

## **EPISODE 99: SLAVE TO THE ALGORITHM – WITH DATA NINJA DAVID GAUGHRAN**

Speaker 1: 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 for the last time in 2017, welcome to the SPF Podcast with Mark Dawson and James Blatch. Episode 99, the last one of 2017. This all feels like a turning point in something.

Mark Dawson: I got 99 problems, James, and a podcast isn't one.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's a quite young reference for you.

Mark Dawson: Quite young, it's not that young, goodness. Jay-Z is hardly for youngsters these days, he's about 50.

James Blatch: Anything with rap in it is young. My 11 year old son last night was doing some, word for word, some quite complicated rap thing in the kitchen. You've got this to come, your kids are just too young for this at the moment, but suddenly YouTube is a corrupting influence on their lives. It did remind me of a young James doing Vanilla Ice in the clubs in those days.

Mark Dawson: Oh my god. Here we go, Paul Patridge activate.

James Blatch: It's time to go solo.

Now, we have chosen our Patreon member, we're not going to reveal who it is yet until we've set everything up, but thank you very much indeed to everyone who volunteered for that.

We're going to do another one in just a few weeks so hold your horses about that, you're not out of the frame yet. You'll go onto the list forever, having volunteered once for that. We're looking forward to that episode and we'll schedule it soon so that people know when it's coming.

**You can become a Patreon, subscribe at [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast).**

We've got in the new year coming up on probably, we think, the 19th of January, an interview with Stuart Bache and that will be the time at which we announce the price and how you can buy Stuart's DIY cover design course we mentioned a couple of weeks ago.

It's a really good course. I'm in the process of editing, where we stand at the moment we think we're on target for that, so 19th of January we're going to have Stuart on and it'll be a good podcast regardless of the course, talking about how you approach a brief, how you talk to a designer, what you need to do if you're going to do it yourself, which is of course is in itself a big thing to do, because the cover's so essential to you, but Stuart is the man to brief you on that.

In this episode however, we have a man who made a big splash in the self-publishing world, three, four years ago, with Let's Get Digital.

Mark Dawson: Keep going.

James Blatch: More than that was it?

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: How long ago was that then?

Mark Dawson: Probably I'd say five or six years actually. David Gaughran, he's one of the early influencers of me actually, in the same way that Joanna Penn is a friend now and was a big influence on me, and Johnny and Sean for SPP, and Dave also the same.

Dave had two books called Let's Get Digital and another one called Let's Get Visible. Digital was first I think. It was really well written, he's a really clever guy, and helped understand how Amazon works as a marketplace.

Whereas the other, the retailers Apple and Kobo tend to be more merchandiser based, so people making decisions, it would be the case at an all book store, Amazon is algorithmically driven with a bit of merchandising as well.

David was one of the first people to lay all that out in language that I thought was comprehensible, something I could understand. By taking some of his lessons I suppose, his learn, was able to kickstart my own books.

Then Dave went quiet for a while and has recently come back again and started doing some speaking, he's working on new books, he's blogging.

Also worth saying, I don't know how much of this bit you got into an interview, James, but something that he is really excellent on is standing up and ... This sounds like a bit of a superhero thing, but fighting injustice where he sees it.

He's not afraid to go toe-to-toe with Amazon if he sees things like Kindle Unlimited scamming going on and people using nefarious authors ... and I use that word very lightly, using bots to shoot their books up the charts and then make money.

David will call that out all the time and is kind of almost like a shop steward, I'm not sure how universal that term is. He's kind of like, if there was a union for authors, he would-

James Blatch: Teamster?

Mark Dawson: It's kind of it. If there was a trade union, he would be towards the top of the trade union. He'd be the one going on television and decrying various injustices. So yeah, he's a great guy and has ... I don't know if he still has his beard.

James Blatch: Yes he does. It's not too dissimilar to yours, although I think he purchased the beard trimming kit, beard maintenance kit before you did because it's quite tailored. Is that a word?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I need to work on mine.

James Blatch: Sculptured.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. All beard envy aside, he is a really great guy and I'm very pleased to get him on a podcast.

James Blatch: He is. Yeah, we sat down together in the States in October I think, so if you're watching on YouTube it's full video presentation of the interview and you can see not only his well-sculpted beard, his well-sculpted mustache as well, which is a signature.

Yeah, absolutely right I think, what you say about David. I think he's outspoken, which is one way of putting it, which this industry needs, and he's incredibly bright, really interesting guy to talk to. What he's thinking about now, the next thing, is what this interview's about, so let's hear from Dave.

James Blatch: Welcome to the SPF Podcast, it's been an ambition of ours to have you on for some time and it was serendipitous that we bumped into each other here in the US.

David Gaughran: It's been an ambition of mine to get inside your hotel room for quite some time, so thank you.

James Blatch: Yeah. I am slightly alarmed that they put the beds right next to the ... I was hoping when we had the suite, knowing that it's going to be for filming, that the suite bit would be as you walk in and then the bedroom would be hidden away. Instead people have to walk through my bedroom and they look unnerved at that.

David Gaughran: See your drawers all over the floor.

James Blatch: See my smalls.

David Gaughran: Yeah. Your tighy whities.

James Blatch: Anyway, moving swiftly on.

David Gaughran: We can return to that later.

James Blatch: Yeah, yeah. Let's get back into detail.

**David, so why don't you, for the uninitiated, introduce yourself?**

David Gaughran: My name is David Gaughran, I'm an Irish self-publisher. I'm more known for writing non-fiction for writers how-tos. I wrote Let's Get Digital and Let's Get Visible, but my main genre is historical fiction.

This year's actually the first year where my fiction sales have reached my non-fiction sales, so I'm quite happy with that.

James Blatch: Okay, that's great. Your Let's Go Digital, so I know there's a book, but also you blog quite a lot and you're quite visible in the self-publishing world.

David Gaughran: Yeah. I do start the odd fight on Twitter. I remember someone asking me what's the best way to use Twitter, and I always say, "Like a cuddle, just hit them repeatedly until they break."

James Blatch: Hammer it.

David Gaughran: Yeah.

**James Blatch: When did this start for you in terms of you having an expert opinion or authority. I don't know how you brand yourself, but being somebody who had a voice on how to do things?**

David Gaughran: It's really funny, I was really stretching the definition of expert when I first started doing this, because when I released Let's Get Digital I think I'd sold maybe 100 books, I'd been self-publishing for about six weeks, I'd been writing for about two years, so yeah, I wasn't exactly an expert.

But back in 2011 there wasn't all these resources that we have now. People are always saying, "Oh, it's so much harder now." And all this kind of stuff, but the tools we have now are amazing, you know?

I didn't know of any self-publishing guidebooks at the time, so that's why I wrote one. There was one or two out there but they seemed to be more focused on either print self-publishing, like the old school kind of way, or it was written from the perspective of someone who might've been a trad author with like 10 reverted backlist titles and how they launched themselves. There wasn't really something for a beginner.

Sometimes they say the best teacher is the one who's one step ahead of the class, and with that in mind I totally dived in. Actually it was all totally accidental like.

Basically it all started with a bum fight online, someone saying that self-publishing was only for people with a huge backlist, and newer authors were better off still querying agents and all that kind of stuff.

They were like, all these people like Joe Konrath, they've come to it with an audience built in, and all this kind of stuff. I was like, "Okay, look, I'm going to self-publish, because I can't get an agent." I was trying for 18 months, couldn't get one. "And I'm going to blog about it so you can see whether this is all BS or not."

So I did, and I started every week, I was just like, "Okay, this week I'm going to try and find an editor." Then I would go around, read a few blog posts, talk to some people, and then I would just post about the experience. Then the following week I was looking for a cover designer.

So week by week ... and this is the year, the summer that self-publishing broke into the mainstream. I think it might have been the summer when JK Rowling self-published the Harry Potter eBooks, which people in traditional publishing still won't accept the fact that she has self-published.

### **James Blatch: She still does that, she has those rights for life doesn't she?**

David Gaughran: She still does that. She still does that. Now she does it in a slightly different way than I do, but it's still self-publishing.

Anyway, that was the summer when it broke into the mainstream, so there was a lot of people starting to self-publish and there wasn't a lot of resources out there. So I was just in the right place at the right time.

The blog really took off, soon I was getting like, I don't know, I was getting like 100,000 views a month out of nowhere. I was a nobody who hadn't sold anything and didn't know anything. All the people in my comments at the same time were looking for an editor, looking for a cover designer, trying to figure out marketing. So we were all helping each other.

Then at the end of the process when I finally published, I think it was just a short story that I published first, somebody just said, "Can you put all these blog posts in a PDF so I can download it?" I was like, "Sure." So I started doing that and then I was like, "Well I appear to be writing a book here, so maybe I should clean up this chapter and write a bit of introductory text here."

Before I knew it I'd written Let's Get Digital and published it, and then it was in the right place, the right time. I was lucky with, I think Joe Konrath gave me a blurb quote just before the launch and that was huge. The Pixel of Ink website gave it a lot of promotion the month it came out and that was huge for me as well. It just took off from there.

James Blatch: Yeah, so you helped people, guided them through those early days of stuff.

**You talk about finding a cover designer, you were giving advice on how to find a cover designer, it wasn't a directory listing.**

David Gaughran: No, no. It wasn't just like how to find one, but also how to brief them. Because I was kind of cheating a little bit in that my sister was a professional cover designer. Well she started off working for EMI doing album covers and then she moved to Harper Collins and she was a cover designer there for years. Then she went freelance.

She was able to teach me how to brief a cover designer. She would show me the sheet they would use in Harper Collins, where you give them your

comp authors, and you give them examples of covers you like and you don't like, so I totally stole all that and then monetized it.

James Blatch: That's how the world works.

David Gaughran: Yeah.

James Blatch: She's fine with that, I'm sure.

David Gaughran: Yeah.

James Blatch: You had a big hit with Let's Go Digital and that's how I know you in that way. I'm interested to talk to you about your writing in a minute, your non-fiction writing, but you continued to update and upgrade, and your blog posts are relevant and stuff.

### **How much has changed then from 2011 to today in your view?**

David Gaughran: Well do you know what? Again, this is something where I've totally changed my mind. I used to get annoyed with people saying, "Well everything's changing all the time." I'm like, "It's not, the fundamentals are always the same. You got to package your product professionally, you got to go to where your readers are and all that kind of stuff."

But you know what? The last six months things have changed so much. KU has changed everything. It's changed everything. I'm going to be talking about this over the weekend here at NINC, but I think the population of successful authors is bifurcating into people who are successful on Amazon and people who are successful wide.

If you look at the authors who are successful wide, who are selling a lot on Kobo, Apple, whatever, their rankings on Amazon aren't so good, considering the size of their readership. That got me thinking, like, "What's

going on here?" Then obviously the people who are in KU are only selling on Amazon and they're killing it there.

I think basically if you're not in KU, every hour there's thousands of KU powered salmon leapfrogging your book and pushing you down.

Aside from that, the other way that it's changed everything is that, okay if I'm in KU and I run a countdown deal, 99 cents, right? I'm getting 70% royalties on that. If you're wide, you're only getting 35%. That means I can spend twice as much on my marketing.

What's happened, it's an arms race now in KU. People are coming up with mad campaigns, multi-pronged efforts where you've got BookBub, CPM ads, you've got Facebook campaign going on, you've got newsletter swaps, email marketing, and then the usual way of advertising on ENT and Robin Reads and stuff. It's just become so much more complicated, a lot more spending going on if you want to hit the top level on Amazon.

Yeah, so just in the last six months it's getting insane. If you're in KU and you stand still for a second you're run over straight away.

James Blatch: So you've got to keep on top, you've got to know what's working.

### **Is it still a golden opportunity for self-published writers or is it becoming too tough?**

David Gaughran: Oh no, no, absolutely. There's no doubt that the waters are choppy now, but the rewards are greater, you know?

When I started in 2011 I remember on KBoards we used to have a monthly thread where people would post their sales. They had something called the Thousand Book a Month Club. If someone hit a thousand books a month that meant they'd made it, which sounds kind of quaint now, right? Because

you can get a BookBub ad and sell 2000 in 24 hours just by filling out a form. Yeah, it has changed a lot. The market is so much bigger.

If you don't want to play that KU game there is another way to reach readers. If you look at the guys who are wide, they're marketing in a totally different way. The successful guys are marketing in a totally different way.

I'm seeing two different marketing models emerging. In KU is the big monthly campaigns, throw everything at it, huge blast for like four, five, six days, and then try and coast off the ranking for the rest of the month. I'm helping someone launch a fifth book in a series at the moment this week, and we're doing a countdown deal on ... 99 cent countdown deal on the first book. A free run on the second book, a 99 cent countdown deal on the third book, 1.99 countdown deal on the fourth book, and launching the fifth book at 2.99 instead of 4.99. We'll probably keep those prices down for a week or two after launch, because KU is all visibility.

You're giving up short-term money for long-term rank. That rank will turn into page reads.

If you're wide, you don't have the page reads, and the way you have to market is totally different I think. If you look at the successful guys, they're not doing this once a month huge blast, **they're doing constant drip marketing in the background.**

They'll focus more on aggressive email list building strategy, they'll do a lot of lead gen ads on Facebook. They'll have small lower level campaigns running on BookBub CPM ads targeting Kobo readers in Australia, targeting Apple readers in England. Just little small budget campaigns, but like little streams constantly, all the time.

What's interesting is some people will use the right marketing approach with the wrong distribution methods. You see some people trying a drip

approach when they're in KU and it doesn't work, because you need to go big.

When I was wide I was trying to do the monthly big blast approach and it wasn't working for me. For me the question is not about should I be wide or should I be in KU, it's which marketing approach do I want to take? Which is going to suit my books?

Or if I'm going to be wide, if I hate exclusivity and refuse to put all my eggs in one basket, then I have to realize I have to retool my marketing process. I'm actually going to be doing this now and I'm rolling everything out of KU, I'm going wide, so I have to change my marketing approach. I have to look more at lower level constant drip, drip, drip kind of campaigns.

### **James Blatch: Are you going to blog this process?**

David Gaughran: Yeah, yeah.

James Blatch: I know it's a bit of a faff writing everything down again.

David Gaughran: I know, yeah. No, I'm actually, that's a big thing I decided at Christmas, that I'm trying to make every piece of work work for me in two or three different ways.

I'm giving a talk here in NINC about that kind of approach, it's also going to be a book, I'm going to blog about it. Yeah, just try and use my time a bit more smartly.

James Blatch: I can see that some people are loving this, they're tuning in, they're thinking, "Okay, this is like next level stuff. I've got to really understand. It's not just good enough to do marketing techniques, it's got to be the right products."

Other people are listening to this and thinking, "Oh my, I don't know where to start." You must have in mind for this, it can be daunting for people, particularly at the beginning of their careers.

David Gaughran: Sure, but you realize okay like, none of us spring from the room fully formed as excellent writers or marketing geniuses. Just take it step by step.

Your aim when you publish your first book is not to hit number one in the Kindle store. That would be nice, but that's not your aim, your aim is to start building an audience.

Actually the template, even when you talk about this made KU strategy, it's still the same basic template where what we used to do when it was a bit simpler to get into the charts was you would just run a sale for a few days and then you would advertise to tell people about it, and you would use that to increase your sales, and increase your mailing lists, and increase your reviews. It's that same model, we're just layering stuff on top of it.

Don't get intimidated if you're thinking like, "Oh, this is too difficult." I'm talking about stuff that it takes to launch a book to 120 in the Kindle store and keep it there for five or six weeks. That's mad money, you know? You don't need to be aiming for that right at the start.

At the start you just need to be ... Well your first focus should be making sure that you're going to market with a professional package because there's no bush league, as they say in the States.

Straight away you're competing against Stephen King and everyone else. There's no separate market for beginners.

You've got to realize that readers demand a professional product, it's got to be well edited, it's got to be well formatted, you've got to have a good

cover on it to make sure the right readers find it. Just focus on that stuff first.

I think people are in a big hurry these days. They're like, "Oh my god, I've been self-published for six months and I'm still not making six figures a year." You're like, "Dude, like relax." It's okay to take a couple of years to get there, you know?

James Blatch: Yeah. Mark says exactly the same thing, that your book should be indistinguishable, that's your first priority.

David Gaughran: Yeah.

James Blatch: Indistinguishable from the big five.

David Gaughran: I guess finishing the book and writing a good story. That's still, for me, the hardest part by the way. If you can write a good book you're more than capable of figuring everything else out.

The publishing part, that's actually the easiest. Once you do it once, you can do it in your sleep.

James Blatch: I mean there are people the other way around, by the way, who naturally just have been writing their whole lives and they love writing books, and they struggle with the marketing.

David Gaughran: Yeah, but they didn't start off being able to write in their sleep, right? It took them 10 books to learn that, so don't worry about it, you'll learn as you go.

James Blatch: Yeah. You're still optimistic about the environment and it still feels like this is a golden age. We had Sean and Johnny in here from the SPP Podcast yesterday and they were very much, this is the infancy of self-

publishing, there's no maturity to this industry, we don't know what it's going to look like. They're doing some really interesting stuff.

Nobody knows what this is going to look like. The stuff you were talking about, that's how we used to do it, you're talking about nine months ago. Things are happening so quickly now.

David Gaughran: Yeah.

**James Blatch: It's good. The point I'm making is that this is ... and if you can give yourself a little bit of an edge in one area it's tremendous.**

David Gaughran: Yeah. I think people stress too much about changes and stuff. If you zoom in, yeah, it seems very turbulent, but if you zoom back a bit ...

Any talk I'm giving I usually open with the same slide, saves on a bit of work as well, and it's just a slide saying 125 billion dollars on it. That's the amount of money that consumers spend on books every year globally.

Because we often focus on changes, we focus on, "Oh Amazon's doing this, or it's difficult to do that. It's hard to get visibility." We're very zoomed in because we're looking at it day by day, but if you zoom back, people spend a huge amount of money on books every year.

Now, it might be going into different pockets depending on which way the wind is blowing, but that money is still out there. Sometimes we talk like people have stopped reading, they haven't. People are reading more than ever.

The publishing industry likes to spread bad news stories all the time, I think it helps them not pay authors very much. Usually you get a very expensively tailored agent at a conference telling you that advances are going down, it's terrible. You go, "You seem to be doing okay."

I call it the sartorial index. When you go to a conference and you see who's the best dressed, and you see the authors with holes in their trousers, and then you see the editor in kind of a nice suit, and then you see the agent like coming in on a helicopter with two models getting off with him, you know?

James Blatch: I mean when you look at the way the traditional industry works, and we've had several conversations with people who are transitioning or in both here at NINC.

**You cannot get away from the fundamental that there's a company there and that the less they pay the author the more the company makes, and that is their driver. That is that relationship.**

David Gaughran: The biggest lie that traditionally published authors tell themselves I think is ... And it's fed to them by agents and editors, is that they always have ... Your interests are always perfectly aligned with either your agent or your publisher. It's not true.

You actually have, when you're having a negotiation, that's quite adversarial. They want to pay you as little as possible to get your rights and you want to get as much as possible. I think, yes, you are trying to make money together, but they want more of that money.

You've got to remember that and you've got to remember that the only person that has your best interests at heart is you, and the only person that will ever care as much about ... No one will ever care about your book as much as you do.

Your editor might care about it now, but next week he's going to care about someone else's book. Because like Harper Collins, they publish what? 1200 books a year or something? They have a duty to move onto the next author.

If they're publishing several books a day, how much attention are you really going to get? That for me is the biggest reason to self-publish, that you will always care about your book whereas an editor might not. They might get fired, they might move onto a different company, you might fall out with them, or you might leave your publisher for whatever reason.

If you're the captain of the ship, you're always in control. Your sales might drop on a particular book, but you can put a new cover on it, you can run a new marketing campaign. That's just not possible if you've sold the rights.

James Blatch: **The publisher, writer interests are never more aligned than when you self-publish.**

David Gaughran: Yeah, exactly, because you are all those people.

James Blatch: Yeah, exactly. Nobody's going to work harder for you. Good. It's brilliant to see and this industry is dotted around with people like you and Mark and I think you've a very similar outlook, who make it part of what they want to do and also part of their business to help other people and navigate this.

**Without that in these early days of self-publishing it would be virtually impossible.**

David Gaughran: I remember when I wrote Let's Get Visible, a couple of people were sending me messages saying like, "Why are you giving away all the secrets?" I was like, "But that's how we all got started."

It's been a very opensource approach. We've all kind of hacked the system together and cracked the code and figured it out. It would be wrong to pull up the ladder now just because you think too many people are getting on the boat or whatever. No, it doesn't work like that.

James Blatch: It's not even close though, because I mean everyone here ... Actually not everyone at NINC, but most people you meet at NINC know a lot of this stuff and are really interested and want to talk to you about it.

Everyone who listens to this podcast, they're already way ahead of the average self-publisher who we've never met, who sits in their home in Idaho or London or somewhere and doesn't listen to a podcast and doesn't know what to do.

**If you look at how many books are self-published every day, and you could probably list all the people we know and come across and listen to the podcast, it's a small part of it.**

David Gaughran: Yeah. I don't care so much about these raw numbers, like people focus on them, like there are so many books or whatever. People freak out, "There's like six million books in the Kindle store, oh my god, what are we going to do?" There's 12 to 15 million print books on Amazon, there's 34 million books in print if you take account of the wider world outside of Amazon.

Google calculated I think, if you count all the titles that are still available for purchase in places like second-hand stores, there's a 140 million distinct titles in the world. The Kindle store's actually a fairly small pool in comparison to the rest of it.

Anyway, let's be honest, half the books are rubbish, they're invisible. I think I worked out that a quarter of the books in the Kindle store don't even have a rank, so they never sold a book, so they're not competition, you don't need to worry about it.

I think George Carlin said, "If you think how stupid the average person is, think that half of them are stupider than that." So what I mean is like, okay, you might think like, "Oh my god, there's so many books in space opera right now."

But really how much of that is actual competition? It's a small number of titles. If you do the basics like write a good book, package it professionally in the way that readers notch on or expect, you're ahead of 90% of people already, so don't worry about these big numbers, worry about yourself.

James Blatch: Yeah, brilliant.

David Gaughran: People freak out about the market, they say like, "Oh sales are up. Sales are down." Or, "It's the summer slump." I hate this meme about the summer slump. It doesn't matter.

All that matters is what you're doing with your own promotions, how fast you're releasing, and what you're doing to reach readers. These macro things, they're fun to talk about at conference, but they don't really affect you on a micro level. That is what you do.

James Blatch: By the way, some of the worst books on the Kindle store are traditionally published books that have been badly formatted. I'm reading one at the moment. It's a really good, well regarded, non-fiction-

David Gaughran: It probably wasn't cheap either.

James Blatch: It wasn't cheap, and I mean it's-

David Gaughran: Do you want to name and shame? Okay, you don't have to.

James Blatch: I'm a little bit hesitant about doing that. It's a really good book, but I'll tell you afterwards and you can decide whether you want to-

David Gaughran: I'll tweet it.

James Blatch: Just badly formatted. You get to the end of paragraphs and there's hyphens because they're formatting. It looks like no one's gone through it afterwards.

David Gaughran: Well you know what? I know for a fact that it's not ... I actually know how the quality control process works at a lot of Irish publishers. They take the ... Not the PDF, what is it they use? Adobe InDesign, right. They use an automated tool to convert that to EPUBs and then they convert it to MOBI.

Whereas we start with the MOBI. I actually do it all in HTML myself to make sure it looks perfect. Yeah.

The first thing most self-publishers do after they publish a book is buy a copy, right? They buy a copy straight away so that you can get the Also Boughts starting to roll, you get your rank quicker.

I always buy a copy straight away and I don't hit my mailing list or start my launch plan usually until that rank has arrived, because I feel like I'm going to be invisible in the recommendation engine.

Anyway, for a variety of reasons most self-publishers will buy a copy of their book first, just to check it's not broken. Traditional publishers don't do that. They don't even do that for their biggest authors.

It's amazing when, if you look how badly they handle their biggest names, and then you think about the people that are on a \$5,000 advance it's ... I can remember, Dan Brown's just released a new book this week. I remember when *The Lost Symbol* came out, I think it was two or three years ago, and Random House did something very unusual for a big publisher, they made the *Da Vinci Code* free for like three weeks or something because they didn't really know what they were doing. They could have done it for like five days.

They made it free for like three weeks and it probably got a quarter of a million downloads at least. I know it was on BookBub and it was all over the place. Obviously that's still a big draw that book, and would have been selling a lot, so it was quite brave of them to take that step.

So I bought it out of curiosity, I was like, "Okay, let's see if they're doing this right." Because I'm fascinated they made Da Vinci Code free. I didn't read it obviously, because it's Dan Brown and it's going to be terrible, but I paid to read it-

James Blatch: It's a good book.

David Gaughran: Oh come on. Dan Brown, he's probably ... Anyway, we won't get- He's the guy I love to hate in terms of his writing.

James Blatch: I think he's clever. My editor says the same, he's cleverer than you think.

David Gaughran: The tall man walked into the long room and spoke to the sad woman, it's just-

James Blatch: Do you know what? Jenny Parrott who's been on this podcast says there's a trick to making your reader feel they're ahead of you.

David Gaughran: Here's the thing, I read one of his books, Angels and Demons, I was backpacking somewhere and it was the only book available. I read it in four hate-filled hours. I couldn't stop.

James Blatch: Exactly, but you couldn't stop.

David Gaughran: Exactly. What I find, these bestsellers, all of them, 50 Shades, whatever one you love to hate is, they're all excellent at pacing.

That's the real trick I think to a bestseller, is the pacing and the emotional arc. The writing doesn't have to be good obviously, with some of these books.

Anyway, so Dan Brown, Da Vinci Code free, paged to the end of the book to see what the end matter is like. I was like, "Oh, they're doing this right, there's a chapter here from The Lost Symbol." Which wasn't out yet, it was going to be out the following week. I was like, "Interesting." Then I paged to the end to see if they linked to the pre-order on Amazon and they didn't.

There was no mailing list sign up, there was no link, and the pre-order was up on Amazon, they could have linked to it.

The only weblink in the back of the book was to Anchor Books, which was the imprint of Random House Publishing, The Lost Symbol. I clicked on that and go to the homepage of Anchor Books, and you know the punchline here, right? No mention of Dan Brown or The Lost Symbol.

It was just like, "Come on guys, you were so close to getting this right." What I always think is if that's the treatment Dan Brown, probably their biggest author, the biggest release of the year, that's the treatment he's getting, what kind of treatment are you going to get on a basic advance?

James Blatch: Yeah. That's why the traditional industry ... You've probably had the same approach as Mark's.

**Mark is asked every month by somebody in the traditional industry, "Can you run our campaigns for us?" Because they understand something's going on that they don't really know the detail about.**

David Gaughran: They're just starting to realize, they've always been very dismissive of self-publishing and eBooks, and all these articles all the time in the New York times or whatever saying eBooks have plateaued, which is rubbish.

James Blatch: Yeah it is.

David Gaughran: They're mistaking their own shrinking market share for a shrinking market. I think the ebook market is 50 or 60% bigger than they think it is, and we have grabbed all of that. Because we've taken something like 40% of the US market now in terms of unit sales, and they have no idea.

They're just starting to, they get a little bit curious about how big self-publishing is, they're like, "Maybe something's going on here." You know? I don't know how they wouldn't have known this already.

If you look at military science-fiction or something, all right? You look at the top 50, it's all self-published books, there's no traditional author.

That genre, that category used to be dominated by Baen, right? Those guys are all ranked down at 300,000 in the Kindle store, so no wonder they think eBooks are a fad that have peaked. They've no idea how much the market has grown, because we're grabbing it all. We're drinking our milkshake.

James Blatch: How brilliant is that?

David Gaughran: It's a tasty, tasty, tasty milkshake.

James Blatch: Sweet, sweet milkshake. Let's talk about you a little bit David.

**Hopefully they can tell from your accent that you're Irish and you live in Dublin now.**

David Gaughran: I do, yeah, yeah. Well my accent has softened a bit because I was away for a while. Not in prison I was in other-

James Blatch: Away for a while.

David Gaughran: ... other countries. Import, export scheme went a bit wrong. Yeah, I moved back to Dublin last September so I'm home about a year now.

I was living in Prague before that, and London actually before that, and Sweden before that, and then South America, and all over the place.

James Blatch: Yeah. Dublin's a great city. Is that your home?

David Gaughran: It is, yeah.

James Blatch: So that's where you come from?

David Gaughran: Born, bred, and buttered, as Ronnie Drew used to say.

James Blatch: Yeah. Dublin, I mean lots of countries, France is like this, I think Paris is very cosmopolitan and once you move out of it, it becomes very rural, but it's so pronounced in Ireland isn't it, literally?

As you walk to the fringes of Dublin it suddenly becomes farms and very rural. I always think it's Dublin and the rest of Ireland.

David Gaughran: Well it's actually, I live in Smithfield in Dublin, and there's a few horses nearby. Because it used to be-

James Blatch: Field living.

David Gaughran: No, it'll be in a shed or something. It used to be traditional for certain sectors of the working class to own horses in the city, and actually that square used to be an old horse market when the British built it a few hundred years ago. There's still a tradition of owning horses in that area. It's right in the city center, like it's like five minutes from Temple Bar, it's really funny.

James Blatch: That's amazing.

David Gaughran: In case you see a lost tourist walking through the area, and then some guy coming on bareback on a horse in the square and they're just like ...

James Blatch: Yeah. You don't get that in America unless there's a policeman and a truncheon.

### **Your historical fiction, just talk to us a little bit about your fiction books. You've got two series?**

David Gaughran: No. The first two, because I'm an idiot, the first two I wrote were standalones, and I finally got with the program and decided to try and write a series. Because when I read historical fiction I like reading just a big meaty standalone.

I like reading a series when it's science-fiction or epic fantasy or something, but with historical fiction for some reason as a reader, I always preferred reading big, meaty standalones.

So that's what I was drawn to first when I started writing them. I didn't want to write a series. Then it's like fighting with one hand behind your back. It's so much easier to market when you have a series, there's so many more options, you get so much more spillover between titles.

When I promote one of my standalones, even if it has a good run on BookBub or I put together a good campaign, it'll do all right for that week or whatever, but then it doesn't ... There's no real halo to it because it's not spilling over to another title. You can't push two things together to not relate it.

It's so hard to get readers to jump from one standalone to another if you can't connect them in some way in your marketing. With a series you have

that automatic connection. It's the same character, it's the same town, or whatever. I said, "Okay, I've got to try and figure out how to do this, and how to do it in a way ..."

Because if I'm going to write a five book series, I'm not a fast writer, especially with historical fiction, all the research. I'm like, "I'm going to be doing this for a few years so I've got to do something that's not going to drive me crazy as well. So can I do this?"

Actually I enjoyed it way more than I thought. The intellectual challenge of trying to solve that puzzle where instead of thinking about one arc it's a series of arcs and an overall one, and all that kind of stuff. I've really, really enjoyed it.

**James Blatch: Tell us about the books.**

David Gaughran: Okay, so the first two books I wrote were, like I'm definitely not one of the people who's proof that the agent system is broken. It wasn't the most commercial book, it was set in Argentina in the early 1800s, it's about the story of Argentina's fight for independence against the Spanish empire, which is fun and interesting but it wasn't exactly the most commercial setting. It's not the biggest niche. It's not like the Tudors or anything, you know?

I wrote that one, and then I tried to meet the market halfway with the second one, it had an American character, down in Latin America during when the banana companies come in and the Americans start toppling governments and all that kind of stuff. That sold a bit better, because that was slightly more commercial, people could relate to it a bit more with an American protagonist.

This time I was like, "Okay." I remember I went to the pub for an afternoon, where all great ideas are born.

James Blatch: All the best ideas, yeah. Particularly Dublin pubs I think, if that's where it was.

David Gaughran: It was Prague actually.

James Blatch: Oh it was in Prague? Okay.

David Gaughran: Yeah. I went to the pub for an afternoon just with a notebook and a pen, telling my girlfriend I was going to work, you know? I sat down and had five or six beers and then started thinking deeply about where to go next with this.

I was thinking, "Okay, I'm obsessed with Latin-American history and culture, and I really want to write books set there, and I've loads of ideas and periods of history I want to cover. But readers aren't interested in it, so that's a tricky problem to solve."

I remember thinking like, "How do I bring my readers to South America? How do I do it? How will I do it?" I was thinking for hours. I was like, "Well I could have a character who goes there." It was such an obvious solution but it took me six beers to figure this out. I could have a character who starts off somewhere in a more commercial setting like Dublin, which is a bit more marketable to Americans.

James Blatch: Indiana Jones, starts off in the college.

David Gaughran: Yeah, and you get the whole fish out of water thing as well, you know? So your protagonist doesn't know all the local history and culture so you can ... Not skip a bit of the research but you don't have to feed all that to the reader in various artful ways, because this guy doesn't know anything when he arrives, so that makes your job a bit easier. Also, yeah, you're physically bringing readers there.

The first book starts off in Dublin, and gradually he's going to end up somewhere down there. Just physically bring them there and we'll see how it goes. I've only released the first and that's gone pretty well.

Getting back into the self-publishing weeds for a second, Also Boughts, I'm obsessed Also Boughts at the moment. I think they're central to the entire Amazon recommendation engine in ways that we only partly understand. I think when you have an email spike, whatever books are in your Also Boughts, that will decide which kind of readers are going to get targeted with the Amazon emails.

If you have the wrong Also Boughts in your book, when you have a sales spike those guys are going to get hit with the emails from Amazon. I'll give you an example, right. When I launched my second book, Mercenary-

James Blatch: Sorry, what you're saying is that Amazon are going to send emails to the wrong people?

David Gaughran: Yeah.

James Blatch: For you?

David Gaughran: Like when I launched my second historical novel my audience was bigger among writers than it was among historical fiction readers, so I thought, "Well I'll launch it maybe, I'll try a 99 cent launch, I've never done that, and I'll let my writer audience know about it and maybe they'll like to try it."

Then of course I got a good few sales from people who wanted to either check out the book or support me or whatever. I had a pretty good launch for my historical fiction books, I think I sold like, I don't know, four or five hundred that week, which was a good launch for me. All my Also Boughts were like marketing books and writer how-tos. So the launch went great for the four, five days I was doing the push, and then it just dead fish.

I sold a handful of books for the next six months, no matter what I did. I'd throw some marketing at it, I'd sell a few books, and then it would die again.

It was until I cleaned out those Also Boughts, I think I eventually had to do a BookBub free run or something to get historical books attached to it.

**James Blatch: Yeah, so the way around that is to make sure that the people who are interested in your genre are the ones buying your books, particularly in those early launch phases?**

David Gaughran: Right. I always think of it like a newborn baby with the soft head that you have to protect. Your Also Boughts are critical in those first couple of weeks. If you are a writer who writes in two different genres where there's no crossover, let's say like me, non-fiction and historical fiction.

When I launch my next historical novel I won't tell my writer audience about it for a couple of weeks. I'm building separate lists now for historical fiction and I will wait until organic Also Boughts have attached itself historical novels and then I'm safe to say it on my self-publishing blog, "Oh hey, if you want to check it out I launched this book a couple of weeks ago." Because then it's safe, it's got the historical novel Also Boughts already attached to it.

These are some of the things you need to consider. I've learned that the hard way. Beginners might be thinking about like, "How am I going to figure all this out when I launch?"

You don't have to, it's okay to make a few mistakes. I've made a ton of mistakes on the way here, but I still am able to sell a few books and build an audience. Don't be afraid of screwing up, I've done a lot of it.

**James Blatch: Tell people where they can find you.**

David Gaughran: All right. Davidgaughran.com is my website. I'm rebuilding it at the moment, because it's going to be all lots of cool stuff for writers there in maybe two or three weeks I'll launch the new site.

From there you can click through to my blog and you can see all the articles on marketing and self-publishing, you can see links to my books if you want to check them out. I spend a lot of time on Twitter, probably too much time, you can check me out there as well, and Facebook as well of course.

James Blatch: Okay. Obviously these links will be in our show notes, selfpublishingformula.com. You should spell Gaughran by the way.

David Gaughran: Oh yeah, G-A-U-G-H-R-A-N. It rhymes with Schwarzenegger, it's easy to pronounce.

James Blatch: You look a bit like Arnold Schwarzenegger as well.

David Gaughran: I do, especially with my shirt off.

James Blatch: Yeah.

David Gaughran: Arnold Schwarzenegger now, not when he was younger though.

James Blatch: Yes, yeah.

David Gaughran: Time can be so cruel.

James Blatch: You look better than that.

David, it's been brilliant, thank you so much. I want to say thank you on behalf of us who are starting out in the self-publishing world for being one

of the guys who we follow reading. You're as generous with that as Mark is, and that makes a huge difference to us.

David Gaughran: Thank you very much.

James Blatch: Yeah, there you go. As you say, Mark, somebody batting for us.

I was going to say it's easy to be conservative with a small c and not put noses out of joint. That's how most of us are, right? Because that's where we think it's always a risk it's going to be harmful to your careers, and you need the bombastic types, you need the people who get the bit between their teeth and take no prisoners.

David's not reckless like that, I think he's a complete scrupulously fair actually, but when the time comes he fights the corner.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, he does. It's not in my nature to make a fuss about things, and I suppose in some ways you could say that's selfish of me, but that's just not the kind of character that I am. David is different and he is prepared to put his head about the parapet in ways that others aren't. It is important.

He does good work. His blog is one of the first I'd recommend to authors just starting out, because you can learn a lot of stuff, you can learn what to do, and equally important you can learn what you shouldn't do. He won't be afraid to call out the predatory companies that circle authors, and as we've mentioned before, offer them publishing packages for stupid amounts of money when they could do everything themselves.

He won't be afraid to call out marketers who are offering slightly dubious tactics to take advantage of authors and their understandable wish to see their career get a kickstart. He'll call everybody out.

It's an important role, and he's done it for a long time, and long may he continue doing it.

James Blatch: Yeah. We should say, I don't know if we said it in the interview or not, that David Gaughran, Gaughran is spelled G-A-U-G-H-R-A-N.

Obviously you could tell he was Irish from the interview, so if you want to Google him, Google his books, Let's Get Digital and Let's Get Visible are his two ones. His new book which is announced recently and I think he talked about it in the interview is going to be published shortly. One to definitely watch.

I have to say we've been to NINC a couple of times. I've been twice, you've been only once, have you?

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Well I've been twice and we're going to go this year, as in 2018, next year. The last time it was the most ... It was a fantastically dynamic group of people there, it was stimulating, every conversation I had I found motivational, I got stuff out of it.

So it's not just obviously I get a privileged position to sit down and really tap the mind of someone like David, and Johnny, and Sean, et cetera, but in the evening over beers you're talking, you're really getting down in the weeds, as they say in Curb Your Enthusiasm.

Down in the weeds where the business gets done and try to understand where the trends are, what's happening, where the frustrations are, what's likely to happen in the future.

I know it's expensive traveling to conferences, but there's nothing quite like being in that atmosphere and soaking up opinions from these very bright individuals.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I'll be there next year. It's a good conference, it's one of my favorites. It's a really nice part of the world as well, so lovely part of Florida. I'm traveling a lot next year. I'm in America at least three times, maybe four times.

James Blatch: I mean Thriller Fest, RWA, NINC, all of these are opportunities, and the Smarter Artist Summit that Johnny, and Dave, and Sean run in February, these are all opportunities.

I saw the video they've got from last year's Smarter Artist Summit, and that again, Dave Gaughran was there, et cetera. You could see a lot of familiar faces in the room. There you've got a quite close environment to soak up what's going on. I think it's worth it.

Perhaps choose one of those every year and just put some money aside to visit. If it's going to be NINC you'll see us. It's going to be a slightly different NINC, I had an email from Julie Ortolon, which I've not spoken to about yet, about how NINC's going to operate this year.

All I would say, because I don't want to jump the gun on their announcements, is it's definitely worth being a member of NINC if that's something you're thinking about doing.

Good. That's it. The last one of 2017. The last double digit podcast from SPF. We've rejected your idea of doing number 100 naked.

Mark Dawson: Oh.

James Blatch: It's Kitty. I haven't interviewed Kitty Bucholtz yet, normally the interviews are in the bag at this stage, but I'm going to have to find some way of celebrating it. Shall we get a little party popper each?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, we could do that. I think the budget might stretch to-

James Blatch: Just one.

Mark Dawson: A single one, yeah.

James Blatch: No backups, it's got to go, because sometimes they're duds and they don't fire. We'll just have to live with that if that's the case.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I know, it's a risk we'll have to take.

James Blatch: Indeed, okay. Thank you so much indeed for persevering with us through our first full year. We started in 2016, so this is ... is that right? Started in 2016?

Mark Dawson: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Blatch: 99 divided by 52.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it must be mustn't it? 52 in a year.

James Blatch: Yes, that's right. Yes. Our first full year. It's been absolutely delight ...

For me, this is the beating heart of SPF, this podcast, is what keeps up going week to week. It's the community and it's the bit that makes it most satisfying for us I think. That wouldn't be the case without people listening, so thank you so much indeed.

Have a lovely, happy new year, and we will speak to you in 2018. Buh-bye.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to the self-publishing Formula Podcast. Visit us at [selfpublishingformula.com](http://selfpublishingformula.com) for more information, show notes, and links on today's topics. You can also sign up for our free video series on using Facebook ads to grow your mailing list. If you've enjoyed the show please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. We'll see you next time.