

## **EPISODE 103: HOW TO BE A HEALTHY WRITER – WITH JOANNA PENN**

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 from the United Kingdom to the rest of the world, it's James Blatch and Mark Dawson on a Friday with a Self Publishing Formula podcast. We hope you're having a great week.

Mark and I were just discussing how calm it is at the moment, we've almost got nothing on, you and me, haven't we?

Mark Dawson: Oh, it's so quiet, yeah. There's nothing to do.

James Blatch: That's English sarcasm, because Mark is actually exchanging contracts on his house today, which is ... I mean we have a strange ... I don't know what it's like in the States, we have a strange system in the UK where it's so flakey, everything can collapse at any moment.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it could do.

James Blatch: Just to calm you.

Mark Dawson: I've been hugely busy. So yeah, exchange. Normally you'd have a slightly more relaxed period where you'd take care of the bits and pieces that need to be taken care of in-between this, today and moving into the new house, but we've decided because, we don't mess around and we like a challenge, and we've only got two kids and a puppy and we're

going on holiday ... shit ... soon as well, we're going to do it in two weeks. I've been running around a bit today, so yeah. There you go.

James Blatch: You're getting professional people in to do the moving obviously?

Mark Dawson: Oh no, no, I'll do it all myself. Absolutely, I will not be lifting a stick of furniture.

James Blatch: No, no. Quite right too, that's the best money you could ever spend. I've made that mistake before.

Well good luck with the move, it is a stressful time and we're in the middle of doing a lot of coursework at the moment.

Stuart Bache's course, which I mentioned last week, is out in beta at the moment, so we've got three or four people who are doing that course.

### **Have we set a price for that? Can we announce that?**

Mark Dawson: Not yet.

James Blatch: Not yet, okay. Let's just have a further think about that and the final tweaks will be made, then transcripts and captions and it'll look polished and neat, and then that will go up for sale.

It's going to be the first time we just sit as an evergreen course, as they say. That's quite exciting. We are talking, so funnily enough how busy we are, and this week is not without anxieties for you and me, and I've struggled to get out and do some exercise.

I went for a brief run yesterday, but we are going to be talking about the healthy writer. This is not just a sort of faddy thing, it's a really important aspect of our lives that we need to think about.

We've got none other than Joanna Penn from The Creative Penn who's going to come on and talk about that in a moment. She's been brilliant, she's doing a bit of a transformation at the moment and prioritizing her life, and she's written a book to go along with that, so it's a really good interview and I would urge you all to listen to it.

It doesn't matter what your genre is or where you work in it, it's important to look after yourselves for the long haul here.

However, before that, and sort of a slightly related theme in terms of looking after yourselves and looking after the community, we have a member of our SPF community who needs our help.

### **Mark, do you want to talk about Tommy?**

Mark Dawson: Yeah, sure. Tommy Donbavand has been writing for quite a long time. He has worked for, certainly the Beano I think and the Dandy potentially, so those are very well known comics from the golden age of comics, the '40s and '50s, maybe even earlier than that in the UK.

He's written for Doctor Who, he's published some self-publishing stuff. I've known him online for a little while, and a couple of years ago I guess, I'm not entirely sure of the timeframe on this, but he was diagnosed with, I think stage four throat cancer some time ago.

Tommy, he's married, he's got two young sons, and it was touch and go, there was a moment I think when he had some other ailments as well and the doctors told his wife that he had a couple of hours to live if he didn't respond to the treatment.

He did. He lost 13 stone, or he's lost 13 stone I think since being ill. He fought back and was able to beat the throat cancer.

Then, before Christmas just gone, he noticed a very large lump on the side of his face and he went to the doctors worried that it was the cancer. The doctor said that's kind of to do with your previous cancer, it's not cancerous, but unfortunately you have got a growth in your lung.

He now faces a situation where he has lung cancer. This pisses me off, let's be honest. People might remember a friend of mine had breast cancer last year, Emma, and she raised 50 or 60 thousand pounds, more than that probably, and that quite a lot of that came from my audience, and a very large slice of it came from the SPF audience as well.

I said to Tommy last night, "Have you thought about a Just Giving page?" I think Tommy's probably one of those people who was a little bit reluctant to put his hand out and ask for help, but he has put a page together and I really want to get behind that and help him.

He can't work now, he makes money from going to schools and telling them about writing in comics and things like that. I want to help him, I'm going to donate to it, in fact by the time this goes out I will have donated to it.

I think that James, and John, and Lucy from SPF, we are also going to donate to it as well. I'm going to push a message in the SPF community, I'm going to contact my fans.

I would really love us to be able to give Tommy a little bit of help, because it's just awful, I hate it. After fighting so hard to beat the first cancer, to then come down with news like this is just the worst.

Yeah, this is a little, it sounds a bit grandiose, but it's a little project. I really want to do what I can and what we can do to help Tommy get back on his feet again.

James Blatch: Yeah, absolutely Mark. Reading through the description Tommy's written on his page, and I'm going to give the URL in just a second, you can tell.

In fact he says, "I'm devastated," and you can tell that he's scared, as you and I would be, anyone would be in that situation. Let's do everything we can to help Tommy beat this and recover and carry on writing and carry on being a member of our community.

The place to go, it's a rather long URL, we'll put it up on the screen on YouTube and we'll put it in the show notes, but it's [justgiving.com/crowdfunding/tommydonbavand](https://justgiving.com/crowdfunding/tommydonbavand). Tommy Donbavand is actually spelled as it sounds, which is Tommy, T-O-M-M-Y D-O-N-B-A-V-A-N-D. So [justgiving.com/crowdfunding/tommydonbavand](https://justgiving.com/crowdfunding/tommydonbavand).

Do you know what we should do? Let's set up a redirect, John can do that, on SPF, so [selfpublishingformula.com/tommy](https://selfpublishingformula.com/tommy). We'll set that up, so that's an easier one for you to remember, [selfpublishingformula.com/tommy](https://selfpublishingformula.com/tommy), that will take you to the page to donate.

Yes, well what can we say? I mean we glibly walk through life and probably just take huge amounts of what we do every day and enjoy our time with our family, and we take it all for granted. Of course we do, because we're humans and every now and again you read Tommy's story and it just brings you up short of what life can throw at you.

**Mark Dawson: Yeah. So let's see what we can do. I'm confident we can make a really positive difference and help him out.**

James Blatch: Great, okay. Good. Good luck Tommy, I hope you're listening, and we're going to do everything we can to help you out.

Right, before we get into the interview, it's that time to welcome some new Patreon supporters to the podcast. We give a shout out to everybody who

becomes a Patreon support. Mark's going to have a cough. Did that very well, didn't hear a thing.

Mark Dawson: Thank you.

James Blatch: There's a lot and my pronunciation's going to be hilarious through this. Let's say hello and welcome to Al Dinova, to Amber Biseca, to Anthony Young, to Bea Shrimmer, to Claire Delaney, to Craig A. Hart, to Dana Killian, to Dahla Lark, David F. Berens.

### **Could we announce something about David F. Berens? Shall we announce that?**

Mark Dawson: Have we announced it?

James Blatch: We haven't announced it, but we could announce it.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Yeah, David applied for the first book lab, so we are currently taking one of his books to bits and we will be podcasting about that quite soon. We'll do that another three times this year.

All of these people James is reading out, if they're gold members, you are eligible to have the team that we've put together look at your books and provide hopefully some feedback that will help you and also the community, because a lot of this stuff is universal.

James Blatch: It'll be interesting actually, if you look at David F. Berens on Amazon, I think it's Hat Check, is that right?

Mark Dawson: Yes.

James Blatch: Hat Check I think is the book that we've taken, so you can have a look at what's there now, read the look inside, and these are all the things that are going to be taken apart by our experts very publicly shortly.

Let me carry on, say hello to Emily Divario, and thank you. Holly Starkey, Jack Erickson, Jane Kennedy, Gemma Brown, Jennifer Morgur, John Majoris, Kenneth Britts, Night and Day Publishing ... Night and Day Publishing, interesting name.

Lily Saint Jermaine. Kerov Jessica Rosco, Lucy Score, Melissa Banjack, Nini Hammon, hello Nini. We've got Patricia D. Eddy, Pip Cody, Robert Fessman, Robert Clark, Ron Yuroch, hello Ron.

### **Do you remember meeting Ron in Florida a couple of years ago?**

Mark Dawson: Of course, I do.

James Blatch: Rory Maron, Shannon Kusmitch, Shannon of course we met as well, well we interviewed Shannon, head of the 101 launch I think. Good luck to you Shannon who I think is in the middle of reassessing her writing, which will be an interesting journey actually Shannon.

She's obviously a writer, she wants to write. She wrote a family story, which are difficult, they're difficult to market and I think she struggled with that. She wants to write so she's now taking a very practical approach, thinking what genre should I write in? She's getting some good advice in the group already, what do you like reading, you know? We can't wait to see Shannon moving forward with her career.

Taron Blackthron, Thomas Fowler, Vanda Writer ... Oh, is that a hand name? William Tyler Davis. There are all our new supporters on Patreon, and you can become a supporter on Patreon if you go to [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast). Thank you so much for supporting the podcast it means a lot to Mark and myself, yes, and it keeps us going doesn't it? So good, right.

Well let's talk to Jo, and then I'm going to ask you what exercise you've done this week when we come back. Okay, let's talk to our friend Jo about being a healthy writer.

**Jo, I think most people know who you are, but just in case there's somebody who doesn't know who you are listening to this podcast, shall we do a recap of who Jo/J. F. Penn is?**

Joanna Penn: Aw, thank you so much. As Joanna Penn I write nonfiction for authors and I have the Creative Penn podcast, which some listeners might know.

As J. F. Penn I write thrillers and dark fantasy, and as Penny Appleton I actually write sweet contemporary romance. I'm a speaker and a blogger and all of that as well.

James Blatch: Okay. We're going to talk about I think a sort of area of wellbeing in general terms for writers in this interview, but let's have a little catch up if you don't mind, Jo, because it's been a little while since you've been on.

**I know one of the exciting things you've been doing is some collaborative writing, in fact in unusual places.**

Joanna Penn: In 2017, last year, four of us got on a train in Chicago, and between Chicago and New Orleans we plotted out a book, a dark fantasy novel, and then we spent a week in New Orleans writing that.

I must say there are wonderful pros and terrible cons when it comes to co-writing. It's very, very challenging, especially with a narrative arc. We took a character each and wrote four characters, but sewing them all together was a hell of a job and we only had a week to do it. That was a real challenge.



Whereas the other co-writing I've done, so with J. Thorn when we did *Risen Gods*, with my mum for Penny Appleton, and with *The Healthy ...* Oh actually, *The Healthy Writer* we alternated chapters, but generally I have a consistent voice with my co-writers.

What was so funny with *American Demon Hunters: Sacrifice*, was there was no way we were going to get a consistent voice between me and Lindsay Buroker, who writes just massively long fantasy books, and J., and Zach.

That was great fun, but I actually think that collaboration is a huge trend in the indie publishing movement, so I'm really glad to be doing more of it myself.

James Blatch: Yeah, we did speak to J. about this, it sounded a great episode. Now you just said that you did the ... I obviously talked about this with J., I'm trying to throw my mind back, but you did the character arcs. I can understand fleshing out the characters individually and then coming together.

**I'm not sure how four of you separately plan an arc of a character without constantly talking to each other about the story.**

Joanna Penn: Well, I mean as in the arc of the story. So we plotted the story but what we didn't want was a repetition of the same story from different points of views.

So it's like here's my character, Sebastian in a carriage. We actually wrote it, the story itself is set on the train from Chicago to New Orleans, so it's very meta.

Basically the point of view is with Sebastian, my character, and then the skull rolls out the door, and then it's with another character. Instead of following Sebastian it's more like a visual, like *24*, where you would zoom into a new character's point of view, but the narrative arc remains the same.

Whereas some novels written from multiple points of view might tell the same episode from different angles. I think that's what made it work.

**James Blatch: You obviously did have to do a fair amount of actual collaboration as well as working by yourself in your room to get this together.**

Joanna Penn: We did. That was the beauty of all being together in New Orleans, was actually we were meeting twice a day. Because I had jet lag, which is a real bonus when you're flying west to America, I was up really early.

I got my words in before anybody else, and then they had to listen to me. It was awesome.

One tip I would say to people is you really have to let go of the things that you're not very attached to, and then when you are very attached, then you have to convince the other people that this is important. You learn to pick your battles when it comes to this type of thing.

The same with Euan and I with *The Healthy Writer*, because he's a medical doctor, writes for medical journals, his voice is so different to mine. I had one idea of what I thought the book was going to be, and it ended up being quite different because I adjusted to his style.

So that's one big tip for collaboration. Sure, someone has to be the leader, but really collaboration is about letting go of ego and coming up with a better product in the end.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's a really great thing to do. I remember thinking when J. was talking about it, that ... old-fashioned word is to call it teamwork.

There's a reason why this is a bit of a cliché in the military and in the corporate world of teamwork building exercises and all the rest of it. There's a real reason behind that, because it's kind of the essence to getting stuff done, and not just in corporate or military life, in your family life and with your friends and stuff.

**It's a really important part of being a human being I think, and existing.**

Joanna Penn: Yes. Although I think writers, part of the reason we write is we don't necessarily like all that. In fact when I worked in the corporate life I used to get feedback like, "You're not really a team player are you?" I'm like, "No actually, I'm not. I'm more of a lone wolf."

Jack Reacher is a lone wolf character and I love those bits in the Lee Child books. So I think that becomes the difficulty, is yes, I'm a lone wolf, yes, I create, how can I bring my strengths to this other person's strengths and create something that is even better?

I've been very blessed working with J., I've co-written now three books with J. Thorn and he's brilliant because he's so adaptable, because he's worked in music, he's a musician. I think authors don't get it as well as musicians.

What I'm looking at now, I'm working on a screenplay for Map of Shadows, I think because of the lessons I've learned around co-writing and collaboration because screenwriting and film is a much more collaborative process. You can't do it on your own.

Whereas indie authors, we can do everything on our own now, but it's very good to kind of think, "Well what can I do more with more of us?" Of course you guys do that at SPF, you're not just Mark, or James, or John, or Lucy, you're together, you know?

James Blatch: Yes, absolutely. I think I probably am a team player and I think it's a need for me to want to be in a team. It's interesting how personalities are so different between different people. I would be a very bad lone wolf assassin, I'd want a couple of people with me.

Joanna Penn: I'd be great.

James Blatch: Yeah, you would be good. Cold blooded, just go. Okay. That's kind of catching up a little bit with where you are, so quite a lot of writing.

**The book production's been a bit of a focus of yours, and you are a bit of a polymath, is that fair? You've got quite a few strings to your bow.**

Joanna Penn: Oh yeah. I mean definitely. It's funny because you say, I did eight books last year which is the most I've done ever, and five of those were co-written. It was a big year production wise.

What's so interesting is right now I'm doing the screenplay partially because I feel a little burned out by writing books. I think that's been a really interesting learning for me, because I haven't been a high production person and I wouldn't have done eight without co-writing.

When you're doing eight different projects, as well as all the rest of the stuff we do, podcasting, speaking, traveling, life, I realized last year a lot more about how some indie authors have become quite burned out with this production process.

Part of the reason to move into doing a screenplay adaptation first thing of *Map of Shadows*, my latest novel, is to give myself almost a break from the book production process, because it's so different.

I'm loving it. I'm so energized by learning something new, by using the same story, because I love my story, I'm still in love with the book, but I'm

not really ready to write another novel. It's a really interesting process, but I feel like last year was a big year for my own development, and co-writing has been a big part of that, moving into romance which I never expected to happen.

It has been a big year and big year for production. This year will probably be just as big, but I also want to do a couple of screenplays and start the adaptation process too.

**James Blatch: Was the focus on production last year, what was driving that? Was it commercial?**

Joanna Penn: No, not at all. Although I'm a business woman and very proud of it, my writing, I don't have a production schedule really. I know what the next book will be, but I don't have a whole year's worth of production.

My mum and me ended up doing three novels, sweet romance, basically because my mum is now retired and she loves writing, so she turned into a nutter writer. I was like, "Okay mum, whatever, we'll do it."

So I did a lot of work with her. Also, *The Healthy Writer* was not planned at all, it was not on my 2017 plan. Then Euan pitched me with the idea. That was a surprise. *Map of Shadows* was probably the only book I had planned.

It's quite interesting how some writers are very organized around, "These are the books I'm going to write for the next x years." For me, I kind of have this rolling hierarchy in my files on my computer, which is the next book.

I move things in and out of the next book for each author name depending on how I'm feeling. Also, I guess depending on the promise to the reader.

I have to write another *ARKANE* novel, *ARKANE* number 10, which will be set between New Orleans and San Francisco. I've written the notes on the

plot, I kind of know what it's going to be, but that has to be my next novel. I'm not quite sure on the others.

I think it's very important, when you're doing this full-time, to make sure that you're listening to the muse, and I'm very much driven by the muse, especially for J. F. Penn, my thriller name.

I don't write to market for J. F. Penn at all. I think that would be ... I just would have to go back to the day job for me. No, I have to love it, basically.

**James Blatch: You don't want it to feel too much like work at any point.**

Joanna Penn: No, and in fact this has been another big thing for me, I've really changed my focus. Anything that is considered work or feels like work, I'm trying to outsource as much as possible.

That's another reason I'm able to create more and was able to create more last year, and why this year I'm getting a lot better at saying no. I'm doing very few speaking engagements this year, I did quite a few last year.

Although I love it, it's work, it really is hard. I find it so hard and it tires me out. This is part of the introvert thing, obviously. I'm doing a couple of conferences this year, I'll be at NINC, I think you'll be at NINC as well.

James Blatch: Yes.

Joanna Penn: Yeah, but that to me will be hopefully less work and more engagement with other authors and things like that. I think we have to be very sensitive.

For the listeners, whether you're doing this full-time or whether you want to do this full-time, you have to run the business of being a writer, and then

you have to look at the creative side, but you have to make sure that you don't turn this into another day job, otherwise what is the point?

I've instituted weekends, which is new for me. Something that I learned from The Healthy Writer, because another thing that happened with the kind of burnout is, it's because I work so hard. It's like, "Okay, well how do I balance working hard, but working hard on the things that really matter to me?"

Which is building a body of work that I'm proud of over the long term, because I'm lucky enough now to be financially secure in many ways, and so I'm really focused on how can I make this the best creative life, focus on creating the best creative work and spending my time doing stuff I love.

James Blatch: That's brilliant. We had Kitty Bucholtz on recently to talk about time management, and reflecting on some of the things she was saying, I think I worked out that I'm working more hours and taking less leave than I've ever done in my life.

Yet, most of my friends look at me and slightly take the mickey because they're trudging off to get a train in the morning, and they say, "Oh yeah, what time did you get up today? How was your afternoon nap?" And so on. They'll never listen to me, they have no idea how much work goes on at the moment.

Joanna Penn: Well and that's the thing, but at the end of the day we are our own boss. I mean you have it slightly worse because of course you have a whole team.

James Blatch: Dawson.

Joanna Penn: Yeah, you have both Dawsons, whereas I am the boss here, there's me and my husband but I'm pretty much the boss. If I decide on a

new project ... I mean I'm very ambitious as you know, I've talked about this before.

I am ambitious but I'm creatively ambitious more than anything now. I really do want to win a literary prize, I do want to be on the lists of top authors, I do want a film made, I'd love to win an Oscar for a screenplay, hell yeah.

I have those ambitions, and that part of the healthy writer is how can we achieve our creative ambitions while still looking after our physical and mental health, because you're not enjoying the journey unless you are happy along the way.

As you say, actually I've worked harder over the last ... Since I left my job in 2011, and I guess before that I was doing both jobs, doing both at the same time, but yeah sure, absolutely, you have to work damn hard when you're starting a new business.

At some point you have to move into a more maintenance mode of, okay, well is it worth cranking this out for the next 10 grand, or the next 50 grand, or 100 grand, or am I actually really happy?

What's so great, I was at yoga earlier. This is another big shift and I'll bring this around, the phrase time management I've started to have a problem with, in the same way as diet and exercise. Because these words tend to have quite a negative connotation and they feel like punishment.

What I've started to kind of reframe it as is instead of diet, it's just nice food, food that makes your body feel good, not necessarily your taste buds, but your body.

Then instead of exercise thinking about movement. Every day now I move, I do movement. That might be yoga, or a walk, or a really long walk, or something like that.



For food, it's yay, I love healthy food that makes me feel good and I have portions for the size of the woman I am, or the woman I'd like to be.

Also, time management, it's okay, not how do I fit more in the day, and I could fit more in the day if I didn't do a two hour yoga class, let's face it, but how do I fit more of what's important in my life?

On the wall I have all these different things and one of the main thing is create a body of work I'm proud of. I wrote that years ago, but that body of work also includes our body, our physical bodies.

So often as writers we concentrate on our brain as the most important thing, but actually the body is not just something that carries around a brain, it's the best brain hacker and the best way to make your brain work better, is to deal with your physical health. I've been having these real come to Jesus moments around these issues, you can tell, in the last year.

James Blatch: One of the results of that is The Healthy Writer, the book, so let's talk a little bit about that. Sounds like it grew organically as an idea from you, rather than you sitting down and thinking, "I'm going to do a self help group, self help book," or whatever you might want to categorize it as.

### **Tell us about the collaboration as well with Euan**

Joanna Penn: Dr. Euan Lawson, he's a British author. In fact it was his idea. I spoke in November 2016 in London, at an event in London. Euan was in the audience.

Then over the January he heard me talk about wanting to become a healthier writer, and he emailed me and pitched the book. Now, obviously we all get pitches every day, and do we listen to most of them? I mean no we don't, because a lot of them are not a good fit.

I read this and I remembered Euan from the event, and I was like, "Okay, this is interesting." So I actually set him a task, I said, "Well write me a chapter and I'll see, because this is quite a big deal."

Because I knew that I would be doing a lot of the marketing. I have an audience, he doesn't. He's a British GP. He did the chapter and then we started to brainstorm table of contents and then I just went, "Yeah, we can do this."

Then probably the big turning point when I decided, "Okay, I'll start talking about this in public," is when we did the survey. We did a survey of over 1100 writers on the podcast and on the blog, and well the survey was for more people, that's how many people responded.

It was incredible how much physical pain and mental health issues there is in the author community, ranging from back pain, neck pain, arm, RSI, headaches, migraine, eye strain, to mental health issues like depression, anxiety, loneliness, which is so sad.

As well as being overweight, let's just get it out there, because of the sedentary lifestyle that we end up doing. People who are sitting at their desks writing for 10 hours a day and sometimes more than that, and then people who have essentially broken their bodies on this wheel of writing.

Through doing that we split the book into two halves, so the unhealthy writer, all the things that can go wrong, and then the healthy writer, how you can fix it and how you can make your physical health much better.

James Blatch: Yeah, this whole area's going to resonate I think a lot with people listening, and it comes up time and time again in interviews.

I also suffered from, when I was a BBC reporter I was out and about a lot, and then got a job in the BBFC in London which was very sedentary. I had

the worst back pain I've ever had. It was funny how I just thought, "Oh, it's that stage of life, I've suddenly got into my 40s and I've got back pain."

It was entirely to do with sitting down all day. I came away from that job after seven years, I now have a sit, stand desk, and walk like you are, I have a dog as well so I go walking as much as possible and do a bit of exercise.

That pain comes when I've been stupid and picked something heavy up without doing it properly. That was a bit of a surprise to me and I think how many people go to work and sit down all day. I mean just that one thing has made a tremendous difference to me.

Joanna Penn: We're both right now standing up as we're doing this interview. Obviously in the book we talk about it, I've got some photos coming on the blog soon of my set up and Euan's set up.

You're right, it makes such a huge difference to have a sit, stand. I think going to 100% standing can also be bad, but I also have a Swiss ball, you have a laptop stand, a separate keyboard, there's just a number of things that you can put in place that can really help you.

Then I think also taking breaks. What's so funny, I remember in the book Euan was like, "Yeah, you can take breaks from your computer, but are you taking a break with your phone?" Are you walking away from your computer going, "I'm having a break now." And are you then spending 10 minutes looking at Facebook on your phone or whatever? These are the types of things to think about.

Again, as you say, many people are at the point of really quite crippling pain, and what I would say to people is you can reverse the situation.

Some of my own personal chapters, so I have some very personal chapters in the book, one is about my kind of five year journey of back pain. At one point I was in hospital with suspected spinal tumors, it was so bad. I was in

the whole scanner. I didn't have it, and then over a process of years basically now it's I'm fine, and I do yoga, and I walk, and I stand, but you have to do all these maintenance activities.

It's a bit like writing, you can't just write once and that's it for the rest of your life. You actually have to do this, use your body every day, which is why I find yoga now really good. I think that's really important, is that it's a consistent journey over time.

The other thing I talk about is my letter to sugar, which has resonated with a lot of people, which basically last year I self diagnosed myself as an addict and my behavior was as an addict. I was very unhappy with that.

It wasn't just the weight gain from sugar, it's the link with Alzheimer's is the biggest scare for me. When Terry Pratchett died, wonderful British fantasy writer, of Alzheimer's, it's my biggest fear. I'm not scared of dying, I'm scared of Alzheimer's and dementia.

The link with sugar is being proven lots, there's lots of resources about that. I was like, "Okay, I really want to give up sugar, but I am an addict, how am I going to do this?" So I went, I had some psychotherapy, but the main thing was I made the decision.

In that letter to sugar I basically say, this is why I have to stop this. It's been a real journey for me actually. I'm still, just so people know, I'm not a paragon of health at this point.

**James Blatch: I'm interested to know how much sugar, when you say you've cut sugar, you've cut it out of your coffee and you perhaps don't eat Mars Bars, or is it completely?**

Joanna Penn: Well no, I mean as in I drink black coffee so I don't have milk, which is sugar.

James Blatch: I've got to cut out milk as well?

Joanna Penn: No, no, you don't have to. I'm just saying there are things-

James Blatch: I'm addicted to sugar.

Joanna Penn: It's also the behavioral things. For example, if I have milk in coffee, it actually does give you a slightly sweet taste that then I feel like I should have a cake with it.

Whereas if I have black coffee, and I switched to black coffee, it only took a few days to get over how horrible it was and now I love it, but that's one behavioral habit.

That's another thing, so I now have been looking at habits a lot more. The habit of, so I write in a café for example, and what I've done is move around the corner so I can't see the cake cabinet.

James Blatch: I like it.

Joanna Penn: Because I'm an addict. It means I still want it. What's so interesting, things like, well I've just changed my taste buds over a period of time.

I will still occasionally have some sugar, but I don't actually really like it anymore, I haven't had chocolate for ages, I've changed my stance on red meat and to vegetables.

I think that's the other thing, you have to think about your health as like layers of an onion, so right now, people listening, what is the number one thing that is wrong with your body? Whatever that is. Say it is back pain. Then the first thing to do is start doing the things to sort out the back pain. For me, like I said, it was a five year journey of sorting that out.

Then last year it was, okay, now I'm ready to tackle my weight and my eating habits, so then I look at that. Or headaches, or migraine, or loneliness.

How do we tackle each of these things in turn to make our life holistically better? Because this is the thing, we don't have a long life, so let's make the best of it, both in our writing and creativity, and also in our health and wellbeing.

James Blatch: I think that's my biggest motivator in this area, is the old John Lennon phrase that life's something that happens while you're making other plans. Where I am now with the kids growing up, it's exactly what it feels like.

I can feel the years slipping away. The kids have gone from three and five year olds, they're young teenagers now, and they'll be gone. It's a funny thing, we were thinking about doing some work on the house for more space, and Jill and I looked at each other and thought, "Well it's going to take a year to get this done, and what are we actually doing this for? They're going to be at university and gone in three years time."

**That's frightening to me. So I want to be living now, I want to be enjoying now.**

Joanna Penn: This is the thing, you have to decide on your priorities. Around my movement, up until ... I mean even since I saw you in November, I've made huge changes. It's been a little bit at a time, then some bigger bits, then some bigger bits.

It's quite surprising, but you have to kind of make that time in your schedule to go through the process. At the moment with my movement aspects, because I'm training for a double ultra marathon in March, I mean I'm doing between 10 and 20 hours of movement a week. My walks on a

Sunday are six hours plus. I used to feel, "What a waste of time, I should be writing, why am I being lazy? I should be working harder."

The thing is, if you read productivity books, what they'll say is the most productive people in the world, whether they are productive in our sense of numbers of words on the page, people like Richard Branson for example, spend a lot of time doing exercise, and movement, and having fun. He loves windsurfing, this type of thing.

I went ice skating for the first time in 30 years and I loved it. I hope that this message, because I feel like with the indie movement that we've been in this phase of high production, focus, that is just not sustainable, it's not.

We have to look at how do we have a quality of life that involves creativity and health, so that we can do this for longer and not completely burn out. If that means we have to look at different forms of income, then that's what we should do, because yeah, again, what's the point?

### **James Blatch: The changes you've made, Jo, how easy is it to make them stick?**

Joanna Penn: Well that's why I think you need to peel the onion. For example yoga, I tried yoga loads over the last 10 years. I've been to retreats and I've gone to classes and it's never stuck until I found a school here, in Bath, where I live.

Part of the reason for moving to Bath was because I also like to drink, and in London I was drinking too much. By changing even physically, your location, you can help to change your habits. Alcohol of course is tons of sugar.

James Blatch: You haven't given up alcohol?

Joanna Penn: Oh no. No, of course not.

James Blatch: I was slightly scared then.

Joanna Penn: I haven't. I'm trying to cut it down obviously, but no, I haven't given it up. This is the other thing, I think the giving it up, this kind of negative, I haven't given up sugar, I'm choosing to eat differently.

I think that's another thing, and it has to be a habit. As I said, last year in terms of my diet, which has been a real issue, was I saw a hypnotherapist, so he helped me with the kind of input into our brains, hypnotherapy.

Now I have a physical health coach who's helping me with some of the emotional eating. Just being really out there with this, so many of us have emotional patterns around eating.

One of mine, and maybe some people listening will resonate with this, it's, I've been a good girl today, I've worked really hard at my job, I deserve a treat for working really hard. Maybe that's a curry, and a half bottle of wine, and a tiramisu.

The thing is I am a good girl and I do work really hard, and I love my work, but I'm not five, I don't need a treat every day, but I think that treat aspect, I'm sure a lot of writers listening will understand that. I've changed that to, I'm a good girl, I deserve a treat, I'm going to yoga, because I really enjoy it and it makes me feel good.

The feeling good is also something that's really shifted in me, is I used to be how it feels in my mouth. Like a packet of Haribos, which is what broke me back in May last year.

### **James Blatch: Was that your low point?**

Joanna Penn: Yeah, basically eating a whole one of those massive bags of Haribos. If people don't know what they are, they're like those sour gummy



sweets that are really just 100% sugar. That made my mouth feel good and I got maybe a sugar rush, and then I felt like crap.

My sleep was mixed up, I would wake up sluggish, heavy, which is actually like a sugar hangover, feeling that sort of insulin coma feeling in the morning.

When I stopped doing sugar at night, even fruit, my sleep was much better and I woke up perky, like I am now.

This is the thing, it's a bit like the Tim Ferriss stuff, you're an experiment, you are your own experiment. What makes your body feel good?

I used a lot of trackers, so I have on my desk, I have an action log where I keep how did I sleep, how am I feeling? For example my coach said get rid of the scales and we'll do centimeters instead, so centimeter measurements because I'm emotionally attached to the scales and I need to break that.

I guess all in all, I don't want to sound all preachy, I just feel like when you start looking at this aspect of your life, you start peeling away different layers and finding that you're maybe not as completely whole as you thought you were.

Other emotional things around food might be related to parents and things that happened to us when we were kids, and hell, there's nothing wrong with a bit of therapy.

James Blatch: No. I do think, I don't know about you, but I think as I get older that starts to manifest itself much more than it used to.

I think in my 20s I ignored everything, it didn't really matter. Now I'm in my 50s I do dwell on what happened to me as a kid. Nothing very bad happened to me as a kid, but we all have things that we went through, that made me who I am.

There's little bits of resentment there, and stuff just comes up now that didn't used to. That surprised me, that it means more as I get older. I kind of thought it might be the other way around actually.

Joanna Penn: I was talking to someone about the pain aspects, so we tend to only tackle things in our life when we're in enough pain, and that's why that letter to sugar is so important to my journey, because it's the moment I went, "Okay, I'm in enough pain."

Because I'm confident as a woman, it wasn't that I was feeling unattractive, it was that my body was breaking.

As you say, that's partly an age thing, but it's partly a maturity thing, of recognizing, I want to live another 50 years in a healthy way. I still want my brain to be as good when I die as right now, or better obviously. And you're right about looking back and looking forward.

It's so interesting now, just from a writing point of view, food is incredibly political in so many ways. When you start becoming more aware of conversations around food, and movement, and what people say, like I was round someone's house and the children's interactions with the parents, with the political aspect of what they will eat and what they won't, and it's so fascinating watching this behavior around food, which I think just carries through into the rest of our life.

For me, my mum didn't allow us to have sweets and I went to school in Malawi in Africa and there was no chocolate. For me chocolate was like the ultimate thing I really wanted because it wasn't even there, and then I was rebelling by having it, so it became an almost rebellious treat. Those things become so powerful.

I'd urge people listening, if you're still listening to my little rant, then really look at your behavior around food and start writing these things down. I've

been doing a lot of NLP stuff, neuro-linguistic programming around food and language, the language I use around food and alcohol.

I am actually tackling alcohol next. I specifically said to my coach, "I love alcohol, I'm not giving it up," which might be a problem in itself, but the point was what are the behaviors? What are the emotional things around alcohol?

One thing, and again I'm just being honest, when I go to literary conferences as an indie author in Britain I feel insecure and I feel that I'm not good enough. Maybe other people feel this way. I then use alcohol as a way to make myself feel more confident. It helps me act more confident when I'm just feeling like I'm not. Does that resonate?

James Blatch: Yeah, it does. I think there's a positive role for things like alcohol, and I enjoy my alcohol very much, and I enjoy my beer.

When I think about a night in the pub where I would be less enthusiastic to the point of might not even go, if it's the usual crowd and I'm not drinking for whatever reason. If I'm drinking it's a hugely enjoyable thing.

When I think about what I enjoy about it, it's the conversation, it's the we sit down, we do that. The alcohol is part of that. I don't know, you do see this kind of AA club in America where any sniff of it is seen as evil, but actually for me, I'm quite happy to say it is a part and parcel of the way that I socialize and enjoy myself in the evening. I'm quite pleased to hear you say, "I enjoy it so I'm not going to give that bit up."

Joanna Penn: Yeah, and it's the same with the food. I don't want people to think I'm not ... What's so interesting is like I'm having pasta for dinner, and I wasn't eating pasta because I was trying to lose weight. My whole orientation around food, like I said, it's not diet, it's food that makes you feel good.

Yeah, a glass of wine or two does make me happy and feel good. It's more that it's addressing ... and this will be individual to people listening, there will be different things that are your triggers, that are the things that you just feel need some help.

What are those things? What are the things you want for your future or for your kids, or other things you want to deal with in yourself so that you can be a better role model.

It's so funny, because I've resisted talking about this stuff for years, I've actually always used this example of, I talk about writing on my site, I don't talk about weight loss.

Now I find myself talking about this, but only in a, I guess a real realization and a sharing the journey, because I want us to continue. Just circling right back round to that burnout that we're seeing in the community, which obviously, you guys are seeing too because you've had people on to talk about it. That's something that we can address for ourselves by taking stock.

Another thing I've done, like a real practical thing that I've done, is I've now scheduled, the whole of 2018, I've scheduled every month a week when I don't have any appointments and every quarter, two weeks, and then I've scheduled the whole of December.

That means, yeah sure, I'll do some work, but it'll be my work, it won't be getting on a podcast, it won't be speaking. I've scheduled that whole year so that I know that I will have more head space, more time.

I will say no more because I just can't fit stuff in. That's a real challenge to people, look at how do you make sure that you're going to stick to these things?

Because another thing on food, I fall off, I guess my wellbeing. I'm trying to use the right language, because it's so important. It's not falling off the wagon, it's like I feel worse if I work really hard, so say I'm up at six and I'm writing, and then I have a late webinar or something, and then I'm broken, I'm too tired.

By scheduling that time I enable myself to stick to a lifestyle that I think is healthier. Those are some things, just be more self aware about your physical behavior.

James Blatch: That's really good. I realize I shouldn't sound glib about people who have a genuine alcohol addiction by the way, and for whom a sniff is potentially very bad news for them. That wasn't the point I was making, I was clumsy.

This is great, Jo, and I've been trying to go back, so I used to work nine day fortnights in the last couple of jobs that I did, at the BBC and BBFC, and obviously they made you work longer hours to put up with that.

I did a 14 hour day yesterday, we're in the middle of a course creation in this office, which is not particularly healthy. The nine day fortnight is every other Friday, I'm going to try and not work, just take that day off and go to the cinema, I've bought my cinema pass for the year.

I think it's a good thing, a lot of people are coming to this probably because of where we are, as you say, in what is still a young industry, this indie writing industry.

I want to talk to you just a little bit about the book itself. How have you structured this? How accessible is this?

**You say it's alternate chapters and so on, is there a formula people follow? Is it a series of advice? How's it done?**

Joanna Penn: First of all we do start with seven reasons why writing is great for you, because there is no message here that you should give up writing, it's just you need to change your practices around it.

Then we go into part one which is the unhealthy writer, in order to make you feel like you're not alone. We include a lot of quotes from writers who did the survey about the different types of pain they're in, the things they're suffering from, so that you feel like, "Okay, I've got eye strain, or I am lonely, or I have mental health issues, or I am feeling like I'm sedentary and overweight."

We go into all the different problems that you might have, and then the idea is you can dip in the chapters. Or IBS, so IBS is very common anxiety, so that's irritable bowel syndrome, let's talk about poo.

James Blatch: Yes, let's do that.

Joanna Penn: These are the things we really do get into it, and then in part two we have the healthy writer; how to improve your sleep, how to improve your workplace, how to improve your diet, how to make friends, how to build a community.

I wrote that chapter because it's so important. I remember when I started writing, I was living in Australia, I was working in a corporate job, I didn't know any creatives or any authors. There will be people listening who feel like that now, but there are ways that you can attract and build, and grow a community of find author friends and that's really important.

There is a prescriptive ... well it's not prescriptive, you get to dip in and choose what you want, but we have specific tips, like a chapter on the practicalities of the standing desk, or dictation, I have a whole chapter on dictation which is something that a lot of authors are moving to.

Which actually, it's amazing, if you do an hour of dictation, you will not be tired, whereas if you do an hour typing 5000 words, which is hard enough in itself, then you will be tired. It's a very interesting physical difference between dictation and typing. It's basically structured that way.

In terms of Euan and I, I wrote the more personal chapters, so really kind of spilling the beans on the problems we've had in our family with IBS and anxiety, and then my sugar chapter, walking, yoga, all of those things.

Then Euan brings the medical specialism, he is a doctor, and he also is an editor on the British Medical Journal, so he brings the evidence based practice to things. That's so important, I couldn't write this book without a doctor because I'm not a doctor.

That's really important, although it was funny because of course I edited Euan's chapters and I had to make him tone down the medical stuff. I was like, "This is not a medical journal, this is a load of authors."

So he actually ended up moving to dictation to let his real voice come through, his human voice as opposed to his very well mannered doctor voice. I think it worked really well and we've had a lot of good feedback.

We're also about to do an audiobook, so this is interesting, because each chapter has a clear voice, whether it's Euan or me, and he's a man, then we have to two audiobook narrators, because we just couldn't work out how to do it otherwise.

We're going to have a man narrate his and a woman narrate mine. That's going to be coming out in the next month or so. It'll be interesting because I don't really know how that's going to work, but we couldn't do it any other way.

James Blatch: I bet it's been great for Euan. It must have been a great journey of discovery for him about writing, especially with you editing and feeding back to him.

Joanna Penn: Yeah, well he's really keen to move more into helping more people online as well, so he's now doing the Healthy Bloke. He's learned a lot in the process.

He's also in the crime writing community, so those thriller writers, crime writers in the UK may well see him around.

James Blatch: I bet the autopsy scenes are good.

Joanna Penn: Yeah, exactly. I feel that this is, for me, and so often with nonfiction I write the book I need for myself, so when I wrote *The Successful Author Mindset*, it was because I was feeling massively chronic self doubt about my life as a writer.

That book helped me understand the mindset. This book has started my health journey. Again, it's thinking this is going to take the rest of your life in the same way as becoming a writer takes the rest of your life. That's what's fun about it. Yeah, I feel like, even if nobody else is helped by this book, then I feel like my life has been changed and I'll probably live a lot longer because of it, which is awesome.

James Blatch: That is in itself a grand prize to have from writing a book, but I'm sure it's going to help lots of people.

### **Where can people find it, Jo?**

Joanna Penn: It's on all the usual online stores, or if you come over to the Creative Penn, on the books page you'll find all the links there.



Also, I sell direct as well, so moving into that. Yeah, it's on all the stores, ebook, print, and soon to be in audio as well.

**James Blatch: It works well on ebook. Is it diagram heavy?**

Joanna Penn: No, there's no diagrams. It's just a text based book. No, it's not like move this way or whatever, it's more about finding your own path with some of the suggestions.

I really hope that some people might check it out and give it a go, and some of the chapters are appearing on the Creative Penn as well, so you can always get some of it for free.

James Blatch: Jo, thank you. I think one of the interesting things about you is you make a lot of this look easy, and when you speak and we listen to what you say, you realize that for you a lot of it is quite a struggle.

I always remember I saw you speaking in front of 400-odd people at a conference in December, and in the middle of this very articulate, very self-confident talk you revealed that you're an introvert, which I know is something you talk about quite often.

I think a lot of people think, "Really, are you? Because you don't look like one standing up on a stage in front of 400 people." But it's almost inspiring to see you, you almost like those challenges and you will overcome them, but you also make it look easy. I'm sure it's not.

Joanna Penn: Oh, well thank you. I mean part of the reason I started the Creative Penn was to share my journey along the way. Some of those chapters in *The Healthy Writer* are some of the most honest things I've ever shared in public.

I want to give up sugar because I want to look happy naked in front of my husband. Now I think people listening will resonate with that. Being able to say these things, write these things, that's what helps other people.

Whatever you're struggling with, people listening, if you can write about it, if you can share it, your journey, you're going to help others.

It was so funny at that conference that you mentioned, Youpreneur, I said that and the number of people who came to me, who emailed me and said, "I needed to hear that you can still be successful when you're an introvert." That conference was full of seemingly extrovert presenters.

It's so interesting, when you start sharing honestly you change people's lives. I think we are, again, part of the indie way and part of what you guys have done is sharing the journey, sharing income reports, sharing secrets, all these things we can share and we can help other people.

It's certainly not easy, but it's brilliant. The journey is the point. I think that's the thing with exercise and movement as well as writing, the journey is the point.

When we finish a book, that's not the end. We move onto the next one. Thank you so much for saying that, I appreciate it, and I will continue sharing.

James Blatch: Yeah, I'm sure you will. Jo, thank you so much indeed for coming on.

Joanna Penn: Thanks for having me.

James Blatch: So Mark, I know you like your little walks, don't you?

Mark Dawson: I do, yeah. I try and do 10,000 steps a day, all right? That's a reasonable amount, that you have to consciously go and do that, it's not

something that will just kind of tot up by itself. I try at least twice a week, although I have been quite bad this week just because I'm so busy, as you are too, but I will usually go for kind of a lunchtime walk.

It takes about 45 minutes to walk around Salisbury, which is a really beautiful town and there's a lovely area that I walk around. That will usually give me the 10,000 steps. Then at the weekend I'll try and run a couple of times, so I'll usually run Saturday and Sunday morning.

It's one of the things I find very difficult at the moment because we are so busy, and it's winter in the UK at the moment so it's very dark until quite late in the morning, and it gets dark soon as well.

I leave the house when it's dark and I come home when it's dark, and there are the children to worry about. I find it very, very difficult to find a time to run.

When I lived in London it would be different, I could run at any time because the streets are lit. Where I live now, there is no lighting. I could run around the fields, but I'd almost certainly fall over and break my leg or something, so I can't do that. It is very difficult to find the time.

One of the things that I'm doing with this move, I will try and I think work from home a little bit more often in the winter time so that I can ... I'll probably have a treadmill and that kind of stuff, so I'll be able to be a bit more active.

I know that it's important and I start to get a little bit uncomfortable when I don't exercise, so yeah, I need to make a bigger effort I think as we push on through the year.

James Blatch: Yeah. As Jo says, it is about thinking, what do you want to do? You are at a busy stage of life.

I think having children at the age they are, and one of my best friends is in London and his children are about the same age as yours and I stay with them occasionally, and it reminds me of the manic nature of life when they're that old.

My kids are now 14 and William's 12 tomorrow in fact, and it's different. They look after themselves, so our job is actually to try and get them to be manic, get them off the iPads and outside, it's the other way round.

Whereas if the house is in chaos and the kids are shouting and you change into your gear and go running, it feels ... I mean I can remember that and Jill looking at me thinking, "Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself."

Mark Dawson: Yes, I know.

James Blatch: There's a bit of that as well.

I was reflecting also on talking to Jo, and it's interesting, because we bump into each other quite often. I do sense from Jo, and she said it in the interview, that she's thinking, "Well do I want it? If I don't want it, if it feels like work I'm not going to do it, or I'm going to really down prioritize it."

There's a part of me I think, it may be a male thing or a British thing, I don't know, where you sort of feel a bit guilty about enjoying yourself and not working. I think it's brought up by post Second World War austere period parents who really drove the work ethic into us.

There's a balance between working and doing stuff that is killing you and you don't want to do, you're not enjoying. I don't know if I could ever get to the point where Jo is, where she's really winding some things down in her life to reprioritize herself.

Mark Dawson: I know what you mean about that. I find I love what I do so I don't find working to be a chore.

I remember what it was like when I was a lawyer, and then also to an extent when we were working where we met, that was generally a nice job, but there were moments that I would want to kill people. I don't get that now.

I love everything, I love writing, I love the SPF stuff. I'm paid to do something I love which is, I know it's very, very fortunate and we're all lucky to be in that situation.

I would also get quite guilty. I work very close to the cinema in Salisbury. When I was at the BBC I'd often go and just sit in the cinema in my lunch break to watch another film. It'd be much easier for me to do it now because I don't have to pretend, I don't have to kind of sneak out and pretend I didn't just take a two hour lunch break.

I haven't been to the cinema this year, I only really went maybe five times last year, probably less than that, because I do sit in there thinking, "Well what should I really be doing? I should be writing, goodness, I've only done 2000 words today, and I haven't done a podcast."

James Blatch: It's a crippling mentality that we need to get rid of. In fact I had the same conversation with John Dyer and he said exactly the same, "I'm fed up feeling guilty when I'm enjoying myself."

The cinema's a good example, I feel exactly the same. I am trying to get over that. I've actually bought myself a pass for my local cinema, it's 17, 20 dollars a month or so. You get unlimited access to the films.

This is a good time of year to go and see films, there's some really cracking films out there. Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri is in the cinema, Darkest Hour. I've seen Molly's Game already this year, which is the Aaron Sorkin directed and written film, where he's toned down a little bit the quickfire conversations I noticed, probably done enough of that in his career now.

There you go, trying to balance things. Really good advice from Jo. Read the book, it's got a bit of Jo in it and a bit of science in it from the GP who co-wrote it with her.

It's always, always a delight to speak to her, it's a kind of energizing experience. I really think she's a fantastic member of our community and I'm very pleased that we're close to her here at SPF.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, absolutely.

James Blatch: Good, okay. Look, that's it for this week. I'm just going to remind you that we're going to try and raise some money for one of our members of the SPF community who needs our help, that's Tommy Donbavand.

The URL that we made up on the spot that John Dyer's going to be creating in the next few minutes is [selfpublishingformula.com/tommy](https://selfpublishingformula.com/tommy). Go there, if you can give \$5, or \$50, or \$1000, any amount is going to help and we're going to be donating on your behalf as well from SPF.

Mark, thank you very much. Good luck with your exchange of contracts. I think traditionally it happens at two p.m. or something doesn't it?

Mark Dawson: I think so yeah. Could happen anytime really, so yes. Thanks for that. Then the next couple of weeks I will probably have less hair, I'll look older.

James Blatch: Yes. You just need the cat on your lap. Good, okay. Look, have a lovely weekend, good luck with that, and we'll speak to you guys next week. Buh-bye.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to the Self Publishing Formula podcast. Visit us as [selfpublishingformula.com](https://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.