.

When it came time for a new contract in 2010, this is where that comes in, now I remember, I was ready to move on and because I still had to present my idea, it was clear that they were ready to move on from me.

We split ways even though there was still a couple books to come out, and we split ways in August in 2010. Or September, somewhere around there. In the summer of 2010 I believe.

Then I was sitting there with the task of what path should I take next, because I'm still writing full time and I want to continue writing full time. I don't want to go back to a desk job. I was panicked about that.

I talked to my agent and she said, "Well, let's write a new book and I'll take it out to publishers, but clearly we can't do it in your old series because other publishers don't like to pick up series halfway in the middle." Which is a bummer because that series was doing fairly well and everything.

James Blatch: As a writer you're attached to the characters, right?

Brett Battles: Absolutely. Absolutely.

James Blatch: You've got an emotional investment.

Brett Battles: I didn't want to lose that, but what could I do? I had four books in that series and a standalone that came out from Random House. At the same time, and actually even before this, even before the stuff with me leaving Random House happened, the whole ebooks thing was starting to take off. I had some friends who were doing it and I had been talking to them more and more.

Joe Konrath, Blake Crouch, even Barry Eisler was starting to get into a little bit of that stuff. I was talking to these guys and when I was finally on my own I was saying, "You know what? I really want to dip my toe into this and see what it would be like."

I talked to my agent and luckily my agent, super cool, completely understands, has always been supportive of my career no matter what choice I decided to go in, and we decided that I would write two books. One that she would take out to publishers and one that I would just try on ebooks.

James Blatch: When you say ebooks, you mean self publish?

Brett Battles: Self publish, so indie publish. At that time it was really the only thing you were thinking was ebooks, even though you can do them in print and everything like that.

I'm blessed because I actually write very fast. Always have. Everybody has their own speed. Mine happens to be fairly fast and constant and working every day you can quickly get a book done if you're always working, and it's full time so it's not like I'm just putting an hour in.

I get six hours or whatever it is every day, getting a lot of material out, so I got these two books written. The book that I wanted her to take, or I gave to her to take out, it's a thriller, a very personal thriller kind of thing, but she was hoping for something that had a big concept kind of thing to go to a new publisher.

Well, my other book had the big concept thing, but I was really thinking that needed to come out right away because it was more appropriate. I thought I was catching the wave. It was the first in my, I have a pre/post apocalyptic virus series and that was the first book in that and it's called Sick. That was back before a lot of that had started to get going. This was 2010, going into early 2011.

She read it too and she really liked it, but she also agreed with me that if she tried to go to publishers it would still be another year before it came out and the delay would be crazy. She said, "Go ahead and let's just put both of them out and see what happens."

James Blatch: She was happy for you to put the other book that was initially slated for the industry to be self published as well?

Brett Battles: Yeah, yeah.

James Blatch: That is a cool agent, a very supportive person.

Brett Battles: Yeah, she was very cool with that. I was also very anxious to try it. I put up the first book, which was Little Girl Gone, which was the thriller in I think March or April of 2011.

Then Sick went out in May or June. Then I also wrote a prequel novel to my series, actually I called it a novella back then. It's 59,000 words but I didn't want to cause any waves or anything, so I wrote this long novella that was a prequel to my longtimes, my Quinn Cleaner series, and I put that out in the middle of the summer.

I also had another novel, I had a couple of short stories that had been lying around. By the end of the year I had seven different things that I had put up.

I didn't break land speed records as far as sales or anything that first year, but I could see the potential of what was going on and I could see how it was actually starting to work. Every time I had a new book it was like building a snowball and it was all feeding on itself and growing, growing, growing.

I made it through 2011 without having to take a job, although it was close. One month I got very close, but after that it started getting better. Then 2012 was a really good year. Brought out another three or four novels that year. 2013 was great, really good year, and it just kept going and going and going.

I've been basically independent published since then, although 47North, Amazon's imprint, picked up my time travel novel Rewinder and re-released it and then they brought out the sequel, the second book in that series, Destroyer.

They brought that out directly and then I brought out the third one of that this year. I'm still kind of mixing back and forth on that.

James Blatch: That's great. I've got lots to ask you about that journey.

What's the situation with the traditionally published books? They're still in legal with them?

Brett Battles: I've talked to my agent about, "Hey, well maybe we can try to get them back," but they're still selling ebook-wise.

James Blatch: The Cleaner I noticed. You see that popping up all over the place so that's presumed to still be doing business.

Brett Battles: Yeah, it's still popping up. In fact I think Random House is running a BookBub ad on *The Deceived*, which is the second book in the series, like next week or something like that or in two weeks. I only know that because I tried to get an ad for one of my other books.

James Blatch: You were beaten by yourself.

Brett Battles: I was beaten by myself. I was going, "What?"

Because the Quinn series, which would have died after leaving Random House, I've continued to write it. Once all the books were out I've continued to write it. Next week on Tuesday, the 11th book in that series is coming out.

There had only been four and I've written seven more, not counting the prequel that I wrote, so 12 books in that series are out plus a few short stories and stuff that would have never seen the light of day if it wasn't for the ability to be independently published these days.

But with the new book coming out next week, I was hoping to get a BookBub ad for the book that I brought out last year, but eh, maybe later in the summer. We'll see.

James Blatch: The legal side of things-

Brett Battles: Yeah.

James Blatch: Mark's the lawyer, I'm not, and I'm not about to fight with the contracts, but for instance you've got your character Jonathan Quinn in the series.

You are free to write new Jonathan Quinn books?

Brett Battles: Absolutely.

I own the copyright on the books. They don't own the copyright. They are licensed to publish the particular books that they have contracted with me. They don't own the characters. They have no control over the characters. I think that's true for all authors, I would think.

James Blatch: Yeah, I'm just wondering whether that happens. I was just wondering if Ian Fleming was still alive, he could write a James Bond book for Random House and then a James Bond book for Bloomsbury the next week.

Brett Battles: He could. Well, it depends. There might be, depending on how much they're paying you, a lot of times they don't want ... There will be the noncompete clause in there. That only extends until you're out of contract with them.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Brett Battles: They still have the books. I can't get them. I would love to get the rights back because I would love to be just having that, controlling how that income comes in directly, but I still see the royalty checks. It's just they would be a lot bigger if I was self published.

James Blatch: Yeah, well 75% is a lot bigger than 5% or whatever. Yeah.

Brett Battles: 15% or whatever it is, yeah.

James Blatch: With 15% you did well. It's a fascinating story, Brett, because in some ways it's like the best and the worst of the traditional industry. You relied on relationships and individuals to keep your career going. It shouldn't be like that really, but of course it is.

Brett Battles: Right, of course. It's like in anything really.

James Blatch: Yeah, of course. I accept that. When you're a writer and you want to create things, being so much at the whim of supportive individuals whereas the self publishing world it really isn't like that. There's a lot more freedom.

If you're going to fail it's not because somebody got in your way, it's because you didn't do something or the book wasn't good enough. Not just somebody behind a desk you've never met who didn't know you and thought, "I'm not going to do this."

Brett Battles: Right. Exactly.

James Blatch: You must feel that sense of freedom.

Brett Battles: It is nice. Taking a step back, it is nice in the traditional world that there are things that get taken care of that you don't have to worry about, but I do like having the control over it.

I like being able to decide on the covers for my books and guide those. I like being able to choose my own titles. Not that you can't in the traditional world, but it's more of you're suggesting what the title is and more times than not they'll say, "Yeah, that's fine."

For instance I had one of my books, my third book in the Quinn series. All my Quinn series are.... It's The Cleaner, The Deceived, The Silence, The

Destroyed, blah, blah, blah. Next week is The Aggrieved. There's a pattern to them.

The third book in the series I wanted to call The Unwanted. In fact over in the UK, that's exactly what it's called because my UK publisher was fine with that, but my US publisher felt like it sounded too much like a Western so they renamed it Shadow of Betrayal, which-

James Blatch: Suddenly goes off on one, yeah.

Brett Battles: It's like, "What?" Nothing I can do about that.

I was not happy. It's a very generic title to me and I liked the theme before. It didn't bother me if somebody thought Western. They're very quickly going to realize that it's not a Western. Even from the cover they would recognize that it's not a Western.

James Blatch: These are all very sort of arbitrary decisions, aren't they?

Brett Battles: Yes.

James Blatch: Well, at least they didn't come up with A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Pentagon or something completely off field.

Brett Battles: Right, that would have been terrible. Terrible.

James Blatch: Although I think that's a good title.

Brett Battles: Terrible. Well, depending on what you're writing.

James Blatch: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Bring me up to date then. You're now in the self publishing world.

Brett Battles: I am.

James Blatch: Are you doing all of this yourself? Do you have a team working for you? Do you outsource?

Brett Battles: I outsource. Obviously I outsource the covers for sure. I always make sure I try to get very top talent for that.

I have an editor I work with all the time, a second proof reader who does a final pass on everything. I format the books myself.

Early on, back when I was first started, I wanted to be very careful with cost and everything like that and I knew there were certain cost I couldn't get around but that there were some costs I could. I taught myself how to format ebooks and the print books. I still do that myself, although sometimes it's frustrating.

James Blatch: What do you use to do that, out of interest?

Brett Battles: For the print books I'm just doing it basically in Word and then converting it into PDF and everything. I've been using Calibre, or however the heck you want to pronounce it, very effectively for a while.

I understand there are things like Vellum and a couple other things that actually do the job even better and easier. I just haven't taken the time to learn them, which I'll just mark off as my own laziness.

James Blatch: Well, that's fine. Whatever's working for you.

Brett Battles: It's working at the moment. I keep expecting to one day I convert a book and it looks completely wrong and I don't know what the heck happened, and then I go, "What do I do now?"

James Blatch: That's when you employ somebody.

Brett Battles: Yes, exactly.

James Blatch: Out of interest, so just going back a little bit.

What was the job you were doing? What career were you in?

Brett Battles: I worked in television for 20 years. Nothing too glamorous by any means.

For the most part I worked in the television graphics world. We did IDs for networks and main titles for TV shows and graphics for network type, you know promos for shows and stuff.

I wasn't a designer either. I was a producer, so basically I was a project coordinator, making sure everybody did their job. My last position was executive producer in the on-air graphics department at E! Entertainment, which is the-

James Blatch: The showbiz.

Brett Battles: It's a showbiz show. It's where, God forbid, where Keeping Up with the Kardashians started. Not my fault.

James Blatch: Well, you say it's not your fault, but you were executive producer of graphics so you must have-

Brett Battles: I was there when that show started.

James Blatch: You made sure it was spelled correctly.

Brett Battles: Yeah. Somebody did. I think I sloughed that job off on somebody else probably.

James Blatch: You had this period of transition. There's very few writers who can say that it was a smooth journey from beginning to end. But it sounded reasonably scary for you that first year or two years of self publishing when you were going month to month wondering if this was going to work.

Brett Battles: Right. The transition from full time other job to full time writer actually went fairly well because that was still in the Random House days when they were only expecting one novel out of me a year, and since I write fast that's not going to take me all that long.

Which I now look back and see I had a lot of wasted time. It ended up me working part time just to get one novel done a year. I could have written a whole bunch of other things in that time and still have a lot of great time to do other things, but that was fine.

It was two years in when I suddenly lost the contract. I knew it was coming, but when I was out of contract with Random House or I didn't have a new contract for anything new and I had to figure out what I was going to do, and I wasn't sure what step. Yeah, that was scary.

That year, 2011 when I was bringing out those books, I think it was October of that year because I was projecting ahead on income and stuff. When you're self publishing you can see what your income is every month and it's two months ahead of time, as you know.

You know what you're going to make in this particular month or this particular month so you could project ahead. I could see that it was going to start to get better, but it wasn't going to start to get better until this one point. I saw my low point was going to be October of that month and I knew that I had been using all the resources and my savings and everything just to keep going, because I desperately didn't want to take a job again. Because this is really what I've always wanted to do and I wanted to keep doing it. I came very close to not having enough money for the rent that month, but I didn't.

It didn't upset me because I knew the next month I would and the month after that I would. Sales were picking up that much and I was actually going to be able to start putting a little bit away, a little bit away, until I got to the point where I was able to put quite a bit away every month.

Yeah, that was a little scary that first year. It was one of these things where I remember when I first started out, even when I only had ... It might have even just been when I just had the one book out, *Little Girl Gone*. Every single day I would check and see how much sales I had. Every single day. Finally, I think it was Blake Crouch who told me once at a conference, he said, "You've got to stop that, man. Once a month or something like that. You can't do that or you're going to drive yourself crazy," because I was.

I was living or dying on my daily sales and it would make me crazy and make it hard to write if I had a bad day sales-wise and everything. I went cold turkey at that point and I only checked the sales at the end of the month, which made a big difference from that point.

James Blatch: That sounds like a sanity move that you need to do.

Brett Battles: Yeah, total sanity move.

It's a natural reaction to want to see where you're going, and especially if it was something new.

James Blatch: Yeah, of course.

Brett Battles: You want to check every day.

James Blatch: In actual fact, there was probably some benefit for you, becoming intimately familiar with sales patterns and how it works before you were then able to take a step back.

Brett Battles: Perhaps, yeah.

James Blatch: I think we all do that in our businesses at the beginning. You pore over everything and then you realize that you're going grayer quicker than you needed to.

Brett Battles: Right.

James Blatch: In terms of the marketing side of things in those early days ... Actually I did another interview earlier today of somebody who just simply uploaded their book in 2011 and then sat back and it took off and she's not really sure why. Maybe Amazon pushed it or whatever. These days it's a tougher environment I think.

Brett Battles: It is tougher.

James Blatch: What were you doing then? Were you doing anything more than uploading and sitting back?

Brett Battles: Not a ton more. I hate marketing. I hate doing all that stuff, the PR stuff, and I still do. I'm struggling with it right now.

I think in the last six to nine months I've actually seen a dip in my sales, which is frustrating, but it's because I haven't been doing a lot of marketing and everything. I'm just so bad at it and so I'm trying to step my game up again.

Back in the day, I think the only thing I did was I probably did a newsletter, sent a newsletter out. Back then I don't know how big my list was. 1,500 people? It's not like every one of them are going to buy the book.

I would send that out and I would do a little bit of Facebook and Twitter stuff and that was it and then I'd just let it go. I cannot deny that it helped that I had a built-in audience from my previous books.

There were people who knew who I was. I wasn't coming in this completely as an unknown, so that helped, and that's shown over the years. Especially when I have a Quinn book come out. That's when everybody comes back. Or not everybody, but a lot of people come back for those. It's when I try

something new or I dip into science fiction or something that I'm always taking a bigger risk and everything.

Yeah, still I think that since then I tried to do some BookBub ads but I'm not always getting those. I think part of it is I have most of my books in Kindle Select because I've just found that the page reads I get far outweigh any of the sales I was getting on the other platforms, or I have in the past. I'm starting to rethink that new with the dip that has been happening, just to see if I can shake it up a little bit some other way. I would do that, still the newsletter. I've been actually trying in the last few months more actively to increase the number of people who get my newsletter, because I'd never really took much ... It just organically grew without me doing anything. Not a ton, but what I mean is anybody who came I had nothing to do with. Now I'm trying a little bit more. If people sign up for my newsletter they get a free copy of the Quinn prequel. They can download that, and I've done a little advertising around that to get people, so that's one thing that I've been doing. I've been looking around trying to find other ways to do it. What I really need is somebody who wants to do all this for me so that I can just write. That's all I want to do. That's all any writer wants to do, right?

James Blatch: Yeah.

Brett Battles: I envy the authors who are actually really good at this and have the gung ho to go out and go, "You've got to do this and this and this and you've got to do this and all this stuff," and I'm like, "Ugh, I don't want to do that. I just want to write my book and then move on to the next one, you know?" That's the reality.

James Blatch: You're not alone in feeling like that. Some people want to do it but can't do it, just find technically that they're not adept at it. There's definitely space.

We've got people in our community who are superb at it and occasionally people like yourself, Brett, have sort of approached it saying, "Look, can

you put me in touch with somebody who will run it for me?" But it's actually quite a hard thing to find somebody to ...

I do think there is a gap in the market there for technically adept marketers to help self publishers and run their campaigns for them. We're all about empowering you to do it.

Brett Battles: Yeah, because that's the way it has to be too, so it's good that you're doing it. I'm just like, "Ugh." I struggle with it so much, but I have to. I have to try it, so I'm trying different things and trying new things and everything and different services.

James Blatch: You are doing a lot of stuff. You've had a list for quite a long time then.

Brett Battles: I have.

James Blatch: The novella that you wrote, did you write that specifically thinking it would be a giveaway, a lead magnet?

Brett Battles: No. That was the one that I released in the summer of 2011. It was just another revenue generator for me as far as I was concerned at that time. In a way I guess it still is as a giveaway hopefully, but I was looking at it more as a direct for sale kind of item that I put out.

I'm looking for different things like that, trying different services that are out there because I think a lot of the services that are out there are just things trying to get money from authors.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's the other thing to say about having somebody come in and do your stuff.

There's a fairly large number of companies that we find quite annoying who are bordering on charlatan.

Brett Battles: I think it would be great to have somebody, you come in and say, "Okay, look. I have this chunk of books and they're all self published. We can do whatever we can. Here is where I am at right now, income level. If you can raise my income level X amount of dollars you will get X percent, 10% of that." Or 20% or whatever. I think that would be a way of doing it, where their performance is tied to your performance.

James Blatch: Yeah, absolutely.

Brett Battles: I don't know if that's possible.

James Blatch: You may get a call off this interview. Who knows?

Brett Battles: Hey, I would be interested in somebody who could do that, because that would be a benefit for both of us. I've got how many now? The book coming out next month is my 31st novel and five, six, seven, because of the two at 47North. Yeah, it's the 31st novel. That's 24 novels plus some short stories and I think another short novella that are all up, so I have almost 30 pieces of property or pieces that are up self published for sale up there. There's a lot to work with.

James Blatch: Yeah, the shelf is well stacked.

Brett Battles: The shelf is well stacked, and it continues to get stacked. I'm about a quarter of the way or almost a third of the way into my next novel, writing it.

James Blatch: Let's talk about the writing. We're all writers and we're fascinated with how other people approach these things.

You talk about a lot of writers will actually write for an hour and a half, two hours a day maybe, and you talked earlier about doing a full day's writing.

Brett Battles: I think seven years ago I was probably doing six, seven hours a day. Eight hours a day maybe. I looked at it as a job, because it's my job. I sit down for these amount of days and I work at least five days a week, getting X amount of words out per week. That's really how I looked at it. I have a daily word goal, which has steadily come down over the years.

James Blatch: Can you share that?

Brett Battles: Yeah, sure. In the past, when I first went full time and was self publishing, I was actually trying to get anywhere from 4,000 to 5,000 words a day, which is crazy now I think about it, but I was doing it back then. Then I started getting into the 3,500 to 4,000 range. Then down to 3,000. I have now settled on if I can get 2,500 words a day, I'm happy. Yesterday was 3,000. Today I only got 1,500 so I'm not quite as happy today as I was yesterday. It's the job.

It's just keep moving forward because if you do that, even if you're getting 2,000 a day that's 10,000 words a week. In seven to eight weeks you've got a 70,000 to 80,000 word book. That's a good start.

Then if you get a weekend in here or there with a few, you've got a 85,000 word novel and that's right in the sweet spot. Then a month or two to edit it and everything, in four months you've got a book. Right?

It better be good, but that's a totally separate subject.

James Blatch: Sure. I knew there was a catch.

Brett Battles: Yeah, there is always that catch. Isn't it?

James Blatch: It can't just be the same word.

Brett Battles: Damn it.

James Blatch: In terms of your approach to the actual structure in writing, how do you draft and how do you redraft and edit, etc.?

Brett Battles: I don't do a formal outline. I'm not an outliner. But I usually go into a book with an idea of where I want to go, or at least a direction I'm headed, sort of.

I have characters, especially if it's one of my series, it's very easy. I've got my characters and I just kind of go. I may not even understand what the mystery is I'm writing. I know there is going to be some sort of mystery. Every book is a mystery. Even if it's just a drama, it's a mystery because we don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what the mystery is going to be at the end of my thriller or how things are necessarily, but I'm heading there and I'm setting things up and it just naturally comes to me.

I treat my first draft kind of as my 80,000 to 90,000 words. My books usually fall somewhere between 70,000 and 90,000 words and I treat that as my first draft in essence. It's a pretty solid first draft, although there's going to be crap all over it.

Then I go back and I do a really heavy handed rewrite of all of that to get everything straightened out and cleaned up as much as possible, and then I go back and do it again, trying to get it all nice and clean. If I feel like it I'll do a third polish pass on that.

If I'm happy with where it is, I'll send it to my editor and then we'll go from there. She is more of my copy editor with a light story pass at this point. I do think that authors that are still starting out definitely need story editors. I think after 30 books if I can't figure out where the story is and where the problems are, then I shouldn't be writing.

That said, she is a story editor for other people so she also will point out little things, because you do still need that. You're always going to miss these little things that are intuitive to you.

You think, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, everybody is going to catch that or know what that is."

She goes, "Well, you know this and this," and I go, "Okay." It's usually ... I've never had anything big in the last four or five years. It's all just little a line here, a line there, just to clarify something and stuff like that.

That's the process for me basically.

James Blatch: A practical question. What do you actually write on?

Brett Battles: I use Microsoft Word and I write on a Macintosh, a Mac. A desktop model. I'm looking at it right now.

James Blatch: You use Word. This is very nitty, but the sort of thing I'm interested in-

Brett Battles: No, please.

James Blatch: Do you fill up one Word document? That can be quite a big unwieldy document in 90,000 words. Do you do chapters?

Brett Battles: Oh, yeah. I just go from beginning to end. No, no, no, I go from beginning to end.

James Blatch: Okay.

Brett Battles: Because I format my own ebooks, as I'm writing I'm formatting it so that it makes it easier when I actually finish the book and go. I'm putting in headlines on each chapter so that it automatically will generate a table of contents, that kind of thing as I'm going along.

Also with the new Word you can actually bring up the table of contents on the side, so I can click chapter to chapter to chapter if I want as I'm going along. That works out great.

Yeah, it's all just one big document. I never even thought about doing separate. That never even dawned on me. I think Scrivener does that or something like that.

James Blatch: It does. Yeah, Scrivener is used by a lot of people.

Brett Battles: My friend Bill Cameron uses that and he pushed that. I think I saw some picture with him and it had all these different windows and stuff and I'm going, "Agh, too much. Too much information. Just let me write my story." My story, and then I have my little post-it notes that I write things on and stick it all over my desk and then I'm happy.

James Blatch: Your Scrivener is on the desk and the post-it notes.

Brett Battles: Yeah, that's your post-it notes over there, but I don't want that. I want them practically where I can touch them.

James Blatch: You're writing the final formatted thing in your Word document, it's almost like pre-printing press of the monks.

Brett Battles: Maybe.

James Blatch: They wrote their books in flourish right from the beginning, being done as something very lovely.

Brett Battles: Well, I always like to think of myself as a monk.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's great. We've raced through. We're coming up to 40 minutes, which is normally where we stop it.

Brett Battles: Really?

James Blatch: I know, it's unbelievable.

Brett Battles: Wow.

James Blatch: It's been great, but I want to keep it going for a little bit longer if that's okay.

Brett Battles: Absolutely.

James Blatch: People I think will be engaged in this.

Brett Battles: Yeah. I'm not doing anything.

James Blatch: Although I am aware you've only done 1,500 words today. I don't want you to blame me.

Brett Battles: I'm not going to do anymore on that, although there's a short story I'm supposed to be giving to somebody that I'll probably take a look at a little later, but that's if I feel in the mood.

James Blatch: I'm just going to finish off on the writing stuff, so your writing routine.

Do you write at the same time of day? Do you sit at the same desk?

Brett Battles: It's interesting. I do sit at the same desk. I write at my dining room table, just because there's no dedicated office in my house, but this works out fine. It's perfect.

I am in transition when I write. As several of my friends know and laugh at me about, over the last, I don't know, six years or so, and I don't know how I got into the habit, but ... Well, actually I kind of do.

Back when I was having a full time job and still writing, I would get up early before work, write for an hour or two, then go to work, then write after work.

Over the last six years I developed the habit of getting up like at 4:00 in the morning and I would be writing by 5:30 and I'd be done by 10:00 or 11:00 in the morning. Then I'd be asleep by 8:00 at night. That was the problem on the back end.

I am trying to shift that now. Today I was up at 5:00 which was great. That's sleeping in to me, so we're getting there. I'm hoping to move it to more where I'm getting up at 5:30 or 6:00, but I still want to be done around noon or 1:00.

Now that said, that's when I'm writing new material. If I'm in an editing phase I tend to go for longer days. I'll may go 12 hours, from 6:00 to 6:00 or 5:00 to 5:00 working on that, because I'm not coming up with new material necessarily. The stuff I'm working on is there in front of me so I can keep going, keep going, keep going.

James Blatch: Is that because you function better in the morning or because you like to have some time to yourself in the afternoon?

Brett Battles: I am definitely a person who can wake up and start doing what I need to do, and I like that. It's nice and quiet in the morning, especially at 4:00 in the morning. I love the darkness and I love just the silence of the world at that point of day. But I feel like I need to get back into the world of the living.

James Blatch: Meet some other people during the daylight hours.

Brett Battles: Yeah. I'm really becoming a hermit sometimes. Sometimes it's just me and my dog for days on end and that's probably not a good thing. Not for her. I know she doesn't like it.

James Blatch: I bet the dog's sleeping at 5:00 in the morning when you're writing.

Brett Battles: She sleeps but then she comes in and wants attention. Australian shepherd, too hyper. She wants everything.

James Blatch: Yeah, they need a lot of attention. You're in California?

Brett Battles: Yeah, I'm in Los Angeles. Well, Glendale but basically Los Angeles.

James Blatch: You've got some lovely climate out there and some genuinely nice daylight, so you should definitely try and make the most of daylight.

Brett Battles: We do. Yeah, I should actually take advantage of that.

James Blatch: At some point, but whatever works for you, right?

Brett Battles: Right.

James Blatch: I think all of us feel if we've got something that's working for us, you almost feel you don't want to jinx it.

Brett Battles: That's exactly right. That was why it took me a long time to even try to change it, but it's so true. It's whatever works for you is what you should be doing because the important thing is to write as much as you can.

I don't mean as much as you can in a given session. I mean time-wise as many days as you can. Write every day. That would be as much as you can. Or if as much as you can is once a month, then you have to write that once a month. But you write as much as you can and if you can push it for a little bit more, you do.

James Blatch: In terms of the stories and books then, so you start off and you have a vague idea. It's a mystery to you as much as anybody else at the very beginning of the book.

Brett Battles: Often. Yes, to a larger extent. Like I said I usually have an idea of where it's going or the theme that I'm going to try to be playing with or something like that, but I don't like to do involved outlines because I do want the story to tell itself to me.

I'll sit down in the morning and start writing, and all of a sudden there will be characters showing up, when I woke up that day I had no idea even existed or were going to exist I guess. I like that. I like that element of surprise.

I like when something fun happens that I just never even saw coming. If I had to work from an outline, I feel like I would be just ... It would be creative death for me personally.

Not everybody is this way. I know some people, I have very good friends who love to outline. They love the structure of it and everything. For me I just feel like then I'm just retelling what I've already written here. Why?

James Blatch: There's a confidence to that writing that you have. Was that always there? Those first couple of drafts you did, those first couple of books that didn't get picked up. I've taken you all the way back.

Did you outline them or did you have the same kind of approach?

Brett Battles: I'm trying to remember. I think I did them in a writers group, so I probably did outline them. I had a mentor who ran the group, who was a published author and everything, and so I'm pretty sure he probably had us do that. I can't even remember now.

I think for me the biggest thing that ever happened was finishing that first book. Once I finished that first book, it told me that I can actually finish a book.

When I finished that I was probably late 30s when I finally finished my first book, and I had been saying since I was 12 years old I was going to be a novelist. It took a long time to get there, but once you finish that first book ...

The thing is, and I think this is for a lot of writers starting out is that the biggest most daunting thing is getting to the end of that book. That first book. How am I ever going to get there? Once you do get there you realize, "Oh, I can get there. I can do this."

When I start a book now, I'm never thinking, "I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to finish it." That thought never even enters my mind, and it hasn't since book two or three. Probably even book two.

Once I finished that first book, after that it was like, "Oh yeah, I know I'll finish this." There are a few books way back then that I would start and that I didn't finish, but none of the books that I've started, that I've sat down and said, "Okay, I'm going to work on this book now," I've finished them all. I have written some scenes or some starts for other books only because I didn't want to forget them and I go, "Oh yeah, this would be good for this. I want to maybe someday come to this. Let me just write a little bit on it." But when I literally set the task of writing X book, I finish X book because I know I can. It never even crosses my mind that I won't. That's a confidence that comes from doing.

James Blatch: It's really interesting. It's brilliantly put and I completely agree with you. As somebody writing their first book, I feel at the moment I'm in a place I can't envisage finishing it to be honest, and I'm at a tough place with it at the moment.

It's a mountain but I can see that thing clicks over, that once you've done that one book and finished it and seen it, as you say, mentally the next book will feel different. I'd love to know what that feels like. Maybe one day.

Brett Battles: I would also say to you that when you finish that first book, or when you finish the draft of that first book, it doesn't have to be perfect. In fact it can be complete crap.

But you get to the end, the most important thing for me was always getting to the end. You may be one of these people, my friend Rob is this way, he's always rewriting and getting everything perfect so that when he gets to the end of his book he's basically done.

He may go back and do a polish pass, but he doesn't have to go back and do a rewrite. I have to do this major rewrite of my book because it's full of blah, but what I've done is I've just pushed through to the end because I know what I need and I'm just throwing the stuff out there that I'm going to need.

It's going to need tuning up, but I want to make sure I have something to work with and I get everything. Sometimes I will get three quarters of the way done and I'll say, "You know what? I need to go back and clean up everything so I can write the end correctly." I've done that several times, but it's the same principle.

I would say to you, even if you're having problems, push through the parts that you're having problems and give yourself the tools to finish and then to go back and polish it up.

It doesn't have to be perfect when you finish. That comes in the next stage. I think too many people worry about perfection on that first draft, and that's bullshit. Can I say that?

James Blatch: You can say that. You can say it.

Brett Battles: But it really is.

James Blatch: It is that confidence thing and it's that nagging doubt that what you're doing is no good, which I don't know whether that ever goes away.

Brett Battles: Often, a lot of my books I think, "Ah, this is crap." Then by the time I finish I go, "Yeah, this is pretty good I think." I don't know.

James Blatch: That is true. Whenever I sit back, occasionally read back what I've written I think, "This is quite good," but that's the only moment I think that. The rest of the time I think-

Brett Battles: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

James Blatch: Okay.

Brett Battles: You know what? Give yourself permission to write crap. That's it. Don't worry about whether it's good or not, just write it.

James Blatch: Yeah, that's great.

Brett Battles: Then you can fix it later.

James Blatch: That's great advice, Brett. Let's finish off on the future for you. I know you're doing a little bit more marketing maybe, even though you kind of don't like it but you feel you've got your products there, or maybe we're going to hook you up with somebody. That would be great.

Brett Battles: Yes, please. Please.

James Blatch: We'll follow that story.

Brett Battles: Help me out. Help me.

James Blatch: In terms of the books, you mentioned sci-fi.

You've got obviously Jonathan Quinn. Is that going to continue? Are Quinns going strong?

Brett Battles: Absolutely. It's going strong. We've had some major developments within the grander story of the whole series in the last couple of books, and this book is a direct reaction to the previous book, but it's continuing.

I've already planned for at least the 12th, which is next year, and so it will go on I'm sure beyond that. As long as it stays fresh for me.

What I don't like is series that just feel like they're just going on because the writer was getting paid to do it. I have the Quinn series.

Last fall started a spinoff series from it called The Excoms, which is a group of operatives who have been recruited by this mysterious organization to go do these side missions that aren't really in the espionage world but are dealing with some other thing that needs fixing kind of situation.

That one came out, The Excoms came out in November and right now that's the book I'm writing right now. I'm the second book in that, so I'm about a third of the way, a quarter to a third of the way in that book. That should be out September, October I think.

Then I am hoping between the end of Excoms and when I have to start the next Quinn that I might squeeze in another sci-fi fantasy kind of thing, because that's where my love of writing started when I was a kid, in that area. I'm always drawn back to wanting to do those. Those are more for me than for anything else, but I love dipping my toe in that area.

James Blatch: That's very sort of Iain M. Banks. Although I did read something from him once, because I love Iain M. Banks sci-fi, and people assume that he wrote the posh novels, The Wasp Factory that got the Booker for creative reasons and the sci-fi for fun and for money.

He said it was the other way around. He loved writing his sci-fi, but actually it was those other books that made him the money, the creative stuff.

Brett Battles: That's funny.

James Blatch: Yeah, I love my sci-fi and maybe I should turn my hand to that once I finish my military thriller, which I will finish.

Brett Battles: The thing is with independent publishing you can write it all.

James Blatch: Yeah, exactly.

Brett Battles: You don't have to worry about it. Your publisher isn't telling what you need to write. I could have never written these if I was still, at least not under my own name. I couldn't have written them while I was still with Random House.

James Blatch: Yeah, and that brings us back to the glorious freedom of self publishing and the liberating nature of that.

Brett Battles: It is. It is freedom. There is a sense of fear that comes with the freedom, but there is also the freedom that it has. I've been indie published now since 2011, so that's more than six years now.

James Blatch: What is it they say? Freedom is not free.

Brett Battles: In this case also, yes.

James Blatch: Yeah, works every way. Brett, it's been brilliant talking to you. I don't think we've done an interview where the time has flown by as it has in this chat.

Brett Battles: Oh, great.

James Blatch: I've really enjoyed it.

Brett Battles: Good. I had a great time too.

James Blatch: Thank you very much. If somebody would like to be Brett's marketer you can drop us an email at SPF and we will put you in touch. We won't even take a percentage. We'll leave all that percentage work.

Brett Battles: I appreciate that.

James Blatch: Thanks, Brett.

Brett Battles: All right, thank you.

James Blatch: I forgot to ask him whether Brett Battles is his real name.

Mark Dawson: It seems almost too good to be true, doesn't it? I think, as far as I know, it is.

James Blatch: Yeah, it's a great author name if you want. Really lovely chatting to Brett.

You start off some interviews and you wonder how long it's going to last, because Brett is a relatively ... He does what he does. It's not as if he's come to us with some area of marketing to talk about, but actually that hour just flew by and absolutely loved chatting to Brett. Like I said, an early riser. Are you an early riser?

Mark Dawson: I am but mostly because of my children. This morning I rose at 1:45 a.m. because my daughter wanted a drink. I normally get up about 6:30 and I'm at my desk after dropping Freya off at school no later than 8:30. It's pretty good. I'm more of a morning person than an evening person.

James Blatch: I think Brett has got his dog in the house. I think he just gets up and he works quietly. That is something people do do in their quiet house.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, there's another author called Craig Martelle who I'll be meeting next year when he comes over. There's a conference, 20 Books to 50K. I think they're having a conference over here in February outside London. I think he lives in Alaska and he gets up and starts working at 3:00 a.m.

James Blatch: In Alaska?

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Mind you, it is a difference at 3:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Mark Dawson: I actually imagine it's quite light, yeah, at that time. Yeah, he has a very, very early start. I don't think I could manage that.

James Blatch: No.

Mark Dawson: My kids certainly wouldn't make that possible. Yeah, early suits me. Others work late.

James Blatch: My time might send you a bit screwy, I think, getting up or certainly me a bit screwy. Now, people may have just bumped into you in Florida and they'll be wondering why you haven't mentioned that or said hello to them.

Mark Dawson: Oh, yes. Very true.

James Blatch: We should say that we are pre-recording this particular batch of podcasts. It's the beginning of the summer and the vacation period and it's a good idea, I think, for us to record these in the go now. It'll be more

sort of live week to week in the autumn. You are, as we are recording this, due to go off to the RWA Conference in Orlando, I guess?

Mark Dawson: That's right. I'll be in a Disney hotel at the same time that you're in a Disney hotel.

James Blatch: Which one?

Mark Dawson: Mine one looks like a swan. I've seen pictures of it. It does look frankly a bit weird.

John: It's the Dolphin.

Mark Dawson: There you go, yeah, John.

James Blatch: The Dolphin?

Mark Dawson: It is called the Dolphin, yeah. That's where the conference is held and I am going to be doing, provided I get the slides, it's a bit tenuous when it comes to timing, but as we record this I still haven't done the slides yet so I need to do that next week, looking at John.

I will say John will be making them beautiful so that I'm ready to go on stage. I'm going to be talking about a marketing update, the basics that authors need and then providing them with a launch plan for their next book, so taking the platform that they've build with social media, mailing list, cool new things like Amazon ads, Facebook bots, all that kind of stuff and putting everything together in a launch that will hopefully add a few thousand new readers to their careers as they get ready to launch their next romance book. Yeah, looking forward to that. Going to be interesting.

James Blatch: Yeah, good. Funnily enough I'll be in a nearby Disney hotel with my family on an annual vacation and we probably won't go to the RWA

Conference because I don't think it would go down very well. I shall be on a roller coaster with my arms in the air like I just don't care.

Mark Dawson: I'll be on a roller coaster, a different kind of roller coaster.

James Blatch: Okay, good. Thank you very much indeed to our guest Brett Battles.

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