

PODCAST 81: HOW STORIES WORK – WITH JENNY PARROTT, EDITOR

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: Welcome back to the Self Publishing Formula podcast with James here and Mark over there. I hope you had a good summer, as we go into autumn. We are a recording a bit of batch, aren't we, over the summer, so we should be completely honest about that. This is not the 7th of September, the day before you're listening to this, at the moment. This is just at the end of or the beginning, I guess, of the vacation period, to make sure we're covered. But we get into our really busy period in autumn, so it's good to get these interviews going.

We've had a really good summer of interviews. I've been listening back over some of the recordings that we've done. Now some of the author interviews. Orna was great. Particularly enjoyed learning about sleep from Anne Barrilucci.

This interview I'm excited about. This is an interview with an editor, actually the developmental editor I'm working with on my new novel, called Jenny Parrott, whose very patient with me. She doesn't get updates from me very often. She is fantastic to talk to. I absolutely love this.

She's somebody who thinks a lot about how stories work. You'll hear from the interview, that she's not remotely snobbish about books. She just completely enjoys and understands that what some people might sneer at, the kind of DaVinci Code.

I mentioned Robert Ludlum and she loves because she points out how difficult it is to write a book that's such a page turner. You may well sneer but you can't really sneer at eight million dollars in the bank, whatever he walked away from with the DaVinci Code, perhaps more than that even.

Mark Dawson: Much more than that.

James Blatch: Much more than that. That was a book everyone had a copy of at the time. I loved reading it, but also see the point that the way it's written. There's no Booker Prize.

Mark Dawson: No, he wasn't interested in that. He wanted to write a book that people were unable to put down and mission accomplished. The same can be said for E. L. James with 50 Shades of Gray. No one's going to pretend that that is stylistically genius. I'm sure that she wouldn't claim that for the book herself.

What she has done is written a book that has compelled hundreds and hundreds of thousands, millions of readers worldwide. There's a real skill to that. If it was easy to do, everyone would be doing it.

I made a mistake right at the start of my career. After I had a couple of traditionally published books, I decided that I would try and write a page turning thriller, kind of an airport thriller based on after seeing the success of a writer called Matthew Reilly. He was also published by Macmillan. It was so difficult. It was the only time I've struggled to open my laptop in the mornings to write. Never had that problem before.

And at the end of the process, I did finish the book, but it's absolutely dreadful and it will never be published. I thought thank God I haven't got it anymore.

But what I learned from that, it took me maybe five more years to kind of fully understand that lesson, was that it's very difficult to do that, to write

those books that people find difficult to put down. It's something I've worked very hard on.

My publishing company now is called Unputdownable, so that is something that I aim very precisely to achieve with every new book that I write. I'm not trying to win the Booker Prize, because, frankly, I'll probably make more money if I write and sell books that people will read quickly. They're addictive. They'll read the next one. They'll recommend them to their friends. That's a much more sustainable business model for me. And also, I find it very satisfying. There's certainly no shame in writing those kinds of books.

James Blatch: Absolutely not. It takes us back in a little way to Chloe Esposito, who had a similar journey of Oxford and an A style student, who went to Oxford University and had lofty ambitions of winning Pulitzer Prizes etc, and in the end has written ...

Mark Dawson: I think it's a youthful thing. I was 21-22 when I thought that way. Experience tells you as you have mortgages to pay and children to bring up, that you have to be practical. Pragmatism becomes a more relevant concern.

Those lofty ideals, which are a bit naïve, the only way to succeed as a writer is to have someone garland you with an award. It's not a very sensible way to approach things. It's something that I think you learn over time.

James Blatch: OK. Well your chance to pick up tips on how to write a page turner now. We're going to talk about some extra resources that we've created in SPF for you at the end of the interview. Let's hear from Jenny now.

Jenny, thank you very much indeed for joining us on the SPF podcast. It's great to speak to you and great to speak to somebody who spends their working life thinking about how stories work, why they work, and helping

people make them work, which is kind of what the rest of us spend our lives struggling to do.

Jenny Parrott: Well, I think most editors do too, as well, if I'm completely honest.

James Blatch: Tell us a little bit about you and your back ground, and what sort of day to day work you do with books.

Jenny Parrott: I've got quite a mixed history. I'm an ex-journalist but I've worked in publishing now for 30 years. I've done publicity. I've done only a little publicity.

I've done bits of copywriting. I've done ghost writing. I've sold rights. I've done books to film. I have acquired. I also have two alter egos, so very commercial women's fiction.

But day to day, the bulk of my work is either running my crime list at One World, which is an independent publisher. One World's claim to fame is we've won the last two Man Booker Prizes.

James Blatch: Wow.

Jenny Parrott: I'm also a preliminary judge for the Costa Short Story Prize. I read and assess manuscripts for a literary scout called Lucy Abrahams. She's got 17 clients and a film and television company.

The aim of that sort of reading is to find projects before the other scouts do. I also do some work for Amazon, which is where I met Mark Dawson.

James Blatch: Have you edited any of Mark's books?

Jenny Parrott: Yes. I have done his Isabella Rose series for Amazon, which is on the Thomas & Mercer imprint.

James Blatch: I think that's the one that Hollywood are very interested in at the moment.

Jenny Parrott: I can completely see why. Really cracking characters. Absolutely sort of bone shattering pace. That'd really translate well.

James Blatch: You've even had an early draft of my effort put in front of you.

Jenny Parrott: I certainly have, yes.

James Blatch: You'll be pleased to know that chapter one is now 33,000 words. I think the whole of the book was 52,000 when I gave it to you.

Jenny Parrott: It was. I'm so glad that you took the plunge because you've got some great characters and a really nice setting. I think you just needed the space to let them grow and come to life.

James Blatch: I've really enjoyed the notes I've had back from you and even though some of them that you specifically said one thing about. I've written, as you know, in seven days with timings and sequences.

I wanted it to be quite simple to understand for people, this narrative. But it lost some of the enjoyment of being there and getting to know the characters and caring about the characters, which is the key thing that came across in your notes.

I think you said to me in one of the set of notes that I was perhaps assuming people would understand the politics of the Peace Campaigns and so on, in the sixties and that I should do a background.

My initial thought was that would break the flow that I'd set up, these seven days. But I wrote it anyway and I now love it. I love it as an introduction to the book. It's a nice little pause. I enjoyed writing it. I enjoy re-reading it as it

came off the top of my head, but I know quite a lot about the era. It sets it up nicely.

I think my initial feeling about working with editors then, is a first, brand new experience for me, is always try what they've said before you dismiss it.

Jenny Parrott: Yeah. I'd agree with that. I think no editor is going to say they've got all the answers, but sometimes you can read something and you think "This is what most readers are going to want to know." Actually, I think it will help all writers. I certainly do this myself.

If we ask ourselves continuously "Am I giving the reader what they need to have at this time not just what I want to say?" In your case, you're talking about a world a lot of people will know something about. But there's a whole generation, a young generation, that might know nothing.

So you have to give them the framework that they can then fall in love with your characters. Or, if not fall in love with them, become interested and want to stay on the journey that you're going to take them on.

James Blatch: Yeah. I keep forgetting that I'm getting older.

Jenny Parrott: We all do.

James Blatch: Everyone lived through Green and Common and the Peace Camps, which were a huge news and daily news when I was in my 20s. But you're quite right. My daughter probably has no idea, she's 13, have no idea what C and D is.

Jenny Parrott: That is distant history for a whole generation. Most people who are at the offices of publishing companies tend to be 35 or younger. I'm old enough to be their mom. I'm continually reminded of this.

Actually, I think it's a really good thing for all writers to think about. If you know nothing about a particular subject, would you be interested enough to want to read the book anyway?

James Blatch: Yeah. That's a good question.

Jenny Parrott: I think actually, it's that emotional connection. One of the things I do, which I forgot to say when I was talking about me, I teach creative writing as an occasional tutor for Avon and also for a company called Spiriter.

I think sometimes you've really got to sort of to drill into your characters, you've really got to think about how you're creating your world. So often I think, writers until you have a certain level of experience, you think what you want to say is the most important aspect. Where is your novel going? What is the overall message?

But actually, increasingly, I think that readers read on an emotional level. All they're interested in really are the characters.

James Blatch: Yeah. I know. Of course, that must be right because when you think about it, you said would people want to read a book about something they don't know. Most of us pick up books, well we will often pick up a book about a subject we don't know. People go and watch Indiana Jones, they don't know much about archeology, but what they care about.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely.

James Blatch: So those common things that make the books you like why you like them, those films you like why you like them, is the common things, which is the character you want to be with, the character you enjoy seeing. That helps focus that mind.

Jenny Parrott: Though two books I use repeatedly and encourage first time writers to read, partly because they're so brilliant at taking the reader into different world.

The first one is [The Fault in Our Stars](#), by John Green. The fact it's YA and the fact it's a story about teenagers dying of cancer is irrelevant.

It's an absolute master class in pulling the reader into this world and instantly making the reader not be interested in the fact they've got cancer so much as in the dynamic of these teenagers.

The second book I really recommend people to read is, I think it's called [Under the Skin](#) or it might be Beneath the Skin, but it's Michel Faber and that's a man so it's M-I-C-H-E-L and that's about a serial killer who happens to be an alien, driving around Scotland doing body harvesting. The fact that you're reading about an alien, within ten pages, it doesn't mean anything at all. You're just in a Shakespearean tragedy.

James Blatch: Great. Good recommendations. We'll make sure they're in our show notes as well. We'll dig out the links for them. Gosh I can start, I mean Johnathon Livingston Seagull was a short but gripping tale, but it's a seagull. It doesn't matter, does it?

Jenny Parrott: I mean, well, look at Watership Down.

James Blatch: And Watership Down. The terrifying, I can never forget the terrifying film version of Watership Down, which still gets complaints every year.

Jenny Parrott: There's going to be another version on the BBC.

James Blatch: Oh is there?

Jenny Parrott: I think, yeah. So it's either going to be this Christmas, but more probably next Christmas.

James Blatch: Let's talk a little bit, because there is people listening to this podcast, some of whom are very experienced and some of whom are just starting out, if we start at the beginning end.

I don't want kind of range of books you normally edit, whether you edit first time writers a lot or not.

Jenny Parrott: Oh, I do all sorts.

James Blatch: Okay.

Jenny Parrott: I've done Booker short listed authors, down to people that are just writing a speech. I've worked a lot with first time writers, Amazon, really well known names. I've had quite a lot of experience working with self published people.

James Blatch: I guess that's probably going to grow for you.

For those of us who are starting out, I hear what you say quite often when you say when you get more experience, this will become more natural to you. Actually, that process of that becoming more natural to you, of working out what bits are important are going to make the book work, the characters and stuff, it's quite difficult. I am finding this bit difficult to make that natural.

Jenny Parrott: It is.

James Blatch: Who knew that writing a book was difficult? Otherwise, we'd all be doing it.

I don't know what advice you give people at my stage, who are in their first or second novels, of how to keep their focus on those things that are going to resonate with the reader, rather than get bogged down in the story that you want to tell.

It's a real panic about story most of the time. It turns out it's probably the least relevant part.

Jenny Parrott: That's right. I think there's two things you can do.

First of all, you can look through your book and look through it in a really cool analytical way and think does every scene have to be there? Is it in the right place?

I often use the word is it singing for its supper? Does it feel the right weight? Is it moving forward? Are you doing a silly information dump? Just does it feel right? Are you happy with it?

And then go on to the next scene. That is a very good guide because you will find that there are some scenes that you're less happy with because that's the nature of writing.

One tip can be to do a printout of your novel and to read with two colored Post-It notes. Read from beginning to end. Don't stop. Stick one color on bits you like and one color on bits you don't like.

When you've finished your book, you've got an emotional landscape of your happiness with your book. Because actually, your happiness with it will probably replicate how the reader is going to read. So I'm pretty certain the bits that you like that you think work, other people will think work.

James Blatch: Being able to take that step back from your book. That's vital as well, isn't it?

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. The most important, the biggest thing I can say to self published writers or writers who are trying to get a book together and they want to get an agent is, think of it as a whole and think of it as well, that it's blurred. It can be anyway you want.

You might try writing it one way. That's not how it necessarily has to be. When I was at Bloomsbury, probably 15 years ago, a book was bought and it just didn't work. The editor, she changed the sexes of the main characters and the book completely worked then.

There's also a fantastic book by a writer called, I think it's Catherine O'Flynn, called [What Was Lost](#). That book was told in a jeweled time frame. So you had modern day or more modern narrative, interspersed with an older story. It's about a missing child.

The agent suggested to the author, or at least this is what the agent told me had happened, that the story be divided, so that the story of the missing child is told, which is roughly half the book, and then the second half is the story of the man who works in a shopping center, ten or fifteen years later, as a completely different reading experience.

Sometimes I think you've got to free yourself up. Often you have to write your book. You've got to get something down, so you've got something to work with, but that is just one of the stages.

After that, you could think about maybe changing tenses. So you could have some bits in past tense, some bits in present tense or first or third person, or a different time frames.

If you've got a lot of information to get over, often you might as well put a newspaper article in there, or a newspaper story, or a letter, because that can be a very effective way of just telling the reader what they need to know, for the plot to make sense, to move on to the bit, which is the characters working within that.

James Blatch: Rather than shoehorning into a slightly unrealistic conversation between two people.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. Because everybody does it. I've done it myself.

James Blatch: Well, they do in film and TV all the time.

Jenny Parrott: Yes and it rarely works. Sometimes you just think, or otherwise put a historical note at the front of the book or an author's note at the end of the book.

James Blatch: Yeah. Funnily enough, I did have a newspaper article in the very early draft of my book. Which I put in there and then I took it out thinking it looked a bit amateurish to have that half way between. Actually, maybe I should go back to it.

Jenny Parrott: It's hard sometimes. It's like a context in which you do it. There was obviously something wrong with it because you felt twitchy about it. It may be that you hadn't quite got the voice right. There would have been something. Maybe it wasn't in the right place in the book.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: So the other thing I would say is, maybe think about moving things around. If you're nervous about something, consider maybe putting then ending at the start of the book, because you can always tell all your story, then have your ending in for the second time, but subtly different.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Then, of course the reader knows much more.

James Blatch: That's quite a nice way of doing it, isn't it? All stories ultimately feel more satisfying when there is an arc, when there is a circle that almost meets where things get wrapped, that's a way of doing that. A couple of areas I want to talk to you about. I think there is a tension here between the advice you get about driving the story along. Singing for its supper is a good example of what you said there and also allowing something to breathe.

So you get to a character and get to know where you are, and describe the white picket fence and the birds chirping and the green grass, because you want this scene of tranquility.

On the other hand, I suppose you could argue that is serving its purpose because you need to establish that.

Jenny Parrott: Yeah it can be. If you think of that David Lynch film. I can't think of it now, but it's the one where the ear is found. It literally is picket fence -

James Blatch: Blue Velvet?

Jenny Parrott: Green grass.

James Blatch: Not Blue Velvet.

Jenny Parrott: It might be Blue Velvet. But anyway, it's all lovely and then the camera goes down. There's an ear in the grass. That is a fantastic sort of narrative way.

One thing I would advise writers to do is look at successful films a lot, because they will say a lot about structure and storytelling and viewer equals reader response. Otherwise, what you can do is that you can think of "Okay. I want to have this idilic setting." You don't have to describe it all in one go.

James Blatch: No. Break it up.

Jenny Parrott: Use bits of description or every time somebody is linked to, say it's a house or a particular place, you could have them described in very sunny language or warm language, happy kind of memories.

Often it can be good to use different palettes of words for different people. That can all be a very, very effective tool in that subconscious way that we read. You need to do it subtly but that can work.

James Blatch: That's interesting. One of the films you told me to have another look at was [The Right Stuff](#). When I watched it, always a treat to watch that film again anyway, I was amazed watching from a story point of view how much was missing.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely.

James Blatch: From the detail that I know about the era, it didn't need to be there.

It did become about the people and their tension about the situation they're in and much less about the kind of documentary narrative of what was going on then.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely, yeah. Of course, it's much better and more effective because of that.

One of the golden rules of writing is "Less is More" because the more you hold back, the more you save your armory of sort of dramatic tension and dramatic effects, emotional resonance, that you can bring in later on.

The problem often with books that an editor has not worked on, someone like me, when I read, they feel very one note. So they started to canter and then they just stay at that canter.

Whereas, if you think of James Bond say, you're getting peaks and troughs. You get action relax, action relax. That's how readers need to read.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Because it just doesn't work if you're not kind of being taken at somebody else's rhythm.

James Blatch: I think it must be why I hated Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, because it just never seemed to stop.

Jenny Parrott: That's it. That's it completely.

James Blatch: But some people like him.

Jenny Parrott: It's very much of its time because it just is.

James Blatch: It's a stream, yeah.

I want to talk about voice a little bit. When I first told Mark that I had this novel that I'd written, and he asked me is it first person or third person.

Genuinely, it hadn't even occurred to me to make that choice or to really be able to answer that question.

I think people don't even think about this, but it is a choice that you make.

Jenny Parrott: It's got huge implications both ways.

First person can be incredibly engaging. So if you think something like *Gone Girl*, as a narrator you've got the husband or the wife. You're thinking "No, you're the one who's telling the truth." You wouldn't get that with third person of course. In that book, they're both unreliable and it's a complete shaggy dog story.

The problem with first person is that most writers get to the point of the book where they need to have something happening that the person who's narrating can't know, because they're either not there or they're not going to be able to discover it without ruining dramatic tension. That's where the problem lies, because first person is all about thoughts, what one person is doing.

Third person gives you more of a panorama canvas to work from but you might not get that immediacy.

James Blatch: Yeah. I do think when I'm writing mine, which is third person, I often think who does the reader think this person is. The stories do come from somewhere.

If you think someone told me a great story, the key part of that sentence is someone. There was someone there telling you the story. I don't want the reader thinking about me. No author particularly wants the person thinking about them telling the story.

I do wonder whether the first person, then it presents its own challenges in terms of restriction.

Jenny Parrott: It really does. It's very limiting, first person, actually. People often write themselves into complete pickles because of having to stay there.

It's often an uneasy relationship if you do first and third in a book. That's why quite often people put letters in books. So you can have a first person, you, or a telephone conversation or something like that, that you can have the perspective that you often need just for logistical points of view.

What I've found with my own writing is that I write in the third person, but I basically have one main character who will be in virtually every scene.

James Blatch: Right.

Jenny Parrott: So you are getting a perspective.

James Blatch: So the book is virtually written from what they can see.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely, and what they experience and what they think.

James Blatch: Yeah. I think that's a good way of doing it, because that mirrors life. That's how we walk through life as we see what we see. We know stuff's going to be apparent to us later but we don't know it's happening now.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Now in terms of novel structure and length, are you happy to see anything works, and some people will do 45,000 word thing, other people it will be 400,000?

Jenny Parrott: If you're self publishing, basically, it's an elastic market. You can go out with a book that is 20,000 words. Most print books that are sold in bookshops, as novels, if it's literary, you might be able to go as low as 40,000 words or 60,000.

But most books tend to be within that 80 to 120 thousand words. Above 150,000 words, you're giving yourself real problems in that quite often people won't want to read longer books.

Also, if you think there's a chance your book might get reviewed, a lot of book editors in magazines are paid by the page, so they will write five or six reviews per month or whatever it is. They literally will choose the shortest books from the books that's being sent to them, because they don't get paid extra for reading longer books.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: That's human nature. Basically, you make yourself vulnerable. It's hard to make very short books seem value for money, unless you're Ian McEwan and it's Chesil Beach.

You know, all the clever type setting. There is a limit on what you can do in the print version. I would say for most writers, try and think, you don't want to be writing less than 70,000 words.

James Blatch: Okay. That's good advice.

Jenny Parrott: It really is because that sort of 80 to 110, 120, that's the sweet spot. That gives you enough time to develop and build a good story, but not to have people completely losing interest.

Every single book I've written for a publisher, they've tried to contract to 90,000 words.

James Blatch: Right.

Jenny Parrott: So that's with both Hachette and Harper Collins. So just that people know that it seems an emotionally satisfying length for the trade and the reader.

James Blatch: You mentioned Ian McEwan. I think he's probably my favorite author, but I now realize that's a bit of a handicap when you're trying to write because he's an amazing writer. Like a lot of the brilliant writers, who are really up there, there really aren't other people like him.

He has his own style that he makes work and to try and copy that would be foolish.

Jenny Parrott: Also if you read early Ian McEwan, they're quite different from later Ian McEwan. He's an interesting writer. He evolves and he grows with each book.

James Blatch: Definitely.

Jenny Parrott: I think as writers, that's what we all should be trying to do. Even if we go into a genre, I can absolutely attest that Mark Dawson works really, really hard at his physical writing. He wants to be better with each book.

I think that's something for everyone to remember. The writers who tend not to do that, as returning writers or having returning characters, their sales tend to stall and then decrease because people don't necessarily need to have exactly the same hit again and again.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Another one you can really see works hard at his writing is Ian Rankin.

James Blatch: Yeah. I was going to mention Ian Rankin and another Scottish Ian is Iain Banks. I love Iain M. Banks' science fiction. You can see him changing the way he writes and trying different things because they're all short stories and they all sort of standalone.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. Yeah.

James Blatch: He's a great writer as well. That's the other thing. I was going to move on to advice for writers to improve themselves and this seems like a good spot to ask the question.

The simple thing that I've found, and it's perhaps not as obvious as it should have been to me at the beginning, is to read more.

Jenny Parrott: I was just going to say that. Absolutely, without a shadow of doubt, the biggest thing you can do is read really widely.

Read out of your genre. Read things that you absolutely wouldn't think be interested in. Read fiction, non-fiction. Read the newspapers. Absolutely, really go for it.

I'm not being facetious about saying read the newspapers because they will give you a sense of the sight guides of what people are interested in. It may well give you fantastic ideas, but also, you'll just be better informed.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: It sounds quite obvious to say that, but quite often people get an idea and they think "Oh. I want to write psychological suspense and I'm going to have a character that's got OCD." And yet it's very obvious when you start reading what they've done. They know very little about it.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: But just having the experience of reading how other writers have attempted things, quite often you can think that doesn't work. Then you can think why doesn't it work? Why don't I like it? You can cross it off your list of maybe potential things you'd like to try. On the other hand, sometimes you'll read things and think "No, well that's brilliant."

James Blatch: Completely. It's funny, I've been surprised by reading things. I won't mention him because he's dead and I can't insult him.

I'd never read a Robert Ludlum, but obviously, he's quite an influential writer for Mark and Lee Child and so on. I just thought this writing is not for me. This book has been written for somebody who doesn't really read a lot. They just read a very specific type of thing.

Actually, it kind of gave me a bit of heart, because I spend a lot of time, like most writers, thinking my writing's awful. No one's going to like it. Then I read Robert Ludlum and I thought, "You know what? If people like this, they'll probably be able to read my stuff."

Jenny Parrott: Another one I often use is Jeffery Archer or Dan Brown.

James Blatch: They're very, very similar, both of them, to what I experienced with Robert Ludlum.

Jenny Parrott: Exactly. And yet, the more I think about Dan Brown, the more I think of the four million sales in the UK the DaVinci Code has had. If you think about that, it's really interesting because I think he completely understands the reader.

He rewards the reader throughout the book by allowing the readers to think they're very clever and that they're in front of him. They're guessing what the story is going to be. Actually, they're half a page ahead. The books aren't quite as simple as they seem, necessarily.

James Blatch: As you say, the millions in the bank will testify to that.

Jenny Parrott: Any books that are selling in their millions are worth looking at. I would advise all writers to keep an eye on the sort of Rich and Judy lists.

Read prize winners as well because you don't have to like them. You're not reading them to think "Is this a fantastic book?" You're reading them to think "What is it about this book that has attracted this number of sales?" Now often, it's because the market wanted that book at that time. Who knew that 50 Shades of Gray was going to work? Probably Girl on a Train became so phenomenally successful because it was published in the wake of Gone Girl. People had enjoyed Gone Girl wanted a similar feeling.

There's always that slight X factor, but most books sell in phenomenal quantities have something very interesting in the way they're written.

James Blatch: Yeah. Without doubt. I think I'd have to thank Jeffery Archer. Probably the first grown up novel I read was probably *First Among Equals*, one of his early books. I enjoyed politics and probably as you say, I can remember almost every page of that book. You can turn every page and it's actually probably very well written for all the snobbishness that surrounds it and other Jeffery Archer books.

Jenny Parrott: I do think we've got to try and lose snobbishness in reading. I say that spending half my time working with both very literary writers that often they're as willing as anyone else to read something that's really -

James Blatch: Dan Brown's work, yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Yeah. I think don't prejudge what books can offer you. Sometimes there is those very commercial ones ...

James Blatch: Well, a lot of people listen this wanting to be quitting the nine to five and working from home, so that's the top advice. Look what's selling.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely.

James Blatch: You mentioned the Rich and Judy book list, which is quite UK specific. I think there's the Oprah Winfrey book list.

Jenny Parrott: And another one, look at the New York Times best seller lists. Just think I doesn't really matter what the books are. What you're reading is books that have resonance at that moment.

It doesn't mean that if you write a book just like that, you're going to get published, but what it will do is give you a sense of what people are enjoying. That often then helps you find your own voice.

James Blatch: Yes. You mentioned you work for one of the imprints at the moment. There seems to be a crop of imprints around at the moment, often within bigger publishing houses, whose sole job is to find the next *Gone Girl*, *Girl on a Train*.

Jenny Parrott: There definitely are. I mean part of that is a commercial reason because publishing now, is so polarized. Most novels are only published between February and July because of publicity reasons. The big hitters, the Ian Rankins, Lee Childs, Kate Moss, they're going to come out probably September, October time. And your Ian McEwans because that's a good time for the Man Booker.

What that means is there's actually a huge competition for identity in that six month period. Various big publishing houses starting prints so that you can bring more to the market. And it also has the advantage that for certain prizes, when you can only put two entries in ...

James Blatch: You can have more than one. Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. You know it means that Penguin, Random House, might be able to put 20 entries in.

James Blatch: Trick of the trade.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Jenny, before we wrap up, I just want to take a broader view of the role of an editor, because occasionally you meet somebody quite often if they say you're self publishing your novel, "Don't you think you should get it edited?", they'll say.

Why do you think it's not being edited? Self publishing authors pretty much understand that process, but just outline why your role as a developmental editor can be so important, certainly at the beginning of a career.

Jenny Parrott: This issue is really providing a safe place for a writer to discuss options and to discuss what's working and what isn't.

Now often it's just that fresh pair of eyes having a look at what is in front of them. What I would advise self published people is to actually pay for an industry professional to work with you. Partly because they're more experienced.

There's a big trend at the moment for beta readers and I feel very, very cautious because I think it's very easy to make good books worse. People who are working in the trade, they know what is happening a year to two years ahead.

So the reading ID for Lucy Abraham say, I'm not trying to push me, this is the same for anyone who is actually working for a publishing house or is a proper freelance, the books I get sent to me at One World are probably now 2019 and 2020, so 18 months to maybe two and a half years ahead. Basically, that's what you want because you won't know if there's something that you're wasting time on.

I can remember a few years ago, when the White Tiger won the Man Booker. There were all these stories in the press about the new dawn of Indian or Asian literature. That wasn't taking into account that in the previous six months there'd been several six figure deals done for Indian or Asian writers.

So basically, that had completely killed the market for new writers coming along from a publisher's perspective, because you know you can't get them into the book stores and you're not going to get them reviewed. By the

time you bring them to market, everyone's going to say "Oh, we're over Asia. We're over India now."

There's lots of different ways that editors work. They might provide lots and lots of notes. They might provide two good comments. It doesn't really matter, but what an editor's role is, is to get the writer thinking about their work and to be able to talk to any scenario. What the implications can be about certain choices.

James Blatch: That's fantastic, Jenny. A great way to end it, because I think the theme of this interview is getting writers thinking about their work and what works and what doesn't. Some great advice. So thank you so much. You've been incredibly eloquent. Every answer has been valuable, which is what we look for on the podcasts.

Jenny Parrott: Thank you very much. Obviously, cheque's in the post saying such nice things.

The last thing I'd like to say is, just remember that everybody wants good storytellers. The film industry, the TV industry, the people who go out and buy books. We're looking on Amazon. We're greedy.

There's always room for new good writers, but what self published writers need to do, is work harder, a lot of the time than they are doing. They often will think "Oh, I've written ten great pages. Oh, I can write." Whereas actually, over 250 pages it might not feel the same.

I think just realize you're in for the long haul and it might be hard work and it may feel a bit peculiar. But generally, the people who've got talent and they work hard, they do tend to get rewarded.

James Blatch: You can see why I enjoyed that interview. She's brilliant to talk to and I felt afterwards that I could have structured the interview better because she's got so much to say on every sort of individual area of story

writing and narrative, that we'll have a think about whether we do something with Jenny that might be a standalone little series on the different aspects of writing. I thought she did a very good interview indeed. Hope people enjoyed that.

We've got a couple of resources on editing. It is a bit of a mystery and it's something that's not intuitive when you first come into this area. I think people don't really fully even understand the role of an editor. We've tried to address that with the help of some editors, with a couple of books.

Mark Dawson: We have. Jenny is a developmental editor who first worked with me at Thomas & Mercer. Subsequent to that, I've introduced her to several authors that are in the community, including you and a few others as well.

I am copy edited by another Amazon editor called Jennifer McIntyre. Jenny is great and she's put together a book on editing for us, explaining the differences between proof readers, copy editors, developmental editors, structural editors, all, which can be quite confusing and quite expensive if you get that wrong. Lots of detail on that.

Also, best practice for working with an editor. Things like sample contracts that you should be looking for and how to find a good one, how to work on a relationship with your editor, which is going to be very important as you progress as a writer.

So you can get that book, which is completely free at Selfpublishingformula.com/editor.

The second book is found at Selfpublishingformula.com/maxims, M-A-X-I-M-S. That was written by another editor called Elizabeth Bailey, who is a member of the community.

It is a book from an editor's perspective of five tips to write the kind of book that we discussed with Chloe, and as we mentioned before, the interview

with Jenny, about how to write that kind of compelling page turning, fiction. Elizabeth writes really, really well. Just as Jenny does and Jennifer. Again a really good book to get you to upgrade your writing and learn five actual tips to improve the quality of your writing. That is at Selfpublishingformula.com/maxims.

James Blatch: We should say that if you are a VIP Gold subscriber, a Gold listener to the podcast via Patron.com, you get all these books sent to you straight away, as soon as they're published so you don't have to sign up anywhere for them.

So if you go to Patreon.com/SPFpodcast, if you want to help and support the podcast.

At some point, from where we're sitting now, it's not ready. By the time this interview goes out, it will be ready, our new website.

Mark Dawson: Hope so.

James Blatch: There'll be a single page on there somewhere, so I won't give out the specific URL, but you'll find the books listed on our brand new, good looking website.

We'll talk about websites, I think, probably in the not too distant future, as well as having just been through the process. You perhaps would have launched your new website by September?

Mark Dawson: Oh yeah.

James Blatch: By the time this goes out.

Mark Dawson: Absolutely yeah.

James Blatch: Okay. So let's visit websites as an important part of the process. Great.

Thank you very much indeed to Jenny Parrott, who did a superb interview today, and held her nerve with a couple of interruptions, as a neighbor came in to drop off keys or something in the background. All of which got edited out, but didn't throw her at all.

Thank you very much indeed for listening. Don't forget you can support the podcasts at Patreon.com/SPFpodcast.

We'll be back next week with a man called Chris Fox. Well known in the Indie community. Chris is the author of many helpful YouTube videos on exactly the subject we've talked about today. A nice little two parter with Jenny Parrott this week and Chris Fox next week, on how to write and how to approach story structure.

Until then, have a good week writing, a good week selling. And we'll speak to you next Friday.

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