

## **EPISODE 105: INCREASE YOUR GLOBAL REACH – WITH CHRISTINE MUNROE**

Announcer: Two writers. One just starting out, the other a best seller. Join James Blatch and Mark Dawson and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James: Hello and welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast. It's a Friday, so it's Mark and James here with all the marketing inside information and top tips.

More than top tips; in depth instruction that you're going to need to make a success of your writing career. Welcome along, hope you had a great week.

Mark, it's a slight cliché our conversations always start with how busy we are, "We're really busy."

**But you are colossally stressed a little bit at the moment, aren't you?**

Mark: Yes, we're recording this on a Sunday. I come into the office on a Sunday, because Lucy and my mother-in-law are looking after the kids and the dog, because we had to get this recording in, and it's all happening in the middle of the house move.

So this morning was spent with me chasing the children around, soft play, for two hours, whilst Lucy and the moving people started boxing us up for our move, which is tomorrow. So there's that.

I also drove down to Runnymede on Thames yesterday for the inappropriately named 20 Books to 50K London Conference, which is nowhere near London.

James: It was in Runnymede?

Mark: It was in Runnymede, yeah.

James: Where the Magna Carta was signed?

Mark: Famous Runnymede, yes. And it was very good. I was really impressed. Because we've kind of knocked around the idea of doing a conference before and we've kind of decided against it, at least for the moment because we thought it'd be too much work and too complicated.

But, Craig Martell, who runs these conferences for that group has organized a really good conference from the other side of the world. So basically putting us to shame.

They asked me to speak, so I went down there and spoke about my reintroduction to KU, and the excellent start I had in January. I've posted about that fairly extensively in the SPF Community.

And I enjoyed that, and then I had dinner with Craig, Michael Anderle, and Jo Penn. So we had a good, a really good chat actually about some things that they're doing that I thought were interesting and I told them some things that I was doing that I think they thought were quite interesting.

And it was generally very, it was very good. Was greeted with whoops when I started speaking, which was extremely strange, I don't get that in SPF staff meetings. Well I think I might insist that we ...

James: We do make noises.

Mark: Yeah, we do make noises.

James: You're a rock star now.

Mark: Almost. I had people taking selfies with me. Several people complementing me on my beard. And also for the YouTube commenter who told me to stop playing with my beard, I am trying very, very hard not to stroke my beard this week.

**James: Stroking was the word used. Stop stroking your beard.**

Mark: Yes, I had some romance authors saying how they thought my beard was very fetching. So I've told Lucy about that and she's furious. Not really.

And then I was presented with a pen, which I have here, by ... apparently the audience do a whip round for the speakers and they gave me a very nice wooden pen.

James: That's very nice.

Mark: Extremely kind. Yeah, it was just a great ... it was a great conference, really ... I know lots of SPF members were there because they told me. Saw Tommy Donbavand.

James: Oh good.

Mark: Hugged it out with Tommy. Which is great. He's done really well, so of course if you haven't donated yet ... have we donated yet James?

**James: We have donated. We donated straight away. I didn't ask anyone, I just donated.**

Mark: Yeah, so Tommy is [selfpublishingformula.com/tommy](http://selfpublishingformula.com/tommy) if you want to give a bit of money to help Tommy with his round two of his fight against cancer.

It was generally fun, full of energy, full of enthusiasm, loads of people wanting to learn more about how to self publish. So yeah, generally a great event, and I am now eyeing up the conference in Vegas.

Craig was suggesting there could be a thousand people there, which is the biggest self publishing conference by far. And they've also invited me to keynote their one in Bali in January, which I have to say I am quite tempted by. So we'll see.

James: Strangely. Wonder why? What is it about Bali? You know there's a village near Royston in Cambridge called Bali.

Mark: Is there really?

James: People say I'm going off for a cricket tour to Bali.

Mark: There's a village near me called Freezywater. And Sandyballs.

James: Sandyballs, that's not that far away. There is a village here called Cold Christmas, which is-

Mark: Very nice.

James: If you put these names into a book in America, they'd just think you were making stuff up, but they're actual village names.

Mark: We do have villages called those names, absolutely.

James: Yeah. Good, well that sounds really exciting. A thousand people at a self publishing conference. We're getting there. All the conferences get bigger and bigger every year.

We're already talking to Julia at NINC about this years, or Julie I should say, this year's conference. And I know they've got big plans. They've changed some things a little bit.

ThrillerFest which crosses over a lot into trad, and also I notice into readers. So I think fans of thrillers go to ThrillerFest to hear their authors talking, and that's a fairly big chunk of it. So it's slightly different.

Mark: That's not self publishing. So me speaking there is a bit unusual, so I'm going to blow their minds with what we can do with our marketing. Also, that's RWA, which I'm also going to the week after ThrillerFest. Slightly more traditionally biased, although certainly changing. But 20 Books is purely self publishing.

James: Listen, I know we've explored this before and we looked at the whole conference thing, and it's a serious decision for us. But imagine us, an afternoon with Stuart Bache doing cover design sessions, you could do a whole bunch of stuff.

Even I could teach people some things about self publishing, believe it or not. We've got pretty much all the contacts we'd need in the self publishing world to put together a great conference. Maybe it's something we think about for next year. It would be a fun thing to do.

I just mentioned Stuart because we launched the cover design course, where we're standing now, not that long ago, about a week ago, and it's got a ... from where this broadcast is going out, it's going to be open forever.

This is unusual for us. It's what's called evergreen in the online courses world. So we're not going to close it and open it, close it and open it, it's a small course, onboarding people is a little bit different and the support group's working well.

The feedback we've had straight away has been tremendous. Stuart's doing a really good job. We've had a tremendous response to it as well. A lot of you obviously were chomping at the bit to get in.

And that's been very, very pleasing, because I have to say lots of work went into getting it there, and Stuart's quite nervous about it all as well. But he's done a really terrific job on that.

Just on a technical point, we have an introductory price offer which you may have noticed if you've had a look at this. It's currently at \$197, it's a \$297 course, US Dollars. It's currently \$197.

The idea behind that is lots of our students have bought other courses and ultimately down the line there will probably be a discount if you buy Ads For Authors, to buy this as well, because otherwise it does start to get expensive. But it won't be \$100, the discount in the future. So that's what's on offer for everybody at the moment. \$100 off.

We're going to let that run for one more week. So the \$100 discount period will end on the 16th of February, so we'll say at the end of the 16th of February. Then it'll go to \$297. And like I say, we will discount it probably if you buy another course, but it won't be \$100 discount on it in the future.

Just one more incentive if you're thinking about buying. Stuart has put forward ... in fact we were going to do this last week, but we didn't, so we're going to do it now.

One person who's bought in this opening introductory period, up until the 16th and including the 16th of February, will be drawn out of the hat and

they will win a bespoke cover from the master himself, from Stuart. So that's really something to have. So all you have to do to enter that is simply enroll in the course and you'll be in the hat for that.

He does some good covers, as you can probably tell if you're watching on YouTube and looking behind. If you can look past the beard for a moment, there are some good covers.

It's an absorbing course. I don't know how much of it you've got a chance to sit and watch Mark, but it's actually ... everyone who's worked on this course, I've had editors working on it and they've all said to me, it's actually compelling when he starts talking about what a romance cover is and what it's doing, in terms of its job of selling the book.

Mark: One thing we're going to do actually, which I've spoken to Stuart about this, we always intended it was ... at the moment there are three or four genres that he goes through and gives kind of from the ground up, so starting with a blank sheet of virtual paper, and building a cover. So things like thrillers, romances, sci fi, that's all included.

Not everything is in there. Obviously you don't need it all to be there to learn about your genre, but we are going to be adding new genres as we go through. That's always been the plan. So this will be in the kind of tried and tested SPF fashion.

I think this course will not stand still, it will grow, we'll increase the depth and the range of coverage. And everyone who has signed up now will get all of those bonuses that we had complementary. So you don't need to buy anything again.

If there's a genre that you're interested in, it could be nonfiction, we haven't done nonfiction yet, but I think that's a good one. I think young adult was on the list. Basically have a look in the community, the Facebook community, just drop in the genre that you'd be interested in. Maybe we'll

run a poll just to see which ones we can prioritize and we'll get Stuart on it. He's a bit lazy and he needs to get back to work. We'll set him working again. If he's listening, you're not really that lazy Stu. Quite lazy, not very.

James: He's not at all. Yes, and that's the other thing to say about the course, is that once enrolled in the course you get access to the course only Facebook group.

And as with all our courses, the paid courses, the Facebook group in many people's eyes, is equal to the value of the course itself, because it's a live, dynamic thing. Stuart's in there a lot.

But what's going to happen is one or two people are going to become experts in areas like Photoshop and they'll be the go to gurus for you in that group of how to do specific author related book cover stuff. So it's great to see the group burgeoning.

And despite the fact we had some beta testers, you're quite right, once a hundred plus people have joined the course, so many people are saying, "What about horror covers?" And so on.

Mark: Oh yeah.

James: Horror was one, and I think there is a crossover with one or two of the genres there, and I think Stuart's already said in the ... he's pointed those out to people saying there's broken glass and how to use blood effects and do on. But specifically horror would be a good one to add at some point.

Mark: I've seen some horrific covers.

James: Yeah. Well there's a whole section on what not to do, which is ... we're just kind of hoping that the people who produced those covers don't



then sign up to the course. Although there is an apology at the beginning from Stuart, if one of these covers if yours.

Mark: Yeah. When Stuart announces, slightly tangential but I saw a Twitter response when Stuart posted that the course was open from a designer saying ... the hashtag was bite the hand that feeds you. It's like come on.

My response to that, I couldn't resist, it was first of all to send a picture of a little dutch boy with his finger in the wall. And the other one was, good designers don't need to worry about it.

So yeah, there you go. I think Stuart's quite brave to put this together, but we're really pleased with the response. We've had quite a lot of people sign up for it, and lots more interest. So it's a really good price, I mean let's be honest 197 bucks is fantastic value for someone of Stuart's caliber to put this course together.

If people are interested in that, they should definitely get on before the 16th when the price goes up.

James: We're going to talk Kobo now. And it is odd to think isn't it, that if you're in Canada the biggest retailer of ebooks is not Amazon or Apple, it's Kobo, and it's a household name in that area of the world.

But outside of it, it's known but not as well known. And it's important that you know about it, really important that you understand that there's a platform there and you're leaving some money on the table if you don't understand it.

And in particular, they've done a lot of work on the type of promotion you can get within Kobo and the advertising platform that goes along with it.

So it's time for us to revisit Kobo. Now normally we get a very neatly trimmed bearded man, who's quite buff comes on.

Mark: Me.

James: No.

Mark: I'm on every week.

James: Very neatly trimmed beard, who's quite buff. But Mark's who's surname I can never pronounce without saying-

Mark: Dawson?

James: Mark Lefebvre.

Mark: Lefebvre, that's right, yes, yeah.

James: Mark has left Kobo, but he's left his role in the very capable hands of Christine Munroe.

She's excellent and she does a really great job for Kobo in this interview. So let's hear from Chrissy, and then Mark and I will be back after the interview.

Chrissy, hello, from Kobo. Welcome along to the SPF podcast. It's great to have you here, and I'm not saying that we don't miss Mark. But we had Mark on before, we meet him around at conferences, he was bit of a larger than life character for Kobo. But he's moved on, and you're filling his boots.

Chrissy: That's right. Hey James, thanks for having me. I've been with KWL for five years now, working extremely closely with Mark. Our desks were adjoined, so he taught me a ton, and I've been on the road with him a lot.

So it was a pretty seamless transition, at least from my perspective to take over the reigns and take on this awesome opportunity. He's not very far away. He's approximately an hour away, and I hear from him all the time. So

he will always be a part of KWL blood, but I'm excited to take it to the next level.

James: Gone but not forgotten.

Chrissy: Exactly.

James: Yeah. Okay, well let's start at the beginning.

Let's start with what Kobo is, because for some people there's Amazon, and then there's a few others, and Kobo's one of the very prominent other ones. So let's start with that shall we?

### **You'd better explain what Kobo Writing Life is and how it fits into Kobo.**

Chrissy: Yeah. Great place to start. So Kobo launched about 11 years ago now. We were actually part of Chapters Indigo, Canada's biggest bookstore chain, originally.

And then launched off onto our own as a very specific dedicated ebook provider. So that's our DNA as a starting ground, and it's really shaped what the company is today.

Because we're focused on ebooks and not other formats and not other products, that allowed us to expand by partnering with other retail partners around the world, much in the same way as we started with Chapters.

So for a ton of really big bookstore chains around the world, Kobo is the ebook provider. That allowed us to get a foothold into markets really quickly and establish ourselves around the world as a dominant ebook provider.

If you're based in North America for example, you may not be as familiar with the brand, but globally Kobo is a market share leader in a lot of territories, and that's what we're really known for and continue to excel at.

Fast forwarding to present day Kobo if you'll let me. We are now owned by Rakuten, which is a giant Japanese company. Really giving Amazon a run for their money on a global scale.

They own a ton, I mean hundreds of other companies including Kobo, and that's really allowed us to grow even faster.

Kobo is still Toronto based, I'm in our headquarters right now, but maintain that global focus with the giant support of a really big tech company in Japan now.

That's the background on Kobo, and then Kobo Writing Life specifically, we are Kobo's free self publishing platform, born in 2012. So a little bit later than Amazon and Barnes and Noble, but that gave us to advantage to build our platform to excel and improve on what they were offering, and that's what we still try to do today.

And so we make it as fast and easy as possible for authors and small publishers to get their ebooks into Kobo's global catalog.

James: You didn't mention the two things that Mark always mentions, is that you're a Canadian company and Kobo is an anagram of book.

Chrissy: Yep, that is important trivia.

James: He starts with those two. Okay, there's several things that pop up from there.

One sort of slightly left field question is that you've got good links with book stores and chains, and so for their online presence, I guess that's how they ... you are their main retailer or wholesaler to them, of ebooks.

**Is there anywhere where you walk into a physical bricks and mortar bookstore and can buy ebooks? Is that something you do with them? Is anyone thinking about this?**

Chrissy: Yes, that's something we've worked on with various degrees of success over the years.

For example, in the US we partner with the American Booksellers Association, and that is all independent bookstores throughout the US who decide to be a member of the ABA, which is most of them.

It's up to the store to decide how they want to do that for the stores to have really engaged readers who want to shop online, they really cater to that.

I've seen stores with displays with QR codes for ebooks, and using ebooks to help get indies in the door. If there's a local independent author, they can host a reading for example. And then give out cards with download codes to get the book online. I've seen it work in that way.

I haven't seen it work in a really big way.

The other way we partner with stores, and something I didn't mention before is that Kobo has the line of devices and really awesome devices, so a lot of stores sell those devices online, and then Kobo would take over the experience going forward.

But the bookstore would get a portion of those sales. So you're always the bookstore's customer, but we provide the ebook merchandising and all of that going forward.

James: You deliver it, yeah. I just think that there needs to be a closer integration. There are still some people who look at ebooks and we actually had this the other day on a webinar. Someone said, "But that's not really a book, is it?" I'm thinking, it's all I ever read. The books I own and read now are on my devices. And there needs to be a closer integration.

Everyone loves a bookshop, right? But I do read almost exclusively ebooks now. Occasionally obviously if it's got a lot of pictures in it, I'll buy it. But the idea of seeing, okay the bookstore's got limited shelf space, it might have 5,000 titles. I don't know how big the bookstore is.

**But the idea that you could actually have access to 100,000 titles through a catalog or something there, and walk out with that on your device, just seems to me like a fairly obvious thing that should be there.**

Chrissy: Oh yeah absolutely. There's also the idea of people like indie authors wanting to get into bookstores but not having an easy way to do that without a traditional publishing deal, which is still the case today, despite all the leaps and bounds that have happened in this whole indie revolution. I feel like there's still more opportunity there to happen.

We've partnered for example in Italy with Mondadori who is both a publisher and a giant bookstore chain, to do Kobo Writing Life writing competitions where the prize is to get a big in store event with Mondadori doing a small print run of the self published title. And then you get an in store presentation.

We're starting to do a lot more of that and look at how can we scale that to more users.

James: I guess one of the issues might be, thinking it through, that a lot of the big publishers will price their physical book at sort of 10.99, and their ebook at 8.99, and when you're standing in a book shop you're going to

think, do you know what? For two bucks I'll have a nice, big physical product.

But that's kind of their problem at the moment, in trying to keep their old industry going in the same way it is, but that will change over time of course.

**And of course the indie authors have a massive advantage in that environment, because their books would be 3.99.**

Chrissy: Exactly. I think there still is that fear amongst booksellers, right? That you're going to lose sales to these lower priced books, and books that they will potentially never have a piece of if you don't ever do a physical run or want to have physical books taking up shelf space in a store.

So there are still some gaps and I think kinks to be worked out within all of those relationships going forward.

But one cool example, that Fire and Fury book that took the world by storm. Throughout the US and Australia for example, there were all kinds of delays getting physical copies into stores, so a lot of our partners looked to us because the book was there ready to go at 9AM on launch day.

Even though launch day was four days earlier, with the click of a button we changed the publication date on our site. So, we are seeing opportunities like that where customers think like, oh I want to read this book everybody's talking about over the weekend and I cannot physically get it in my hands. I have to look at the ebook if I want to read it right now.

James: So suddenly the traditional industry's quite interested in the ebook, because they can deliver it immediately.

**Stuart Bache our cover design expert pointed out that it's a worldwide phenomenon that book, it's hotly anticipated, and it has cover that**

**looks like someone did in five minutes before they released it. It's got a pretty poor cover.**

Chrissy: We had a really hot internal debate about that one.

James: Oh you did?

Chrissy: Yeah. All of the merchandisers got into it. The takeaway seems to be that the cover delivers what you expect that kind of book to be. Not necessarily what might be aesthetically pleasing or artistically really creative. But when you see it, you know exactly what you're going to get. So for whatever that's worth, that was the overall consensus here.

James: And that's what a cover should do after all.

Chrissy: Right.

James: So another thing that strikes me is that it's ... this is still early days. I had this conversation with the Self Publishing Podcast guys a couple of months ago. This is still early days in ebooks. And Kobo, you're right in North America, the profile's not as high perhaps as it is here, but ... and everyone knows Amazon.

But do you know what, there was a point where everybody bought Ford cars, because Ford were the only people doing cars. They mass produced cars, and if you wanted to buy a car you bought a Ford.

Whereas now, Ford are a player, but no one would point to them and say they're the dominant global player. There's big competition all around them.

**In 50 years time, who knows whether it's Amazon, Kobo, or names we haven't heard of yet. It's still a pioneering phase right?**



Chrissy: I completely agree. And still a growth phase. I think individual authors, some louder than others, will comment about where things stand based on where they adapted or how many books they publish a year or any of that, but from a KWL perspective, our author base is growing in huge numbers, every single year, still, five years in. Our sales are growing in huge numbers every single year.

And the revenue opportunities are changing. One thing I wanted to mention from a pitch perspective, is we now offer uploading to OverDrive, in a free and easy way.

They're our sister company. Rakuten bought them as well. If you click upload to libraries in KWL, you get the same terms that you would if you had a direct OverDrive relationship.

So I think there will be a lot more of that happening as companies change and as opportunities and formats change.

And then looking at audiobooks, I think audiobooks is still in its infancy in a lot of ways, as people love podcasts like this and want even more rich content. And as podcasts look at new ways to monetize right? I think that will be a really cool opportunity.

So that's a really big initiative on our roadmap right now. Kobo rolled out audiobooks as our new format last year. KWL needs to build out a way for authors to get their audiobooks into the catalog, so that is on our roadmap for this year. Exciting things coming.

James: Yeah. We'll talk about that in a moment.

Let's talk about KWL a bit then. So Kobo Writing Life, as you say, I mean I suppose I have to put the analogy again for people less familiar with the platform, that it's effectively the equivalent of Kindle Direct Publishing. Is

that right? It's the place where self publishing authors will go to create their books, upload them, create their page.

But as you say, you came a little bit afterwards, you looked around and saw what other people were doing, so you've created a very smooth, very easy, nice platform to use. We use it for all our SPF books.

**What would you say then are the advantages for somebody if they're looking around at the moment and thinking about what platforms to use?**

Chrissy: That's a great question. You could get into a lot of different debates on this one. Like aggregator versus direct versus KU and wide, so there's a lot of almost political at this point debates happening right?

But from a strictly KWL perspective, I would say advantages; number one, it is fast and easy. We make it as fast and easy as possible. So truly, if you can type in the title of your book and your name, you have a cover, you have ... we take even word docs, you don't have to have an epub, we'll convert it for you for free. Within hours your book is live in the Kobo store.

We also have a promos tool, which is really unique, no other retailer offers anything like it, where authors can merchandise their own titles within the Kobo store.

You submit your title and we create opportunities like banner support, emails to our customers. It's really affordable. So compared to a marketing tool like BookBub for example, it's quite cheap.

Either a flat fee of like \$10 or an extra 10% cogs we call it, so your royalty instead of 30%, you take that little hit for the time that you're in the promo, but going forward it gives you a sustained lift of sales.

Opportunities like that, you know the OverDrive that I already mentioned. Audio coming soon. I feel like we are always really fighting to make it as easy and fast as possible for authors to get to Kobo readers.

We have a reputation also for really dedicated author care. Our team is all in house. We don't have like some giant call center somewhere, it's actual people working right across from me, so there's a lot of internal you know, escalations that happen for example, if you have any kind of issue.

We all work together. I think that is something that Kobo has always been really proud of, and that Mark really helped initiate from the beginning, is we put authors first.

We don't have any of those issues of what Amazon's doing a lot of rank stripping right now for example. That would never be something that we would work towards or even consider doing at Kobo because it's just not within our interest. We want to help authors sell more books, bottom line.

Another advantage of coming direct to Kobo is that we have a link share affiliate program through Rakuten. It's a really competitive program from a linking perspective, so you sign up ... I can send you the link for that, it's like a bunch of letters, it's not easy to say it out loud.

But, you get 6% of sales that go through these affiliate links for any ebooks and 10% of device sales. So that's pretty unique from a linking perspective and great for people who are doing a lot of online marketing, which most people are doing these days.

James: You mentioned a couple of the things Amazon deal with that made you maybe do things differently, but partly that's a product of their size, and they are facing challenges at the moment over at Kindle.

I guess they end up using a bit of a blunt hammer, a blunt tool, to deal with things like people copywriting or getting click farms to go through Kindle Unlimited.

**You must be facing some of that, because there is an opportunity ... wherever there's money being made, there's people looking for shortcuts isn't there?**

Chrissy: It's very true, yeah. Anyone doing online retail of any kind is going to face some fraud, and scheming opportunities.

In early days we had what we belovedly call eroticagate. A newspaper flagged us for having inappropriate content for sale on our store. That was actually right after I joined KWL, so it was a great intro to the team and to the catalog to go through the real trenches.

James: Wow.

Chrissy: But that lesson really shaped us from pretty early in our day, so we built a big data system that scans all of our titles internally for similarity analysis, so if there's any copyright happening of whatever is already published on the Kobo store, and flagging for word combinations of illicit content that we do not want to sell.

We get all of those flagged in our feeds every single day, and then actual people go through all of the flagged content.

We also have a tiered system on our side of like, green authors who we totally trust and they're allowed to upload whatever they want, even faster than most others.

And then yellow is like all users, we have suspected users that kind of try to break to rules and we know who they are and we know how to find them.

It really shaped the way that we do our business and run the publisher operation side.

I think despite that early hiccup and the pain that it caused us, I'm actually kind of grateful we had that experience early on because it's helped us down the line.

James: I can see how that promoted you into some systems that are going to benefit you in the future. And we should say you're not anti ...

**Kobo's not anti erotica books, but you had a problem with material that went beyond whatever the line is.**

Chrissy: Yeah, exactly. And we make that line quite clear. You never want to hit questions of censorship. But, we are a store for sale ... with partners we're responsible for, and at the end of the day we get to decide what we sell. Anything that would be illegal or harmful, violent, I mean exceptionally violent, rape, incest, that kind of stuff we do not allow.

James: Well you're talking to somebody who used to be a film examiner, and give certificates to films, so for seven years that was my world, making that decision and where that line is.

Chrissy: Yeah, it's hard.

James: It is hard. But there's a difference between censorship and classification if you like of basically saying, "In this environment, this is appropriate."

There are other places on the net, no doubt you can go to that don't have that regulatory surround, but nobody I don't think would object to anybody having a sensible line. And legality is always a good one isn't it? If it's illegal in the real world ...

Chrissy: Yep, exactly. Exactly.

James: So we'll leave eroticagate there for the moment.

Chrissy: In the past, where it belongs. Thank you.

James: A learning experience for everybody.

Chrissy: Yeah. But one thing I should have mentioned when you asked why publish direct to KWL, is also authors wanting to reach a global audience.

Kobo is in countries and dominant in countries where other retailers are not. So if you want to be reaching as many fans as you possibly can, you want to be uploading your books to as many retailers as possible. And you want to get as much bang for your buck at those retailers as you can.

And so that's the question of aggregator, right. With an aggregator you're going to lose 15% of your sales, so you have to decide what you're sacrificing for that 15%. If it's time and convenience, we try to mitigate those factors by making it fast and easy, as I said.

**James: What are the royalties? What's the scale you offer?**

Chrissy: Great question.

We offer 70% for titles prices 2.99 and higher, and we do not have a cap on that. So a lot of authors, especially with big series have put out these giant box sets where you can get the entire series for let's say \$30, and you will still get 70% for that sale.

We see it as you make more money, we make more money, so we're not going to penalize you for pricing a larger title for what it should be worth.

And then, for titles prices 2.99 and below it's 45%. Public domain it's 20%. You can price free anytime with no strings attached.

James: So 45% down to whatever, however low, like 99 cents?

Chrissy: Yeah.

James: Okay, so that's a pretty good edge you've got there.

Chrissy: Yeah.

**James: And in terms of exclusivity, do you offer exclusivity as a different deal?**

Chrissy: We do not.

No, we don't have any kind of requests or demands for exclusivity ever. I mean some authors choose to upload those box sets only to retailers that don't have a cap, because it makes more financial sense. But that's completely the impetus of the author, that's not something that we ask for.

James: There's not really strong reasons not to use Kobo from an author's point of view. I guess going into KU is the big one, if they've signed an exclusive agreement with them.

**But outside of that, why would you not?**

Chrissy: That's what I want to know. No, truly I think it behooves each author to at least try.

It's free and fast to sign up for an account. So check it out. It's [kobo.com/writinglife](http://kobo.com/writinglife) to set up an account. See what it looks like. See if it's easy and fast as I'm promising you here, and make the decision after that.

As a self published author you are taking on that role of business person right? So you have to do your market research and see what's out there.

James: Yeah. Well I can definitely say it's easy and fast, because actually for the 101 course we do screen flows on the setup process for all the various platforms.

Obviously there's a tax interview which you can't avoid, but I seem to remember even the tax interview was as painless as it possibly could be.

I think it's the Amazon one is the really painful one. Apple's not a good one either. But anyway, there you go, you can't avoid a tax interview every now and again in life.

Chrissy: Unfortunately not.

James: Let's talk about the devices then. So this does set you apart a little bit.

**You've got a waterproof device at the top of your range, which I think if I remember rightly, you're going to gift one to one of our listeners, is that right?**

Chrissy: Absolutely, yeah.

The Aura H20 is waterproof. It was the first waterproof device I believe. It can go up to three meters underwater, so that's perfect for bathtub or poolside readers. And I myself have dunked it just as a test at conferences across the world, and it's still kicking along. It's an awesome device.

And then the newest highest level one is called the Aura ONE, and that is actually a device we brought in our biggest shoppers, and they actually helped us to create this premier device that has the biggest screen size.



The biggest thing we did with that one is took away the blue light for bedtime readers, so it's more orange and it helps you fall asleep faster. But it might reduce your reading time.

We're always innovating those devices, and it's something that I really love to use myself.

**James: When did you start with the devices? Was that right at the beginning?**

Chrissy: Yeah it was. It's always been part of our business. And trying to make them as competitive as possible.

Even though our market share is considerably smaller than Amazon in the US, they always, when Amazon launches a new device they compare it to ours as the benchmark, which I think says a lot about the quality.

James: Yeah, yeah. Excellent.

**What's for the future then the Kobo? What are the secrets you're holding for 2018?**

Chrissy: In this vault of mine?

James: Yeah.

Chrissy: One is absolutely audiobooks. I know a lot of authors have deals with ACX for example, and some of those the seven year term is coming up, so that's something to keep in mind.

Some authors have created their own files, so we're going to make it super easy to upload your audio file right in the KWL dashboard and get it out to Kobo audio customers. I'm really, really excited about that. I think that'll be

exciting, and it's due time. I feel like those guys have had a corner on the audio market for indie authors for too long, so we need to shake that up.

Then the second thing we're looking at is how we can make KWL the place where authors can come to experiment and get data that other retailers won't share.

The main one we're looking at putting into the dashboard is reading data. Whenever a Kobo user syncs their device or their app, it feeds the reading data back to us, and this is the advantage of digital versus a paper book, right.

You sell a paper book and the book is sold, you never know what happens to it afterwards, if anyone reads it, goes straight to trash can, who knows?

With an ebook, we know how many people opened it, how many people finished it, how long it took them to finish it.

We have all of that information, so we're looking at summarizing it and putting those stats right in the dashboard, and hopefully in ways the authors can actually use to improve their business.

For example, if you compare five books in a series, if the open rates or different or completion rates are difficult, you could look at potentially reediting a book and rereleasing it.

If your sales are low but your completion rates are high, you could be dealing with a packaging problem and look at a cover redesign. Because obviously the book is good, but you're not selling it well enough. So providing that kind of information to help authors do better business.

That's a really exciting initiative for me too, and that's something we offer to Mark Dawson on an ad hoc basis, because he is such a great innovator and

experimenter. So he responded really well to it, and gave us some really good feedback for rolling it out in a bigger way this year.

James: Yeah, I mean that is fascinating to be able to ... because we have online courses and we do see that information, we see which sessions people stop at, don't finish the end of and so on, so that gives us an idea of going back to them.

And what a great thing for your books. And I'm thinking from your perspective as well ... obviously as an author you're going to get your reading data on your books, but sitting at your level, you can see over hundreds of thousands of books which books get read, which books don't get read.

### **You can start unlocking the secret formula there Chrissy.**

Chrissy: Yeah, so we do look at that information and it helps us feed merchandising decisions. In the old school publishing you just look at the PNL of sales, we can compare sales and completion rates. So we have this two tiered evaluation level, which is pretty incredible.

And when we look at other projects, like for example, we're looking at offering translation deals to authors in countries where we're growing and we have really strong partners, and we're doing a share for example of translation costs and marketing.

We can look at how well are these authors selling and who is completing them, and consider both things. So it is really exciting stuff.

James: That's a really great idea because translation is one of those areas that a lot of authors know they should be doing something about, but don't know quite where to start or just can't find the time in their lives to allocate to it. If you come to somebody and say, "Let's do this together," I can imagine that being a real door opening exercise.

Chrissy: Exactly.

Those are the main things I'm excited about, and then OverDrive, we launched it kind of at the end of last year in a bigger way and then we're rolling it out right now as of this date in January.

It's still a manual opt in where an author says, "I want to upload to OverDrive." We click a button on our side, and then you get that ability shown in your dashboard. But as of early next month, we'll just roll it out to all users to have automatically, so that's going to be a big area of growth from my perspective. And I think an exciting one.

It's really hard to get an OverDrive account and to manage yet one more thing. So trying to make reaching library users a lot easier is really exciting for us.

**James: And you say that's down to the Rakuten link? Because they own both, so you can start to integrate.**

Chrissy: Yeah.

James: Before we go I just want to talk a little bit about the marketing offer that you've got at the moment.

There's opt in for a promotion. Can you just flesh that out a little bit more because obviously it's key to the way authors think, certainly the ones who listen to this podcast think about how they're going to be marketing their titles.

**People are familiar with BookBub, people are familiar with occasionally getting this rare invite from Kindle to take part in a promo, but you've got something that sits there that you can opt into?**

Chrissy: Yeah, so if you are an author listening and you don't have this tool yet but you have a KWL account, you can email us to get it. It's [writingslife@kobo.com](mailto:writingslife@kobo.com). It is currently still in beta mode, much to my chagrin, but we do intend to roll it out wider later this year.

Basically it's an extra tab right in your dashboard called promotions and we list all of the available promos happening on site that we as KWL, we are kind of treated as an internal publisher, can submit our titles for.

In turn, we open that up to authors to submit your own titles for consideration. So in a similar way to BookBub your chances of being chosen every time are different, because different authors submit different titles. And then we select based on the availability of spots on site.

Typically, we do the royalty increase that I mentioned before. So it's an additional 10% royalties that we keep because we're trying to promote you, you sell more, we sell more, that kind of thing.

And then it goes back to your regular royalties once the promotion ends. It'll be things like being featured as the daily deal on Kobo or being featured on our free page, which is the most common searched term on Kobo is free.

So all of those customers get automatically bumped to a page where we feature mostly first in series, because we want to drive sales obviously. You could submit your title to be the spotlight on that page for example.

We have monthly 40% off sales that we pitch in emails to our customers, and they're usually genre based, so thrillers or romance. All kinds of things, there's always a ton happening on that promo tab.

The only rule from an author perspective to keep in mind is that you can only submit the same title to one promotion at a time. So we're not going

to you know pump the same title in 15 different places on the website, you kind of have to pick what you think is the best opportunity.

And we really recommend submitting as often as you'd like. You can submit a couple books to different things at the same exact time, and most of our established authors they just check that page every day, every week, and continually submit, and that's how you really get traction going on Kobo. So highly recommend using that. If you don't have it yet, email us, we will happily give it to you and get you going.

**James: And there's no editorial filtering that you do?**

Chrissy: There is yeah, on our side. Or let's say we get 200 submissions. We choose let's say 20 to 50 depending on what the opportunity is on our side. And then you're notified if your title was selected or not.

If you're not selected we actually give you a reason why, so it's ... the cover wasn't right, if the genre wasn't right or you know, please try again next time. But the message is always, try again, keep trying, we always want to consider your title.

James: Okay. So there is some filtering, but I get the feeling a lot higher chance than getting a BookBub?

Chrissy: Absolutely. Yeah.

James: Or getting that email from Kindle, which comes once in a blue moon saying, "Would you like to take part in our promotion?"

Chrissy: Yeah.

James: Good. Well Chrissy. It's been a delight talking to you. Good to hear ... we're fans of Kobo. We obviously bumped into Mark a few times.

**Are you going to be around on the circuit a bit in places like ThrillerFest?**

Chrissy: I surely will. Yeah, so this year's looking like I will go to Smarter Artists in February, the new Sell More Books conference is happening in Chicago this year. I'll be at RWA and NINC. Those are the main ones I will be at this year.

James: Okay.

Chrissy: How about you?

James: I haven't ruled out Smarter Artist yet but it's going to be difficult to fit that one in.

We will be at ThrillerFest. Mark will be at RWA. I and Mark will be at NINC. So it looks like NINC will be the place where you can buy me, I mean I can buy you a beer.

Chrissy: Alright. I'll look forward to that. I never say no to a beer.

James: Yeah. I think Mark used to buy them, but you know that's fine.

Chrissy: Which Mark?

James: Yeah, which Mark? It wasn't Mark Dawson, I can tell you that. Okay, brilliant, Chrissy thank you so much, it's been a real delight talking to you. We wish you luck with Kobo.

Chrissy: You too.

James: And who knows? Like I say, in 50 years time, you could be, Kobo, the giant everyone has to compete with.

Chrissy: Right. Well that's our dream and that's what we're working towards, absolutely.

Hopefully listeners got some extra information they didn't know before. I truly encourage everybody listening to just stay in touch with us. We never don't want to hear from you.

So [writingle@kobo.com](mailto:writingle@kobo.com) is the email they need to know.

We also, in case you want to know, we have a free blog and podcast ourselves, the Kobo Writing Life Podcast where we share tons of free information specific to Kobo. All of our top selling authors, what's working well, marketing tips, all that good stuff.

James: And an opportunity to win the H20, which you can also ... you could replicate what Chrissy does and hold it in a bucket just to show everyone. Or whatever it is you do at conferences. You should do that at NINC.

We'll set up a landing page, [selfpublishingformula.com/kobo](http://selfpublishingformula.com/kobo). K-O-B-O. And if people want to go there and enter that competition, we'll ping you the email address of the person who gets randomly drawn and you can send them their brand spanking new H20 reader.

Chrissy: Awesome.

James: You could even sign it Chrissy.

Chrissy: If they want, I will sign it.

James: Excellent, great. Thank you so much Chrissy. We will see you no doubt in the states at some point, and until then we'll keep in touch and keep a watch on Kobo.



Chrissy: Sounds great. Thank you so much James, it was great to see you and meet you online, and thanks for the opportunity.

James: You're a man to talk to at the moment about going wide or not going wide, because you're experimenting. And as you alluded to in the opening patch, to a pretty successful start by going narrow. Is that the expression?

Mark: Going exclusive, yeah.

James: Exclusive.

Mark: Yeah, I've prefaced all this with I've been wide for a long time, and I'm very fond of Kobo, very fond of Apple, don't really care about Barnes & Noble.

But those guys have been really good to me, so it was a very, very difficult decision to go exclusive to Amazon. I'm very fond of Amazon too. And I did, and when people ask me about that, and I spoke about this extensively at the conference yesterday.

This is something for individual authors to think about, you have to consider this. And I don't think there's a right or a wrong answer. When I recorded the 101 session on kind of initial strategy about going wide or being exclusive, I rerecorded that session about six times, because I ... the takeaway from that in the end was, there is no right answer. I can't advise on what you should do, because I don't think there is an answer to that.

In terms of going wide, if you are not inclined to be exclusive to Amazon, which is absolutely legitimate. I was wide, as I say, for a good couple of years, Kobo should be a fundamental part of your strategy for that.

They are really professional. Mark was great, Chrissy is great. I haven't met Chrissy yet, but I will meet her at some of the conferences I'm going to later

this year. They're big in Canada as you say, but they're not just big in Canada.

I don't know if Chrissy alluded to this, but they're bigger than Amazon in lots of significant markets where Amazon don't have a presence. And they recently announced a week or two anything that they've just hooked up with Walmart in the US, and there'll be a co-branded or co-owned website between Kobo, and they're owned by a company called Rakuten, a very big Japanese multinational, really enormous in fact, and Walmart.

So for those of us in the UK, I don't think we really realize how big Walmart is.

That suddenly has become a very interesting player in the market, and also at the same time that Apple have announced some changes to their platform.

Barnes & Noble appear to be taking it a bit more seriously again, so suddenly there's more competition for Amazon. Now, that is a great thing, because although I love Amazon and Amazon, let's be honest they have completely changed my life, and last month was remarkable in terms of how successful it was.

I don't really want Amazon to be the only player in town, because once that happens then Amazon doesn't have to potentially look at 70% royalties anymore.

So there's loads of reasons why it's helpful to have a vibrant marketplace with lots of different options. And I see Kobo continuing to take a place as a really viable alternative to Amazon and the others. So you know, I am a big, big fan of what they do.

James: I think just to reiterate the fact that something we say and I firmly believe, about this industry is it's still in the foundation stages.

Don't think things are set just because Amazon's made a fantastic early play, particularly device led, with the Kindle.

In 10 years time, you and I have no idea who the average device owner's going to be and supplier and aggregator and so on.

Mark: No.

James: So that's all up for grabs at the moment and it's all happening. With Walgreen, sorry Walmart ... Walgreen's the chemist isn't it? The pharmacy ... Walmart is massive.

Mark: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. No, it's an interesting situation.

It's still quite early so we don't know how it's going to play out, but Kobo is, as I say, it's been a big market for me. I wouldn't be surprised if I had six figures from Kobo over the course of the last couple of years. So that's a very, very decent return, so it's not to be sniffed at.

It was really difficult to have a conversation with Chrissy and say, "Look, I'm going to try select and Kindle Unlimited for three months to see how that goes." Because instinctively my gut is wide is better than exclusive, just because of the reasons I said before.

If you are not exclusive to Amazon, you absolutely must be on Kobo. It's a really simple interface.

The Kobo Writing Life team, led by Chrissy now, they all love books, they're really responsive. If you have problems they'll be very quickly solved and their promotions and the strategy that they're rolling out on that scope is becoming more extensive and more powerful. So I am a big fan.

James: Yeah. And just, so people should be clear, certainly having listened to Chrissy, that they are a retailer. They're not an aggregator. I think some people think Kobo's a bit like ...

Mark: No, no.

James: Draft2Digital or something. They're not, they are ...

Mark: They're a store.

James: It's a shop. It's a store.

Mark: Certainly in the UK, Kobo works with Smiths, WHSmiths, that's their partnership in the UK. In the US the similar partnership is now Walmart and Kobo. So you can see what their strategy is.

They are expanding. And they are backed ... Kobo by the way is an anagram of book, I think I've mentioned that to you before. And they are expanding and Rakuten is a big player.

James: Yes, huge Japanese investment.

Mark: Yeah absolutely. So you know, I'm not saying that they can go toe to toe with Amazon which ... Bezos is the world's richest man as we record this. But they're not small fry by any means. So it's good to see them duking it out with Amazon and trying to up the game a bit.

James: Great, okay. Well Mark, I tell you when you get to the end of your three month experiment, we obviously do need to devote perhaps more than just the beginning chat of podcast and look at your figures, which you've been very open about in the Facebook group.

And then you'll have some thinking to do. I mean you'll have a bit more data. It's still early days for this experiment for you, you've had a fantastic start to it. Maybe in three months it'll look different.

But we'll follow along in the Facebook group where you post the stuff, and then we'll have a chat about it perhaps when that comes up.

I think that's it. I'm going to celebrate my birthday by going to Cambridge United versus Lincoln City.

Mark: It's not your birthday today is it?

James: It's my birthday, as this is going out, the day before. So on the 8th of February.

Mark: Oh well, happy birthday.

James: So I mention that now to give you plenty of notice. I know you're busy at the moment, but-

Mark: I send you Christmas cards, I don't get any back.

James: You do. Well you're the CEO, you're supposed to send out cards.

Mark: That's very true.

James: That's how that works. Great. Good Mark. Good luck with your move. I'm sure it'll go well, and very excited to see your new pad at some point.

Mark: Yep, no that'll all be hopefully ... we'll see what happens tomorrow. I did discover the other day that the sellers had to be persuaded not to take the wiring out of the house. So I have no idea what the house is going to look like. But they were told not to take the wiring.

James: Are these the sort of people who take light fittings.

Mark: Well yeah, they could.

James: Radiators?

Mark: I don't think there's any chance they listen to this podcast, but if they do, I'm not going to ruin our family friendly image, but let's say they've tested my patience over the last couple of months.

James: It's a stressful time. Everyone knows that. But hopefully this bit will go well for you. Okay Mark, thank you very much.

Have a lovely weekend everybody. Don't forget that the design course is discounted by \$100 for just seven more days, so until the 16th of February. And if you sign up, if you go to [selfpublishingformula.com/design](https://selfpublishingformula.com/design), you can read all about it and sign up there. If you do sign up in this opening period, that's anybody from the beginning of it opening to the 16th, you're in line to be pulled out the hat to get a bespoke cover from the master himself Stuart Bache.

Great, that's it. Have a nice weekend. We'll speak to you next week. Bye bye.

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