

EPISODE 96: A QUIET CATASTROPHE – WITH JOHN BIRMINGHAM

Announcer: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a bestseller. 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 Self Publishing Formula Podcast with James and Mark on a Friday, with all your self publishing news and marketing advice. We have a packed program tonight, as they say.

Mark Dawson: We do. Lots to talk about.

James Blatch: We've got loads to talk about. I'm going to start with our Patreon shout out.

Patreon is an opportunity to support the podcast and hopefully make it self sustaining. We want it to be a valuable part of the community, and we've been delighted with the response we always have on Patreon.

You can go to patreon.com/spfpodcast to support us and there are various levels to do that. We're going to give a shout out to everybody who's joined in the last few weeks.

I'm going to crack on with that Mark. Let's give a shout out to these people because we love to hear these names.

Mark Dawson: Go for it.

James Blatch: And then we're going to move on. So we've got Al, who's just got a first name. He's from the Fiasco Factory, thank you Al. We have Andrea Dermansky, our friend in Savanna in Georgia, thank you Andrea. Anne Alexander, thank you Anne. Bill Duncan. We got ... hmm, I don't know if this is Stuart Delancy or Delancy Stuart. Hmm, I think it's Delancy Stuart, I'm going to go with that. We've got Fran Feel, thank you Fran. We've got Jean Brashear. We have John Tucker. Joshua Derry. Joy Spraycar. Katie O'Dowd. Kenneth Britz. Kimberly Sheed. Laura Durham. We have Lynne Milford. Mike Sheriff, thank you all very much indeed. We got Mr. MJ Llewellyn. I like the formality. We've got Rod Cutcher. We have Steve Turnbull. Susan Jennings. Yvonne Carder. And the last one for this week, Zara Altair. Zara will always end up at the end of a list if we're doing it alphabetically by first name.

Thank you very much indeed to everybody who has joined our band of Patreon subscribers.

One of the special things you can get with that is about to happen, isn't it Mark?

Mark Dawson: Yes, it is. As we've teased in the Facebook groups, we mentioned it on the podcast a couple of times, we're doing Book Lab soon, so people who subscribe to Patreon at the gold level, so apart from getting an SPF mug, which really is a reward in itself. James is looking at his now.

James Blatch: I've got one.

Mark Dawson: I always have mine nearby.

James Blatch: Well done.

Mark Dawson: So getting one of these fabulous mugs, you also get the chance to be one of the guinea pigs in The Book Lab. So what that will

entail is a cohort of experts, so Stuart Bache, Bryan Cohen, Jenny Parrot, will look at things like the Look Inside.

For Jenny, look at the editorial suggestions to tighten that up. Stuart will look at covers. Bryan will look at blurbs, and perhaps even rewrite your blurb for you.

And then I'll look at everything holistically and I might make some comments on marketing and ways you could seek to improve sales of your book.

So it's a pretty valuable resource. When I used to do this kind of thing for traditional publishers, I charged £300 an hour for that. You're getting all of that for free, so just by being a Patreon supporter. That's something that we are looking forward to doing.

We will be podcasting that probably as a separate podcast once a month we think. So everyone will get the benefit of being able to see the suggestions that we're making to the various books that we look at. And there could be some tips that you could employ in your own books.

We think it's going to be great for the individuals who get personalized, bespoke advice, and then for everyone who can learn some best practice on things that we would suggest to improve how your books look and ultimately sell.

James Blatch: Yeah, absolutely. It's an extension of the type of advice you can get, you can crowdsource advice on our Facebook groups. Particularly the two groups associated with the course where people are plowing through those key stages in their marketing setup. And they are brilliant.

I read through those and try to contribute where I feel that I've got a view. But people get some really excellent advice on their covers, on their blurb,

even character names, and in some cases what type of genre they're going to write in. Really doing that market research.

But what we've got here is that on steroids, where we've got real experts in the field giving that high level professional advice as Mark says.

Mark Dawson: And me.

James Blatch: I include you with the experts. I was going to say the sort of thing money can't buy, but you just said that in the old days you used to do it for £300.

Mark Dawson: Well you actually can't, because I don't do it anymore.

James Blatch: You can't anymore, no. I should say that, because we get an email at least once a week saying, "Do you do one on one?" and we say, "No, we don't." We just don't have time. But everything that's golden goes into the stuff we do and we put out there, via the podcast and courses etc.

Talking of which, you do do some personal appearances every now and again. In fact, I think you've got one tomorrow?

Mark Dawson: Yes, I'm going down to London tomorrow to speak at FutureBook, which is a traditional publishing event hosted by The Bookseller, which is the kind of industry newspaper for the publishing industry.

And I'm on a panel about ... this is going to be quite entertaining because I've got some kind of traditional publishing people on the panel with me, and it's how to reach readers in a digital age, so that's something that at least I like to think I'm pretty good at. Probably a little bit better than some of the kind of still cack-handed Facebook ads I see from traditional publishers.

So that's going to be interesting, I'm going to hopefully show them some cool stuff and maybe talk about cutting edge stuff like messenger bots and growth comments from Facebook ads and all kinds of stuff like that. So quite looking forward to that.

I'm then seeing the guys from BookBub, having lunch with Julianna from BookBub, and Annie. And then I think I'm seeing the managing director of a traditional publisher who may or may not be interested in some stuff that I'm doing next year.

And then I'm hanging out with the Amazon guys, and then I'll be coming home. So it's a busy day tomorrow, but it'll be a productive one.

James Blatch: Good. And do I remember, in the midst of ... we've been very busy recently with lots of lives and Facebook stuff and webinars.

In the midst of one of those, did you sneak in an announcement about your Hollywood deal?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I might have done. I've signed it now. It's been signed on both sides, so it's done. It's taken an awfully long time to get there. But yeah, it's been negotiated now.

I don't know if I can talk kind of at length about who's involved, but I'll check, because I should be able to do fairly soon. It's going ahead, so I've been effectively paid a sum of money for ... a pretty reasonable sum of money actually, for a year long option, which gives the producers a chance to pitch with the studio that's involved.

It's all very complicated, but they're basically looking for more money now to put a pilot together. And if that happens, then me and Mrs Dawson will be on the first plane out to Los Angeles or wherever it is that they shoot, and will be trying to see that come to fruition. So yeah, very exciting.

James Blatch: You could stand on the set and interfere.

Mark Dawson: I could, I could. Or I could even give them kind of certification advice.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: Say the F word one more time. So yeah, we'll see.

James Blatch: Good. That's really exciting news. Congratulations.

And are you in a position to confirm which well-known Hollywood producer it was who sat on the project for a long time and blocked it?

Mark Dawson: No. But it's pretty obvious, but no. I can't.

James Blatch: It's pretty obvious. Somebody who, let's just say you're quite relieved it didn't end up on his lap.

Mark Dawson: No comment.

James Blatch: Which is where a few other people ended up.

Mark Dawson: Carry on.

James Blatch: Okay. And I also would like to point out that your beard is now at full James Bond baddie level.

Mark Dawson: It's good.

James Blatch: And you cannot stop doing the-

Mark Dawson: I know.

James Blatch: Mr. Bond, do you expect me to die?

Mark Dawson: I look like Father Christmas.

James Blatch: You do. Your kids are starting to get suspicious. Daddy disappears around Christmas time.

Okay, good. Well lots to get through. And of course a brilliant interview. We are going to talk about a couple of things before the end of the podcast after the interview, including the SPF Foundation. Give you a few more details about that.

That's for authors who can't quite afford some of the services, such as courses and covers and editorial, but they've got the writing talent. We want to help them get off the starting blocks with some cash injections. That's what the foundation is, we're going to talk about that in more detail after the interview.

But the interview we've got is a good one, a really good one actually. It's from John Birmingham, who's an Aussie. I say he's an Aussie, I have a feeling he was born in Britain. He says that in the interview. But he certainly lives in Australia now, and he got up very early in the morning to do this interview, for which we are very grateful.

John writes brilliant books. He writes books that are the sort of thing I aspire to write actually. Good military thriller, beautiful of Tom Clancy, that sort of thing.

And he's got one of his series, there's a lovely time twist where I think he sends an aircraft carrier group with jets back to 1942 to change the course of history. Sort of alternate time genre. And very well liked for that, but he had a real breakthrough book called He Died with a Felafel in His Hands, and he talks about the backstory to that in this interview.

What's brilliant about John is how he is one of the many, many writers on planet earth who have woken up with the whole self publishing revolution, and it's given his readers his books, and it's given him a lease of life, and it's a really exciting and inspiring story.

So let's hear from John and then we'll have a chat off the back.

John Birmingham: Thanks for having me on James, I love this podcast. It's my regular Saturday morning listen as I take myself off to couple of hours of Jujitsu. So I'm very please to be here.

James Blatch: Cool.

John Birmingham: I guess the reason I'm here is because I write. I've always written. I started when I was in high school. I used to sit up late on school nights up til about one or two in the morning, copying out the lines of books I really liked, trying to break down the secrets of how it was they'd make me laugh or kept me up until two or three in the morning.

I basically was just obsessed with the idea of writing, and within a couple of years I was doing it, I did a normal degree and I went off and worked in the defense department for a little while as a researcher. Which was great fun, but I still had that bug. Eventually I left and I started to write.

I had no intention of writing books at all. All I ever wanted to do was write feature articles for magazines, I wanted to fly around the world and have adventures and write stories about it and be paid by nice glossy magazines.

It sort of worked. I became a very successful freelancer after about 10 years. Being a successful freelancer meant I was making about 10 or 12 grand a year.

I just had this bad run once, where a bunch of mags I worked for closed, a bunch of editors I pitched to moved on, and I ended up with nothing. One

of the editors who was leaving a magazine that was closing said, "Listen, I'm going to set up a little publishing company, can you write me a stocking stuffer for Christmas?"

And I said, "Oh mate, I've had a few housemates over the years, nearly a hundred or so. I've had some funny stories. Maybe I could write those for you?"

So he tossed me a couple of bucks to do that, and I wrote it. That book came out. Died in a ditch mate, no one bought it for about six months. And then for some reason people did buy it, and they started buying it in job lots. It became a bestseller, it was called He Died with a Felafel in His Hand.

James Blatch: Good title.

John Birmingham: And actually it came out I think with Harper Collins in the UK. And then from there I had a very good run.

I published a lot of books, both fiction and non-fiction, and was a full time writer. I had a couple of bestsellers but I was, you know, mostly solid mid list, which is a good solid income.

And then about two years ago, everything went sideways fast. I had a deal with my American publishers, they wanted me to write three books in one go, and then we'd release them bang, bang, bang. One after the other.

We set up a deal with my Australian publishers and my UK publishers that everyone would coordinate the books, they'd all come out at the same time.

And for some reason my local publishers down here in Oz, they jumped the gun, and next thing I know this book's come out on Christmas Eve, it's been dropped into a bunch of stores that are closed for the next couple of weeks. It's Christmas so there's no publicity.

Long story short James, utter disaster. I've got kids in high school, I've got a mortgage to pay, I've got tax to pay from the previous books I'd written. And all of a sudden I don't have a publishing contract, I don't have a publisher, I'm in dispute with them. I was looking at the utter ruination of my career and possibly my life.

And then at some point I thought, what have I got? What resources have I got? And all I had were a couple of little ebooks that I'd done for my US publishers.

It's a mug's game writing ebooks for trad publishers, you put a lot of work in, you don't make any money. You should do it with a trad publisher because it's good for fan service and it's good for relationship building, but that is the only reason you would ever do it for them.

And so I took those titles back off them because they hadn't been published because trad publishers are very slow. And I spend about six months researching how to self publish.

I actually mean six months, I came down in my office every day at eight in the morning and I just sat here listening to podcasts and reading books by guys like Nick Stephenson, and I read Dave Gaughran's Let's Get Digital about five times cover to cover. I approached it like I had to build a new business, because I did.

Anyway, it worked. Which is why I'm sitting here talking to you now. Because I just feel intensely grateful to everybody in the self-publishing community who has been just weirdly, exceptionally generous with their time and their information.

And Mark in particular, this podcast and his whole Facebook ads course, is one of the big building blocks which I basically built a second writing career.

James Blatch: That's really kind of you to say that John.

Just to round off this intro story then, so you're making a living again, this time self-publishing. Where are you with that?

John Birmingham: I am yeah. I'm now hybrid. I don't have much of a relationship with my local publishers here, but my guys in the US, Random House, Penguin Random House, they were kind of annoyed that things went pear shaped the way they did, but they didn't blame me for it.

They were stuck with the numbers, they just looked at the numbers of series sold and they just went, "Well you know, we can't sign you up for a three book deal. We can't give you the advance we gave you last time. But we like ya." So they threw me a bone, and I'm writing a nice, big space opera for them, which should be ready in the next month or so.

But at the same time as I'm doing that, I'm also writing an indie book with another indie author set in that same fictional universe.

I split my time pretty evenly between writing for my old trad publishers, those that I have anything to do with, and writing my own books. To be honest doing it for myself is the thing that really gets me out of bed in the morning, I love it.

James Blatch: You're obviously very motivated and I can also feel the energized nature of your new direction.

It seems to me like it's been a bit of an awakening for you?

John Birmingham: It was. One of the things about having been published for so long, personally I know dozens of authors in this situation, and I suspect around the world there are probably thousands, if not tens of

thousands, because there are that many mid list and lower list authors on the books at the trad publishers.

I look at the way the industry's gone since about 2008, 2009 and I just look at where it's obviously going to go over the next five or 10 years or so. I do not know why anybody who is not J.K. Rowling or Stephen King would not walk this path.

It's a really interesting thing James. I truly believe now that publishers, trad publishers, the big five houses, if they could click their fingers and make ebooks go away, they'd do it. Because they hate them.

That wasn't always the case. When the technology first came out, everybody was really excited, it was this new potential income stream, people could be reading everywhere because it's not just sitting at a computer or even carrying a Kindle, people now have smart phones, like billions and billions of smart phones all over the world and every one of those can have Kindle apps and Kobo apps and iBook apps.

Reading looked like it was about to enter a new golden age. And look, in some ways it has. But for trad publishers, it just became entirely problematic because of their relationship with Amazon. And also associated issues with piracy and stuff like that.

We're in a situation now where I think if they could wish away the digital reading revolution, yeah, the disruptive disasters that have hit them since about 2008, 2009, are still working their way through the industry. That's why I now write the Penguin Random House, because those two enormous behemoths basically had to get together to have a chance of survival going forward.

But for myself, I feel like I've had probably, not just a second chance at a writing career but third, because of course the reason I got into books in the first place was because one of the mag that I was working for fell over.

James Blatch: It makes me laugh that there's still people who will hear that you've self published your latest book and then quietly smile to themselves and think oh bless, he couldn't get a publisher so he's gone down the vanity route.

And there's still a gulf between you and I and everyone listening to this podcast, and tens of thousands of others, who completely understand and are energized by this and excited by the opportunity and the terrific change that's going on in publishing, and probably the rest of the world who still look at it as being a trivial side note and possibly even a negative thing.

John Birmingham: That's true. I think most of that, I mean that was universal, that attitude, about four or five years ago.

And within legacy media, like the old newspapers and electronic outlets like TV, within what we think of as the press, which is how most people get their information about publishing and their information about the world to be honest, self publishing is still regarded as a desperate move for the peasants of the publishing world.

But I'll tell you truthfully, I still have a foot in traditional publishing, I still go to things like festivals and author get togethers and workshops, and in fact I'm off to one this week, quite a big one.

And I guarantee you every time I go to one of these things I get taken aside by authors and they go, "JB, can you give me some tips about this self-publishing," because they've all had the same experience.

They're not JK, they're not the King, and they're not getting a five million dollar budget for bus ads and giant piles of books at the front of the chain bookstore when their modest little title comes out.

Increasingly the authors are starting to see the possibilities for them of just basically running their own publishing business. And really, really interestingly, I've actually had a couple of publishers from small independent publishing houses, also grab a hold of me for a drink at festivals, and just asking, "These Facebook ads JB, how do they work? They look good." We see them around, but they've got no idea.

I think Mark shared on the page a while ago, an example of a UK publisher who'd targeted a Facebook ad at people who like to read.

James Blatch: Yeah. Males in the world. Yeah. Yeah, understanding how laser targeting works.

Well look, you've had a really interesting perspective going through those various stages, the freelance, the traditional published, and now self published with your legacy contracts. You've got a very interesting and witty take on this.

There's a brilliant blog post that you've written which we must publicize John.

It's called I think The Quiet Catastrophe. Where can people read that? Because I think it's a companion piece to this interview and it's what we're going to talk about.

John Birmingham: Yeah, it's actually at a marketing website, they asked me if I could just write them a story about what's happened in publishing over the past five or ten years. So it's called which-50.com. It's a weird sounding title, but it comes from an old saying about marketing and advertising. We know that 50% of it works, but we don't know which 50.

James Blatch: Oh yes, which 50.

John Birmingham: So that's the name of the site. And I wrote this for them. The whole thing had been bugging me for ages, and I pitched the idea to them which is something I don't do nowadays, because quite frankly I make a lot more money out of self-publishing than I do out of working for news media. It's been the most popular topic on their site for about two weeks now.

James Blatch: It's well worth a read. And I think what I thought would be a good topic for this conversation, from your perspective is, you referred to it already, the kind of mid list position.

You summed it up very nicely by saying what to do if you're not J.K. Rowling and you're not Stephen King, how do you make a living?

How do you exist as a writer in 2017 and beyond, as we come up to the next year?

Let's try and focus on that a little bit. I mean the first thing to say is that you've pivoted from this traditional place to somewhere in self-publishing, so there's a positive message, if you're a writer and you've got books, and this is obviously something we say all the time, you can make a living from this.

This is not a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow you're never going to get to.

It's not necessarily a billionaire's pot of gold, it's a living for most people.

John Birmingham: Yeah, but it's a good living. I think Nick Stephenson talks about your first 10,000 readers. If you've got 10,000 readers, and that's not a lot for a mid list author, if you have 10,000 people who want to buy your books, you will probably make a lot more money self publishing than you ever did traditionally publishing.

Why wouldn't you? It's just the brutal maths of the situation. If you have a, I don't know what a paperback costs in the UK, call it five quid.

James Blatch: That's a cheap one yeah.

John Birmingham: Okay, well let's say 10 for the sake of maths, because I wasn't real good at sums when I was at school. If you have a book with a trad publisher that's retailing for £10 or 10 bucks in the US, you will probably make a bit less than \$1 or £1 on each sale.

The highest royalty most people can expect to make is 10%. But most people who go into trad publishers go in via agency arrangements, and so the agent will take 10 or 15% of that, and if it's an overseas sale they could take up to 20%. So you're just not making a lot with each sale.

Whereas that same book, if you were foolish enough to price it at £10 or \$10 as an independent title, you would be making as much as 7.70, £7.70 or \$7.70, if you managed to get a nice little affiliate link sale.

So it's just the numbers are such that I don't know why anybody who has had actual experience with trad publishing and who isn't like a mega selling author, would persist with it.

James Blatch: You really think it's that obvious now, where we are, that for a mid list author who's not J.K. Rowling, it's a clear decision that if you can you self publish?

John Birmingham: Yeah, I do. I do. I love trad publishing. I spent a lot of time in it, I made a lot of money out of it, paid for quite a bit of my house with it. And I got a lot of friends in it too. And they're book people.

They love books, they love reading, they love writing and writers. And they're not particularly well paid themselves, except for the CEOs. There's a

lot of young women go into publishing, so the gender pay gap really plays out there.

But also it's an industry which knows that the people in it are there for love as much as they are for money. And so they can get them to work for love in some cases.

I have this real worry that in 10 or 15 years from now, the way that the big houses are going, means they don't have much of a future 10 or 15 years from now. I think what they will eventually do is they will publish either the huge tent-pole franchise series and lots and lots of first time authors who are just really, really cheap to publish because you're not paying them anything.

But everything else in between, they will just drop from their list, or the authors will leave themselves eventually. And the problem there is that a lot of the tent-pole authors, the big names, they've come out of the mid list.

I can recall, I was doing a book tour when Harry Potter, it wasn't the first, maybe it was the second novel in the series was coming out, and we were, myself and my fantastic publicist Annie were going through a big chain bookstore, it might have been Borders when we still had those down in Sydney.

We walked down into the kids section, and there was a bunch of Potter books, and Annie picked them up and said, "John, you should have a read of these, these are really interesting. Everyone in publishing's talking about them. They started out as kids books, but we're finding that people are starting to read them who aren't kids. Grownups really like these books too, it could end up being quite successful."

She came out of the mid list.

I remember having a chat with Ian Rankin a couple of years ago. I think he published six books before he became Ian Rankin.

Lee Child, I spoke with him at a writer's festival in Melbourne, and he was I think three or four books before they really started to take off. And so the problem for the trads is if they hollow out the mid list, they have no future.

James Blatch: Yeah. I mean we're not through the disruptive period for the traditional publishing industry, without question, and we could end up with one large company at some point. I don't know, there may well be some more mergers in the future.

I should say about J.K. Rowling, I think I'm right in saying she does actually self publish a bit herself because I think she holds onto the rights, the ebook rights, for the Harry Potter series. She's always been very canny on that front. And I think that was quite an interesting thing that her publishers didn't see the massive value in the ebook side of things enough to let her go.

Bit like, what's his name who was R2-D2? Kenny whatshisname, who got the merchandising, couple of percent of the merchandising rights for Star Wars at the time, and they were happy, and he was one of the highest paid people from Star Wars just because he did that.

Now, she obviously had that vision as well. So we're talking about her as the icon of the traditional industry, but actually she's got a foot in both camps and probably quite a cheerleader for smaller publishers as well.

Okay, so there's one question that springs to my mind, and I think people will be thinking this as well saying, "Okay, it's obvious from the maths point of view and I can buy into your argument from a career point of view of choosing self publishing over traditional publishing, but what about all the technical requirements? What about the creative requirements? And what about running your own business and all those things?"

How have you found that? Did that come as a bit of a shock to you, from an industry where all of that was taken care of? Well, hopefully was taken care of.

John Birmingham: Look, it would have if I hadn't had those 10 years as a freelancer to begin with. Because as a freelancer, even for magazines, you do a lot of stuff yourself.

And if you're going to be a good freelancer, you get in and get your fingers dirty in the production side as well, because in the olden days of print, you could find that your perfectly balanced paragraph with this killer joke at the end of it, was cut down by two inches just to make sure there wasn't a line hanging over the end. If you were smart, you got into the production side as well.

So I had that background. But speaking for my fellow authors, most of them don't. I've had a couple of quite long conversations with a few of them, saying, "Look mate, you've got to do this, you've got to do this," and just taking them through the process.

One of the things I tell is go read Jo Penn's books, go read Gaughran's books, and go download a couple of podcasts. This is one of the first ones I tell them to, because there is two sides to it.

And to be fair, this is one of the reasons why people will still be drawn to traditional publishing. They don't want to think about it as a business, and the trad publishers are quite happy having them not think about it as a business. They just, "You just give us the beautiful manuscript and we'll just throw it against the wall like a big bowl of spaghetti and see what sticks."

I was very, very comfortable, which was why I spent six months doing the research, learning about the machinery of self publishing. And I find it fascinating. That thing where you use your mailing list, you send just a burst

out to the people who are following you and then a couple of days later on you'll see the sales spike at Amazon or on Pronoun or whatever series you're using.

So I, like a lot of people in the biz now, divide my time evenly each day between writing, just pure creation, and production and marketing work.

Because I can throw a book out and just think, oh yeah people love me, people have bought all my books in the past. I'm sure they'll buy this one. No, they won't, because they don't know about it.

There's just this tsunami of content rolling over most people every day, that just because you released a book 10 or 15 years ago that someone liked, doesn't mean they're every going to hear about it if you do one yourself now.

You have to spend, maybe not as much time, but you have to spend a significant amount of your time tending to the machine as well as the books that the machine produces.

James Blatch: And what's working for you now?

John Birmingham: Mailing lists, obviously. That was the big revelation. I thank Nick Stephenson for that, I got drawn in by one of his many, many, many little fishhook videos that he's put all over the internet.

But good on him, I'm so glad that guy is making a living, because he's got a great story too, about someone who struggled for a long time and now he's got a great business. But the beauty is his business is helping people. He hooked me, let me tell you.

So yeah, mailings lists work. I had a huge social media following before I started this, I think I was already up to about 40 or 50,000 Twitter followers,

and 4 or 5,000 people on Facebook. So for me, social media could be made to work. But that's because I had that huge following already.

I'm going to assume most people listening to your podcast haven't had 10 or 15 years in trad publishing and don't have 50,000 followers that they can hit up.

For most people, just putting pictures of your cat on Facebook and maybe adding a little post about how the manuscript is coming along, it's no good.

What social media is good for is maintaining contact with your readership in a way that you can't if you're not constantly touring.

So I blogged for ages, I still blog, I haven't done as much this year because I've had other things on my mind. But I found that a really nice way, just to make a little clubhouse atmosphere where people who really, really liked the books and wanted to have this little bit of extra content come in and do that. And it's good for that.

The blog has provided me with most of my beta readers over the years, because there's people who've been hanging around there for 10 or 15 years, and so they've become actual friends in real life and I can trust them to read a manuscript and give me some feedback.

The blogging, the social media, it's all part of the changed digital landscape. But in the end, to cut to the meat of your question what works? Mailing list and Facebook ads. You can't beat them.

James Blatch: Yeah. At the moment they still seem to be the main two ingredients you need. And it's interesting the whole social media platform, so I think there is some confusion about, even with very adept self publishers who have got the mailing list and the Facebook ads sorted out,

still I see quite a few who don't really know what to do with their Twitter account, not really sure about Instagram at this stage.

It's one of the reasons actually we pivoted our, this is a slight plug for the course, our Facebook ads course where we took out the Twitter ads course because Twitter ads just weren't ... it's too expensive, the platform's not ... I actually don't know who the Twitter ads platform is for. It's not for us, I don't think it's for big business either. I think they're working that out.

But we replaced it with how to use your Twitter platform to complement your advertising, to complement your career, to get sign ups for your book, to make it a focused thing.

And I honestly don't think that's intuitive, and I look through the stuff that Ian Sutherland did for us, you do need to learn this stuff. That comes almost full circle to the journey that you had when you started tuning into podcasts and reading blogs and books, of how much help and information is out there.

It's still not easy navigating your way, is it? I mean you obviously were successful, you put a lot of hours into it.

John Birmingham: Yeah, I did. I had to. Big mortgage to pay mate. A couple of kids worth of school fees to keep paying as well, so I had no choice.

The silver lining on the cloud, I've actually got a book which is going to be pure hybrid because I'll almost certainly sell it to a trad publisher here and then self publish it elsewhere in the world, which came out of the trouble I found myself in.

I came up with this idea for a middle aged philosophy lecturer who, like everything in his life falls apart on one day. He loses his tenure, he goes home and finds his wife having an affair with the gardener, his credits cards

are all fallen. Basically his life falls apart. A situation that I'm not completely unfamiliar with. And this guy had two skills; he can drive a car and he did a bit of Taekwondo when he was younger, so he knows how to hit people.

And so that's it, he sees well you know, I could drive pizzas or I could be a debt collector. And so he becomes a debt collector.

But being a philosopher he thinks things through, and so he finds the whole debt collecting thing untenable and he ends up working for the people with debts. And so that was a great franchise idea that I sort of got out of my darkest moments.

Sorry. I get very excited by that.

James Blatch: Yeah, yeah.

John Birmingham: But I've completely forgotten what you asked me about.

James Blatch: I've forgotten as well, but I'm quite intrigued.

So that's going to be a series is it? This is the first one?

John Birmingham: Yeah, yeah. It's sitting up here on my whiteboard now, I have a ... one of the things you've got to be really good at is time and project management when you're running a business like this. So it's sitting up in my, not my current list of projects, but my optional projects and it's about to move onto current in about five or six weeks.

That was just something that grew out of a pretty dark time, to be honest.

And that's one of the things I'd say to the ... I don't know how many people you've got listening to this podcast, but some of them will be ... they'll be struggling.

Everyone's got their struggles. The one thing I'd really ... if I get anything out of this hour, I'd like people to know that just because you see somebody who seems to be living the big life, it doesn't mean they're not struggling and that they didn't have to put some really hard yards in to get to where they are. And there's no reason at all what people can't do it.

I mean we don't have any figures. Data Guy does a fantastic service, but one of the things I haven't been able to mine out of his reports is just how many authors there are making a good living out of self-publishing.

My guess would be tens of thousands around the world. So there is no reason if somebody is a writer who's just starting out and listening to this podcast for tips, that they could not join the ever-growing ranks of those tens of thousands.

James Blatch: Yeah. I think that's the case and it's growing all the time. And the market that we sell into is growing all the time. Facebook is adding tens of thousands of users a week, probably a day.

And the active rate of its existing user base is going up, and I think actually some of that does come from Data Guy, and I think there is a healthy expansion of that market.

But yeah, that's one of the reasons we wanted to talk to you, because purely hearing somebody's story can be inspirational for those of us who are trying to break in and trying to get in there at the beginning.

I'm interested as well that you're in Australia and I don't know how much of your sales are based regionally or how much you look at the UK and the US, which are quite big ebook markets, and foreign sales.

How do you divide that up, and how does Australia work for you?

John Birmingham: America is still the 800 pound gorilla. When I first started writing thrillers, because I didn't start out doing thrillers. My first book was a funny book, and then I wrote a big serious hardback history of Sydney, which won the National Non Fiction Award the year it came out.

I started writing thrillers because I like thrillers. I really love them, I gobble them up like smarties. And I had an idea for a thriller while I was writing my big tedious history, and a friend of mine who is a huge New York Times bestselling author, he had a look at this thing, he said, "God, you could write this for real JB, you could sell this for a squillion bucks."

So I started talking about, the way that authors do, talking about you know going to the local publishing house and he just looked at me, he shook his head, he said, "Why you doing that? God bless Australia, but it's got 1.5% of the English speaking population of the world. Why are you shooting for 1.5% of what you could have? Sell them to the UK, sell them to the US."

This was a long time ago, before I think the Kindle had even been invented, he got me thinking in terms of readership being a global audience, not just locally.

Now, I think if I separated out all of my media work, which still pays some bills, I'd probably find that half of my income is from the US and about a quarter from the UK, and a quarter from Australia, and then occasionally Kobo send me a couple of bucks.

James Blatch: Yeah. Okay.

John Birmingham: Thanks Canada.

James Blatch: I wondered if that was the case. Do you see Australia growing? Quite a few of the SPF community are antipodean from my perspective, from the UK, and New Zealand and Australia seems to have a good number of active, energized, creative and successful self publishers.

But I'm just not sure how much they're selling locally.

John Birmingham: Yeah, look I couldn't tell you ... I think like me, they would be wanting to sell outside. I know a couple of them, I've been working with a few recently, a guy called Keith McArdle, who's a former soldier, god a lot of ex-soldiers get into self publishing, because they've got great stories to tell I suppose.

James Blatch: Yeah.

John Birmingham: Keith publishes across a bunch of different genres and he's not interested in selling to 1.5% of the population, he wants the whole biscuit, mate.

I think because there's not that many of us and we are a long way from everywhere, most of the Australian writers that I know, and particularly those writing genre and beyond the beach, they've always realized most of the world is over the horizon, and they've written for those.

Which is to get right inside baseball or inside cricket I guess, the Australian publishing industry is understandably obsessed with local stories. Stories set in the bush not the beach and that sort of thing. They don't necessarily sell that well overseas.

You get a couple of guys who really do sell well, but they're like Swedish crime writers, they sell because they're exotic. Most of the indies that I know here, I tell you a really good example, romance writers.

Romance writing is the success story of independent publishing, I wish I could do it. I tried, I actually tried a couple of years ago. Again, long before digital publishing, I was going to write a book, I had a name, I was going to call myself Joanne St. Lucia. The book was called Innocence Betrayed. I sat down to make some money with romance writing. It was a disaster mate.

James Blatch: And you found your cold heart of steel didn't allow you to ...

John Birmingham: No, it really didn't. Because I didn't believe in it. We're sitting here talking about the commerce and the machinery and the marketing and the money, but if you don't believe in what you're doing, you don't love it, it's not going to work for you.

I've spoken to quite a few romance writers locally, and there's lots and lots of them. You wouldn't know the names of these people, you wouldn't know the name of romance writers in the UK unless you're a romance reader.

They don't get covered in the literary pages of the weekend broadsheets, they don't go onto breakfast radio, but they got hundreds of thousands of readers. Some of them have millions of readers.

And they're now significant publishing corporations in their own right. And they will write for a global audience. They will tell stories set all over the world. The fact that they're in some suburb in Adelaide, it's irrelevant.

James Blatch: Yeah. And do you know, for the few people in the traditional industry who still cling onto a hatred for self-publishing and a snobbishness that it's opened the door to poorer quality, that is the one example of why it's been so liberating.

Because before self-publishing you had Barbara Cartland and a couple of others and they were Mills & Boon and literally they were the stuff of jokes, people made jokes about Mills & Boon books. And it was almost a slight embarrassment about them.

And once the gatekeepers were out the way, look at that explosion of romance writers. We've had lots of them on this show, as you say ... I mean some of them are multimillionaires, running, as you say, small corporations just publishing their own books. And because nobody wants to read that,

because everyone turns their nose up at it? No. Because people really enjoy it, and it's a voracious area for sales for women. And thank goodness for self-publishing that's enabled that.

John Birmingham: Yeah, that's right. I get all the feels when I think about the great good that has been done for probably thousands and thousands of women, who now have this really rewarding, financially and I guess spiritually rewarding career, because they can tell these stories that they love to tell and their readers love to hear. It's not for me, but big deal, it's not for you either. I suspect I'd much prefer to read your books, mate, you should be getting on with that.

James Blatch: Yes, I know. I had not a bad couple of weeks over the summer when things quietened down a little bit

John Birmingham: Good.

James Blatch: But getting busy again.

John Birmingham: Because I am actually looking forward to reading it.

James Blatch: Thank you.

John Birmingham: The thing about it is when ebooks came out, you had that thing on Amazon where you would see this list of people you'd never heard of, they were either free or they were 99 cents, and I bought a few of them, and some of them were shocking.

But, you know what? Trad houses have put out some shocking books over the years as well. There's an enormous sewage pipe of garbage coming out of the big five into the market all the time, because it makes money. It's not all big L literature.

James Blatch: Right. Well John look, we've been waxing on and I'm enormously grateful to you for joining us. We should tell people it's five o'clock in the morning in Queensland. You're in Brisbane in Australia. And you've got a new puppy in the house.

John Birmingham: We do have a new puppy in the house, mate. I have had to do a little cleaning up before I came down here to do this interview. But you've got all that ahead of you.

James Blatch: We have.

John Birmingham: Good luck.

James Blatch: Our new puppy arrives on Saturday, and so I will similarly look drawn. I'm immediately going away on business for about three weeks so good timing.

Anyway, look John, thank you so much indeed for getting up early in the morning, it's been brilliant to talk to you.

I'm going to just plug again this blog, because I think it's terrific and people will enjoy reading it. So people go to the which-50.com website and just search for The Quiet Catastrophe, that is the article written by John Birmingham, which is well worth a read. It's witty and enjoyable and I think it sums up where we are very nicely.

John Birmingham: Cheers mate.

James Blatch: Yeah, he was quite softly spoken but then it was I think 5 AM in Queensland or wherever he was in his house. But brilliant to hear from John.

It was a good interview wasn't it? I know you enjoyed ... when I first recorded it and put it through to you.

Mark Dawson: I did. I read an article that John put together which I really thought was really excellent, and then he was on Jo Penn's podcast, and I thought it would be good to get him on for our audience as well.

He's got an interesting background, and it's great to see that he's fully on board now with what's possible now with doing things ourselves independently. So no, it's great to hear that.

And also very interesting to hear how things are going down in Australia. We have quite a lot of students and I know listeners in Australia, and one day, hopefully not too soon, I'd like to get down there and do something down for the Aussies.

Because I know that I annoy them quite a lot when I send out emails by not including Australian timezones, and then even when I do, they tend to be bugged because it's, as you say, it's always too early for them. So we definitely owe them something by way of an apology.

James Blatch: Yeah. Well, go there and do a webinar whilst you're there. Host a live event, we'll do that.

Mark Dawson: Do a live event, yeah.

James Blatch: Basically some beers and a live event, let's do that.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Yes, in fact that article, I think is the same one, I absolutely loved it as well, called The Quiet Catastrophe, which is a famous quote and we've borrowed that for the title of the podcast.

But that is John's take from the inside really, on this transition from traditional to independent. I thought it was a really well written article, and we will make sure we've posted the link to that as well.

That's the thing about good writers, they're good writers whether you ask them to write a novel, or just to use writing to explain a position that they're in at the moment, which I thought John did a very entertaining job with that.

And not only that, he's a fan of this podcast. And he listens to it, I think when he does Jujitsu, which is, I don't know if it's that or high kicks?

Mark Dawson: Oh god.

James Blatch: Can't get my leg into shot. I don't know what Jujitsu is.

Mark Dawson: I don't think it's that.

James Blatch: No. I'll ask John when we meet him. But yes, he's a fan of the podcast so hello John for listening.

Right, we promised we were going to talk about the SPF Foundation. So the Foundation, which is something close to all our hearts in SPF and it's I think, a very positive idea. We do know that there are people, and it is, although compared to most industries it's cheaper getting started as a writer than almost anything else where you probably require at least 10 to £20,000 to get even any kind of freelance business up and running with the equipment and so on. You can do it for much less than that when you're writing, but nonetheless, it runs into four figures.

Mark Dawson: Sometimes.

James Blatch: Sometimes. Yeah, you could probably do it cheaper than that, but we do recommend that you get properly edited and a decent

book cover and so on. And once you start doing that, you are probably getting into four figures aren't you? It's difficult to do it less than that.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. When I started, I didn't do that and I probably would have benefited from it, but it's not essential to do that, you can do an MVP, minimal viable product, but I don't recommend that as a rule.

The thing that kind of makes this a good idea from my perspective is we get a lot of emails when we open the courses from people who say, "Is it right for me?" And then they'll say, "To afford the course, I need to ... I'm on welfare or this is my pension."

And I hate that kind of stuff, because I can see on the one hand that they've got good books and they would benefit from the things that we teach in the course, advertising, or just general platform building and foundation, all that kind of stuff.

But on the other hand, I hate the idea of anyone stretching themselves too hard in order to buy the course and then buy the things that they might need to put the lessons in the course into practice.

One of the things that we came up with, in fact Lucy came up with this, and she was on the podcast to talk about it, Lucy my wife, was that we should give some back. So that is something that we're really keen to do and so we give away both of our courses, so that in itself is over a thousand dollars worth of content.

Plus, two and a half thousand dollars worth of services at Reedsy, so covers, editing, whatever you wanted to put together. And then all the other bits and bobs you might need so that you can then learn the course, learn the content, the best practice, and then improve your product so that when you put the course into effect, you've got something that people will like.

If you can hook someone with that first book, then they can become a fan for life, and hopefully it gives you the momentum to push on with the rest of your career. So we're really pleased about that.

We've had lots of applications already. So I think we're going to decide towards the end of the month or into January, the first Foundation authors who'll be getting the bits and bobs from us and from Reedsy.

And we're really looking forward to that. I'd love to see how those guys get on. Obviously one of the things that we want them to do is to stay in touch so that we can talk to them before, and then even get them on the podcast afterwards, hopefully as they're sitting back sipping a piña colada somewhere warm and sunny and celebrating their 10,000th sale of their book.

If people are interested in that, then just go to the website. I don't remember the direct URL, we'll put that in the show notes, but there is a link at the top right of the page, you click on that and the application process is very simple. Just little bit of information required. And we will then make some decisions, as I say, towards the end of the month or into 2018.

James Blatch: Yeah. And as Mark says, we'll keep in touch with you so expect me to give you a ring at some point and we'll record a little bit before and after as you go through.

Yes, and we're not taking a piece of the action here are we? I can imagine people thinking already, is this the next step into publishing for SPF? But absolutely not.

Mark Dawson: Definitely not.

James Blatch: It'll be 100% royalties go to you for the rest of your life. 100% of the cut of royalties will go to you. I don't want to do Jess Bezos out of his 30.

We should just say again that patreon.com is the place where we're going to pick up our Book Lab candidates, if you want to be a gold level subscriber go to patreon.com/spfpodcast. It's just \$3, 3 bucks, cup of coffee a week for each podcast, and you get a shout out on the show, an opportunity to be potentially in Book Lab, opportunity to win a course, and a mug of course. Worth it just for the mug. Good.

And on that note, I've only had one coffee so far this morning, and James doesn't run on one coffee.

Mark Dawson: You talking about yourself in the third person now?

James Blatch: Yes. We, I might describe myself as we, for we don't-

Mark Dawson: Very grandiose.

James Blatch: We don't survive on one coffee. So I need to go and get that. Thank you very much indeed for listening. Thank you Mark for joining us from Salisbury.

Is the beard permanent now, is that it? Is this conscious decision or it's just happened by accident?

Mark Dawson: It had to be conscious, because I just decided not to shave. Yeah, I think I might shave these bits off and just go with the goatee, but I quite like it. And Lucy likes it too, which is a big surprise. I thought that would be the road-block, but apparently not.

James Blatch: Well, the Bond baddie is definitely there, trying to get out.

Mark Dawson: Mr. Blatch, I've been expecting you.

James Blatch: Yes. And on that note ... Okay thank you very much indeed, we'll speak to you next week. Bye bye.

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