

EPISODE 106: MASTERCLASS – HOW TO GET REVIEWS – WITH MARK DAWSON

Speaker 1: Two writers, one just starting out, the other a best-seller, join James Blatch and Mark Dawson, and their amazing guests as they discuss how you can make a living telling stories. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Hello, and welcome to The Self-Publishing Formula Podcast on a Friday with Mark and James, that's Dawson and Blatch.

There was a famous comedy duo called Morcambe and Wise, and they changed channels in the UK and they became Eric and Ernie, just swapped the first names, like we wouldn't notice they were the same people. But would we be Dawson and Blatch? That sounds like a solicitors.

Mark Dawson: It does a bit, yeah. Or an undertakers.

James Blatch: Well with your state of current health-

Mark Dawson: With my health, it's not far from the truth.

James Blatch: Not a bad thing.

We have a masterclass episode. Now I have to say, as a casual observer of the stats of the podcast over the years, when we do masterclass episodes, when you talk about an area of expertise and how to help people, it has a big spike.

So, we should probably do these more often, shouldn't we? They are the ones that people like. We've done, 'How much does it cost to self publish'

in the past. We've done 'Five must do critical things'. We've done 'Name this building'.

And what we're going to do today is, it is a conundrum area for a lot of self publishing authors, particularly the ones starting out and that is 'How to get reviews'.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it's a tricky one. It's one of the questions I get most of all when I'm speaking at conferences and stuff like that, is "How do you get reviews?"

And it is a bit of a chicken and egg because generally speaking, you need sales to get reviews but you need reviews to get sales. So, it's one of those intractable problems and it took me quite a long time to solve and what I will try and do today is take you through some ideas with, maybe even addressed as you.

Let's imagine that you had some time to write your book, your book is out there, and we're now going to get some reviews for it. So some basic ways for people starting out and also for people who are just struggling to get reviews. We'll go through some ways that I know work pretty well.

James Blatch: Okay. So as you say, chicken and egg isn't it. And I know one of the areas, presumably you're going to talk about is advanced reader teams.

I know you've got a list of things you're going to get out here and I don't want to get in the way of that in this but ... I think there's probably some don't's here as well isn't there?

Because Amazon are pretty hot and we have a few scare stories in the group at the moment actually, of people who've had accounts shut down and the reviews deleted.

Are you going to cover that as well?

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I don't suppose you'd see accounts shut down-

James Blatch: Yeah, so it's more Facebook than Amazon, yeah?

Mark Dawson: Yeah. But you will definitely get reviews removed and there is a lot of confusion about what is permissible. I don't think there's any reason for it to be confusing because really it's as clear as day.

One of the things that I was going to do, and might actually start with that now, is just go through Amazon's position, with taking a couple of sections from the terms of service and the accompanying notes that will really make it clear what you are allowed to do and what you're not allowed to go.

Amazon's general position, and this is me directly quoting from them, is that, "You may provide free or discounted copies of your books to readers, however," ... just talking about getting reviews, "However you may not demand a review in exchange."

So that's worth noting because we're going to get onto advanced reader teams and some writers, I don't do this, some writers will take people off the team if they don't review.

I think that's getting very, very close to demanding review in exchange. So, I wouldn't do that. But we'll get on to that in a bit more detail later on.

You can't do that, or you can't attempt to influence the review, "Offering anything other than a free or discounted copy of the book including gift cards will invalidate a review and we'll have to remove it."

That's really kind of in a fairly friendly language and then getting into slightly more legalese, so delving deeper into the terms of service, "We don't allow any form of compensation." So I've underlined that in my notes.

"We don't have any form of compensation for a customer review, other than a free copy of the book provided up front. If you offer a free advanced copy, it must be clear that you welcome all feedback, both positive and negative. If we detect that a customer was paid to write a review, we'll remove it. The only type of paid review that Amazon supports is an editorial review."

So that's what they describe as a more formal evaluation of the book, usually written by an editor or expert within the genre. Then weirdly they add, "But it can also be written by family and friends."

James Blatch: Oh.

Mark Dawson: Well that's possibly the most biased review possible. And those ones go into the editorial section of the book's detail page, and we'll get onto that as well.

And then, more underlining coming up here. This is really clear, "Offering payment or any other incentive," so underline that, "Or any other incentive, for a customer review is considered compensation. This includes giving someone money," so that's highly obvious. "Or a gift certificate to purchase your book. We consider incentives to be any type of reward that is given in return for a customer review; including but not limited to, bonus content, entry to a contest or a sweepstakes, discounts on future purchases and other gifts."

This actually came up in the group yesterday. Someone asked me whether it would be okay to run a competition when he got to 50 reviews. And I said, "Well, although that sounds fine, Amazon will likely not see it as that 'cause those reviews, even if they aren't indirectly being incentivized, they are being incentivized because people who have left reviews would be eligible to enter a contest once you get 50 reviews."

It's very clearly incentivizing and if Amazon finds out and don't underestimate Amazon's ability to find this kind of stuff out, they'll take the reviews down.

You will hear horror stories of writers complaining that the hundred reviews they worked hard to get have all gone and it will probably be because they have infringed at least one of the things that I just read out there.

James Blatch: It's slightly mysterious as to how Amazon do that and there's been some genuine pleading cases in the group of people saying, "This was just my advanced reader team. I don't understand why these have gone down."

Amazon understands and there was a post recently about the links that some authors send out because, if you'll notice, when you're on an Amazon page, and you copy the URL, you might want to put it into an email, it can often be a very long URL with an ampersand in the middle of it and a lot of stuff after it. Well that, all that stuff after it, tells Amazon whose URL that is, effectively, and where it's come from and whether you searched to get there and so they can ... and someone else clicks on that and leaves a link, that for Amazon is probably a red flag because they know that you've done a search.

Basically, its come directly from you. Why that? I mean it doesn't really in itself contravene the rules 'cause you can give people the book for free, but I suppose prompting them or giving them the link to the page, you basically got to let people do this completely independently.

Mark Dawson: No, no, no. There's a lot of stuff, I know exactly who you're talking about here and I think it's ... I don't buy that much of it. I think you can send cleaner links; just all that stuff, all the junk, take it off. That's probably best practice but I've never done that.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: I always send the full junkie link. It's not a problem. Amazon doesn't mind that. Of course, I can send a link to my book. Doesn't matter what it says.

And the fact that I've sent a link and then someone leaves a review, doesn't mean that they're connected to me.

The speculation I think has a bit more legs to it, although I'm still not completely sold on it, is that Amazon is able to detect non-Amazon connections between a writer and a reviewer. So some people have speculated, and I think this is BS potentially or in my opinion, is that Amazon is monitoring Facebook.

I don't buy that. But what I think is more likely, is Amazon does know ... so if you and I were in the same house, I ... this is a bit of an Eric and Ernie situation I think-

James Blatch: Want the same bed.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, if I sent you a link from the same IP address, I'm fairly certain Amazon know you're a family member, or at least connected to me because we are on the same IP address.

Or people working from the same IP address. I think those are not a good idea. I also think, bearing in mind that Amazon owns Goodreads, there's a very, very good chance that Amazon is able to detect links through Goodreads and that kind of platform.

But I think people suggesting that Amazon is like this Orwellian force with a team of highly trained internet ninjas detecting links by trawling Facebook, I really don't buy that.

Amazon doesn't have the man power to do that and I don't think technically it would be possible. I may be wrong but that's my opinion.

James Blatch: Okay. Every now and then, you and I get an opportunity to chat with Amazon executives. There was a certain lack of nuance when you are ultimately dealing with algorithms and computer systems, so some people will unfortunately get caught in this.

And they do their best, they absolutely do their best. They're not an evil corporation out to try to make it difficult for writers, but at the same time, they are facing a struggle against some people who are out to cheat the system and so there's a kind of eternal tension there. And occasionally people do get swept up in it.

What are the chances Mark, if someone has had a load of reviews deleted, and they think unfairly, getting them back?

Mark Dawson: I've seen that happen lots of times. If you just email KDP support, quite often they'll come back. And sometimes they'll come back anyway.

When I have a launch, I'm occasionally, maybe 20 or 30 reviews will disappear and then the next day they come back again. So it's not always the end of the road but sometimes it is possible just to kind of drop them a line and say, "What's going on? I don't know these people. They've left reviews and now they've been taken off."

Another thing that happens is, if a reviewer is suspected of doing nefarious things, then all of their reviews can go and it doesn't matter ... you can be swept up in that.

So if they've reviewed a hundred different books by a hundred different authors, and that reviewer then comes under suspicion, all of the reviews can go. So, it may have nothing to do with you, but it's the reviewer.

James Blatch: We're going to focus at the beginning on people who are just starting out. How do they get reviews, Mark Dawson?

Mark Dawson: Well, James Blatch. The general rule, and this is the principle that works for everything, and it is difficult and I'm going to ask you what you think about this, is you should ask.

You mustn't be afraid to ask. Writers tend to be quite introverted people and sometimes writers can be afraid of asking because they might feel that it's an imposition or they are fearful of someone saying no or perhaps they are fearful of getting a bad review.

But once we realize how important reviews are, we do need to step out of ourselves and realize that we have to ask. So, let's imagine in this kind of halcyon vision of-

James Blatch: I know what you're going to say.

Mark Dawson: Of 2029, when *The Last Flight* is ready and on sale and you don't have any reviews yet, so how would you feel about asking people for reviews?

James Blatch: For me my strategy, I think, would be with my advanced reader team; to ask them to email me their thoughts on the book so that I had at least some picture in my mind that it's not absolutely awful and going to be terrible and I'd get a load of bad reviews.

That at least the advanced reader team have said to me ... who have perhaps worked with me. So that as soon as I realize that some people think it's a good book, that's enough for me and I'm not bothered about risking-

Mark Dawson: So I have to pull you up immediately. That is you being scared.

James Blatch: Yes. Obviously I'm scared.

Mark Dawson: Who cares? Who cares if all your advanced readers come back and say, "James this is terrible." What are you going to do? Are you not going to sell it?

You can't edit it forever. At some point you got to go, "You're wrong. I think this is a good book. I'm gonna put it out there."

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: By seeking that validation from people on your team, unless it's something that they all pick out-

James Blatch: Well, that's interesting because we've had TS Paul on here before and I was chatting to him in Florida last year. And his books do have mistakes in them, at least the versions I've read. They're very readable. I really enjoyed them.

But I can imagine probably sending that book to 15 people and getting 14 bad reviews and yet his books are adored by lots of people and fly off the shelves.

So, it's a pretty good example actually, where you could get a lot of negative feedback straight away. It's meaningless compared to how it's going to do commercially.

Mark Dawson: See what you were doing there was asking for someone else's validation before you took the plunge to put the book out there and you can't do that. You have to trust yourself but if I was like that, well I was

like that, that was when I started. But if was like that now, I'd never publish anything. So.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: I don't think this is unusual, I think this a fairly standard response from writers as they get ready to release their first books, but ... you need to not be afraid to ask.

And the other thing is, what are you asking? Is explain to the people you are asking, why you are asking. So if you just say, "I'd love a review." Most people will go, "Grr, I've got too many other things to do."

But I'm fairly optimistic when it comes to other people. I think most people tend to be generally quite good and want to do nice things, especially when they understand why what they're being asked to do is helpful dor someone.

If it were me, I do this all the time. I will, when I'm asking for a review, I will always explain why it is helpful. And I may be specific. So it could be, I want a BookBub deal on a new book and although BookBub don't say you must have 50 reviews, I think it's fairly clear that the more reviews you have the better.

So what I would say in that situation would be, "I would really be very, very grateful if you could find the time to leave me an honest review and the reason I'm asking is because I want to book a promotion with BookBub, which will mean I am able to sell thousands of books and reach thousands of new readers. But to do that I need your help."

If you start to involve people in the process like that and explain just how helpful it would be to your career, I find when I started doing that, the response I got back was starkly different to the response I had when I was kind of naively going, "Give us a review."

James Blatch: Yeah. That doesn't work. Yeah, 'cause we probably get four emails a day from an organization saying, "Thanks for your phone call yesterday. It's going to really help us if you fill in this quick survey."

Mark Dawson: Absolutely. I get that all the time.

Very annoying. Now the other thing ... just because we were talking about asking here. I did a test last night. So I've just set up a new Facebook group. I've got a page, I'm also setting up a group and I might perhaps do a podcast later on why I've done that.

And it's all to do with Mark Zuckerberg's apocalyptic announcement a couple of weeks ago. But there's about 800 people in the group now who've migrated across from the page and I just put a post up last night saying that we were doing this podcast and I wanted to show other writers that it's possible to get reviews by asking.

When I asked them for reviews on the first Milton book. And because I explained it that way and I made it obvious that they would be helping me and there by I would be helping other writers by sharing what's possible, I had ... when I sent it out, I had 916 reviews on the cleaner, this morning I had 934 and then in the UK I have 482 and then up to 489.

So I added probably 35 reviews there just by a one minute Facebook post into a group.

Now, full disclosure, not everyone has a group of 800 readers who are by definition quite big fans, but you know, I didn't give them anything. They're not incentivized.

I just asked them. That's what happened. So, and that's another justification on having things on mailing lists and Facebook groups and pages and things like that.

James Blatch: Yes. Number one on the list is, you don't get if you don't ask.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I mean, just general points now. I mean the kind of natural rate of review. So you sell a lot of books, you will get reviews because people will review them and Amazon does occasionally ... you will have seen this when you finish a book, the first thing you see will probably be something from Amazon saying, "What was your rating?"

Occasionally, you'll get an email from them. I bought something the other day, which wasn't a book, it was something technical I think, and they sent me an email a week later saying, "How did you find the widget you bought? Would you like to leave a review?"

It had a little link to take me straight back. Amazon will encourage that occasionally. It doesn't happen all the time. But, the kind of anecdotal rates, or ratios, of reviews to sales and free downloads, in my experience it's round about one review every hundred sales.

James Blatch: Oh really.

Mark Dawson: That used to be the case. I suspect that is actually probably nearer a thousand now. So it might be between a thousand and a hundred.

You're probably looking at one or two every time you hear that number. Free is gonna be much bigger because not everyone who downloads a free book is gonna read it. So, you're probably looking at one review every five to ten thousand free downloads, something like that.

I may be being a little bit on the pessimistic side there, but it's in that kind of ball park. So those organic reviews should accrue just over the course of you running your business.

James Blatch: Okay. Just on that point, I noticed that I bought a widget as well recently, and the people who sold it to me via Amazon have emailed me twice asking for a review.

It might be the same as Ebay where you don't always see the email address of the buyer but you can contact them through Ebay. I don't know whether they can automate that.

Whether these people have got something in place that five days after delivery they ping a formatted email out, saying, "I hope you enjoy it. Can we help you? And by the way, we'd love it if you reviewed it."

Mark Dawson: Well, number one, we can't do that because we don't have the email addresses. And number two, I suspect that's probably illegal. Because they didn't sign up. They didn't give Amazon their email address, so that you could then correspond with them.

That is probably against privacy protection laws. Certainly would be once the new laws come in, in March.

Fortunately we can't do that because I think the temptation is there. And I would probably be tempted to do it too. For writers to go, "Right. Now I'm going to email the ten people that bought my book yesterday." Not a good idea.

But anyway. The methods that I would say are better ideas, and these are all valid. They're all tested. And they will work.

Focusing back on that asking. When you build up your mailing list, it is legitimate to ask them for reviews. As long as you make it clear it's not incentivized, you want them to be honest.

So, encourage good and bad reviews. There's nothing wrong with bad reviews. They'll even out the good ones. Make it look like a realistic page rather than a page with 10 000 five star reviews.

So just ask them. You can send out a post to your ... it could be your mailing list, it could be your Facebook group or your page. And explain, as I said, why you're asking. You'll probably find that you get a good response there.

Now the really good way to do this is to set up an automation sequence. So as people join your mailing list, and I still do this, one of the first emails they get back, and this is all automated, so you write it, you set it up, maybe it takes an hour, and then it will continue to do that day after day after day after day after day after day after day.

It scales amazingly well. It's just a send up that email saying again, if pressure gave them a free book to join, well why not ask them if they enjoyed it and if they did, or even if they didn't, then why don't you leave a review.

And you give them a link to the Amazon page or the Apple page or the Kobo page and you encourage them to go over there and leave a review and that will lead to a steady trickle of reviews over time that you don't need to do anything. You're not lifting a finger. They're just happening automatically.

And then on that, rather than just having a link to the product page, I would suggest linking directly to the leave a review page. It's possible, if you go to leave a review yourself, so go to my book *The Cleaner* and then go down to the half way point where it says, "Would you like to leave a review?" If you click that, you'll go to a new page that has a text box and the stars for entering your review.

You'll find some people will go I can't find how to leave a review. So make it easy for them. Take them directly to that link that will take them to that text box.

And then, a lot of my readers are slightly older and I'm not going to generalize, but occasionally I'll get emails from people saying I'm not good with tech, actually that is generalizing; it could be from anyone, it doesn't have to be from old people.

Could you help me work out how to do the review. So there's a couple of things you could do. You could have pictures. You could have like a go to this page with an arrow pointed to it. Do this, do this. It's making it step by step.

Or if you're good with video, upload something to YouTube. And then go through the process of leaving a review, step by step so they can see that. And then include a link to that YouTube video in your mail out. Just make it as easy as you can.

James Blatch: Lower those resistance points.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: You talked about the quite low review rates naturally occurring, in terms of your list, how responsive is your list? You gave us an example of the group responding very well.

Mark Dawson: I don't track that. I think in terms of getting off the list because there is, unfortunately only 24 hours in the day and I can't spend that much time on it.

But, you know, I could look at it and it's quite easy to pull out to open rates and the click rate. It will give you a rough idea. Not everybody who clicks will leave the review, but you know, I find reviews come in on the books

every day and some of them will be coming from that particular source. Others coming from other places too.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: If you have 20 sources and you get one a day, that's 20 reviews a day on all your books, which is ... that's pretty healthy.

James Blatch: Yes, yeah.

Mark Dawson: Another kind of automated way of doing it, and this has been done for ages, but it still works really well, is to put the first thing they see ... you've got to think about what you need, what you want most of all.

When someone finishes the book that they've bought, you know at that point that they've finished it, right? So unless, they're one of those readers that are like I'm gonna finish this book. It's rubbish but I don't leave book unfinished. Not many people are like that.

But you get to the end of a book, you're probably in the mood to ... you may feel favorable towards the writer because you've been entertained for 8 hours or so. So, there's two things you can do.

If you want to build a mailing list, then you should put your mailing list call to action, immediately there.

Or if you want reviews more, well just swap it around so the first thing they see is an ask for review. And a really good tactic is, rather than having a page break and going to the next page, just put it directly underneath.

You type 'The End'. The next thing you put in there is whatever you want them to do. So, it could be just a couple of sentences explaining that you'd love a review, why it's useful and how to do it. This is the link. Go and do it. And that, combined with Amazon's automated email that we've mentioned

previously, that should again lead to another fairly fruitful source of ongoing reviews for you.

James Blatch: That back matter; is that what you call it in the trade?

Mark Dawson: Yep, yep.

James Blatch: You don't want to over crowd that though do you? 'Cause it's also a very important place to get people onto your list.

Mark Dawson: Yeah it is. I would say, list is more important because you can obviously ask them for review once they're on the list. If they leave a review but they don't join the list, then you can't reach them again.

Personally speaking, the first thing would be join the list.

Second thing would be leave a review and then you can ask them for a review again with an automation email that they might get a week later. So it would be my order, but you know, it depends, if people really desperately want reviews then you could switch it around.

James Blatch: Okay. Good.

What else have we got?

Mark Dawson: Okay. So, you mentioned, ARC teams. So Advanced Reader Copy Teams and I mean that's a subject for a ... we've mentioned this tons of times before. They're incredibly useful for loads of different things.

So kind of a subset of your mailing list, the super fans who you have identified themselves as willing to leave reviews in exchange for early copies of the book. So, this is kind of specifically for new releases.

You can of course you know, reach out to them for reviews on back list as well if you want to, but the only thing that I would say on that, and I mentioned this earlier, is some people will even use services.

We've mentioned this before, that will monitor whether someone has left a review or not, and if they haven't left a review, they'll be taken off the team.

I've never done that because I, again, it's time intensive and I also don't want to feel like I'm the police. And I'm kind of like, "How many reviews have you left, James?" For me, if you haven't left a review for the last book then get out of here".

I don't want to do that 'cause that feel like being a bit of a, you know ... so I don't do that but that's just a choice. But it may well be that that was a fortunate choice because I do feel now that that may be in breach of the terms of service and I didn't realize this but, just to read the that again.

"You may provide free or discounted copies of your books to readers for reviews. However, you may not demand a review in exchange, or attempt to influence the reviews." I think if you're saying, "Look. You can have a book but you must leave me a review or you're off the team," that to me is fairly clearly a demand for a review.

James Blatch: But even if you don't say it, if you don't spell it out, it's still a de facto incentivization. You're off the team. People will end up realizing they're off the team if they don't leave a review. So yeah, I think most lawyers would say that is an incentive.

Mark Dawson: Yes. So I wouldn't recommend that. But ARC teams are fantastic. They are the best source of early reviews that I've ever come across. So I definitely recommend looking into that.

Now the next thing, social posting. So, these can be automated again. So you've got your social channels, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, wherever you're big.

One thing that I do every Wednesday, and this is all automated through the buffering software that I use to run these, a call goes out for reviews on Facebook and Twitter and this is what it says. "If you have five minutes and you've read a Milton or Rose book, you'd make this writer very happy if you could write a short Amazon review."

That doesn't have a link to any particular book. I can leave that up to the readers to go wherever they want to go.

And the last one that went out the Wednesday before we were recording this, not boosted it, but it went to, I believe it was 2552 people, and it got three reviews.

Pretty long odds but I did nothing on that apart from, and we'll get onto this in a minute, when people left a comment to say that they'd done that, I always thank them. It's crucial. You've got to.

They've spent time doing something to help you. The very least you can do is to thank them for doing that. So, and also, other people see that. So, other people see that comment and that you're thankful so maybe then the next time you ask, they're like, "Well I'd like him to thank me too. I'll go and leave a review." So, it's all virtuous.

James Blatch: How do you know they've left a review because they post back into the comments saying that they've left a review?

Mark Dawson: Yes. And then if you want to check, I mean not that I would, but you can just go and have a look.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: Perhaps they've left a link or you can ... if they've said, "I left a review on Saint Death. I loved it." You go and see and then there'll be one. Oh yeah, okay they did. So and then just ... and even if you can't find it or you can't be bothered to look, just thank them.

James Blatch: Just assume they have, yeah.

Mark Dawson: Yep, yep.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: So again, that's all automatic.

Now, Goodreads. We mentioned Goodreads earlier. This is a decent place to find people who are interested in reviewing. There are groups on Goodreads that are dedicated to almost every niche you can imagine.

There's probably a dinosaur porn Goodreads group, I should imagine. Not that I've checked that out, maybe I'll have a look later. But you can ask them. You can go and post and ask there for reviews.

The only thing I'd say to that is don't spam. And see what the group's rules are. If they say they don't welcome writers, then I would certainly not recommend doing that 'cause Goodreads users can be a little ferocious sometimes.

But if it's a group that actually invites writers to ask for reviews in exchange for free copies, go for it. It's a pretty good way to get an early start.

Okay. Next one. Bloggers. So, when I started doing this, one of the things I did, and this was bigger in those days, was to look at book bloggers, find out people who like thrillers and were reviewing thrillers and then offer them a free book.

Now that did work. I got some pretty good reviews actually in the early days for the first book I posted. It is massively time intensive. So you've got to find them.

I would certainly recommend writing individual emails rather than bulk posting because people can smell a bulk email from a mile away.

You need to at least indicate to them that you have read their page, you acknowledge their requirements, maybe mention that you liked a review that they wrote for another book that's like yours and you think they'll like your book. And then send that out.

It can work but it is a time intensive part of the process. If you are early in your career, then maybe you're not quite as busy with marketing as you will be when you've got 20 books, that might be something you could consider doing because you've got to get the ball started.

Start it rolling and build the momentum up. So, maybe it's something that you want to think about.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: And then connected to that, couple more. You can email reviewers. So if you look at the reviews for anyone on Amazon, you'll find sometimes if you go to the reviewer, click on them and look at their details, sometimes they would have left their email.

Now, I don't know why somebody would do that. I certainly wouldn't. But, maybe they've made a mistake, that's possible, but other times I think people do do it because they are inviting people to contact them.

One thing you could do is maybe look on the pages of authors similar to you, find a list of readers who've left reviews and then have left their email

address. And then just drop them a line and say, you know, "I read your review of James Patterson's new book. Would you like to read this new book, which is quite similar? I think you might like it. I'd love to give you a free copy. And then if you like it or even if you don't like it, it would be great if you could leave a review."

You can do that. Now again, that is time intensive.

Fortunately, there are a couple of tools that make that a little quicker. And these are paid tools. Also, I haven't used them before but I've had a quick look around and they generally get quite good reviews. But there's a site called BookRazor.

BookRazor, I think all one word, as is de rigueur these days. And then there's one with Jim Kukrall from the Sell More book show, has author marketing club, and he has something called the Reviewer Grabber.

I think what they do, and again I haven't them before, but my understanding is that they will trawl those pages and will pull the email addresses out. Give you the email addresses. They'll save you the research process and then enable you just to send the emails and get those out there that way.

James Blatch: That's interesting isn't it? And as you say, it would be labor intensive to go through and do that individually and looking for similar genre writers.

I wonder if people are doing that deliberately to get free books. If they work out this is what's happening.

Mark Dawson: Maybe. But you know, I'm pretty relaxed about it. I give away hundreds of thousands of free books. And thankfully I sell hundreds of thousands as well. So, I think those are connected and reviews are important.

James Blatch: I'll just reinforce that point. Unfortunately I haven't got it on, but I bought ... so I got an apple watch, if you're watching on youtube. Showing off my Apple watch 'cause you got one as well.

If you buy the Apple leather strap it's gonna cost you 140 quid but on Amazon you can get one for 8.99. I got a nice little leather strap for it. And there you go, there's another cough. I thought it looked nice. I took a picture of it and the picture came out really well and I wrote a little review.

Well, lo and behold, three months later, I got an email from them, saying, "We loved your review of our product, we got a brand new leather strap, a luxury version that's 19.99. Can we send it to you? And if you'd like to leave a review that would be great." so they sent me this very soft leather, high end for them, 20 dollar strap and of course I felt pleased and enamored and I took another picture and I did another review for them. So, yeah, that worked for them and worked for me.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, it's all good isn't it?

A couple more and then we'll kind of circle back and look at thinking philosophically why we need reviews.

If you start running ads on social media. Facebook obviously being the obvious one, you will get comments. Now this is, obviously the more comments you get, depends on how many times you serve the ad.

If you're serving it a lot, as I am at the moment, you get quite a lot of comments. But even if you're not serving it a lot and you start to get maybe a comment every couple of days, a really good idea, especially if it's positive, is to thank them for the positive comment.

You should always do that anyway. I always try, as much as I can, to respond to positive comments. But one thing you could do is just say, "That's very

kind of you. I'm so pleased you like the book. It would be immensely helpful to me if you felt able to leave a review or just spread the word and help introduce my books to other readers like you who might like it just as much."

And you know, you'll find again, people will do that. Especially if you make it easy for them, people will, if you ask them, and you explain why it's helpful, and how they can make a positive impact on your career, on your life, people will sometimes will do that, just as happened with you.

James Blatch: Is there any way of harvesting those comments and putting them onto your description on Amazon in the bit that you write? You could quote people.

Mark Dawson: You could put them in the editorial review section. You can't automate that, you've got to do it manually. Generally, I'm not sure I'd ... unless you're desperate and you haven't got any other reviews, I wouldn't do that, but, yeah.

And then finally, the other one I would say is worth looking at. There are some services that will hook you up with reviewers. So they are kind of, effectively like, I suppose, a concierge. So, you know, you want reviews ... or like a match maker, that's a better analogy.

They'll hook you up with reviewers. And you pay them a fee in exchange for them putting your book out to a list of readers in your genre for example. So, this is completely fine. It would be against terms and conditions if you paid the reviewer but it's okay to pay someone to arrange that your book goes out for reviews, provided everything else is in line and the services that I'm gonna recommend are in line, as far as I know.

I'll kind of caveat that a bit; I haven't used either of them and the reason being is that I don't really need to these days. And the other one is the first one, Hidden Gems, used to major on romance and not ... so I don't write

romance books. But they have recently branched out onto other genres as well. So, we actually got a recommendation from these guys Hidden Gems, from Steve Toninball in the SPF community, who's used them before and as

Steve says, they're not verified purchases because the reviewers don't buy the books; they're given them in order to review them, but he says that the kind of response rate is very high because these people know that they are there in order to review the books. And also I think, he says you got to be clear about the genre and also expect these reviews to be honest, which is of course what you want.

You're not going to get hundreds of five stars, dashing reviews. You're going to get a few twos and threes in there as well probably. Which is exactly ... it's fine. It's exactly what you want.

Hidden Gems is one, and as I mentioned previously, the other one is BookRazor who will ... slightly different though. They'll kind of put you in touch with people whose email addresses they've culled from those Amazon pages. But, yeah. Hidden Gems is the one that we look at most of in terms of recommendations from people in the community.

James Blatch: And how much are these services?

Mark Dawson: This is from memory, I think for them it's like you put 20 dollars down and then I think it's kind of structured dependent on the response you get. Something like that.

It's not cheap, but on the other hand it's not extortionate and reviews are worth having. And I remember when I got started, I would have very happily paid 20 pounds to get, or more than that, to get a few reviews.

James Blatch: Let's move onto that.

We'll sort of conclude this with answering the fairly fundamental questions of why are reviews important?

Mark Dawson: If you think about how you react on Amazon when you're buying something, not necessarily a book. One of the first things you'll look at is reviews. And I will always look at the negative reviews first because I think they tend to be the most interesting.

Then I'll look at the other ones too. But weighted reviews is important, I think even like on a subconscious level, when you're buying something, if you see something ... I know this is certainly true from my buying behavior, if you're buying a bottle of water on Amazon.

Bad example, but if you're buying a bottle of water on Amazon, and you see one bottle of water that has five reviews and another one that has 505 reviews, you are subliminally going to move towards the one with the slightly heavier review weighting.

So, there's that. There's positive reinforcement as well. I suppose that's connected. You could put your blurb in there, you could have some core quotes and all that kind of stuff.

But then if you have lots and lots of other reviews there, fours and fives, it gonna build a picture. Make your sales page convert at a higher rate. Just persuades potential wavering readers that this a book that obviously lots of other people have enjoyed, so why wouldn't that enjoy it too?

And then the third and final reason, is they are required sometimes by some of the bigger promotional sites. BookBub don't have a stipulated, you must have x reviews, but in my experience, you'll stand a better chance of getting a BookBub feature deal if you've got more reviews. I think that stands to reason.

And there are some of the sites, Fussy Librarian, I think comes to mind, some of them will have, you must have ten reviews or you must have 20 reviews.

In order to run the best promotions, the ones that have an effect that we know from plenty of experience, is reliable, you will sometimes need reviews. So, every one you get is getting you closer to being able to pull the trigger on something that might then mean you can send out one of those big email blasts, get more sales and then start to get more reviews. It's just kind of, once you get a certain momentum going, they kind of come in naturally, but you've got to get the early ones in order to start pulling those triggers.

James Blatch: One of the dangers of this is the dreaded one star review, which not even you are completely immune from.

Mark Dawson: Oh god no. No. Not at all. I get them all the time. I'm fine with it now.

I've mentioned, I think when we were talking about imposter syndrome a little while ago, and it's one of the things you have to get used to. What did I ... I get one the other day? In fact, I get quite a lot. And it's fine.

It makes it look more realistic to have a spread of reviews, provided you've of course, got more good ones than bad ones. It makes it more realistic to have a good spread and you can learn stuff from reviews as well. I mean, it can help you with the advertising. So if someone says I saw this book compared to book x. Maybe that is a reminder that you're pushing the book into the wrong audience.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: So it's the wrong genre. Or you could sometimes get tips on craft. I mean, you know, this book, I didn't like the way it jumped around to lots of different points of view.

Or maybe if you hear that more than once, then maybe you should think about restricting your points of view a bit. Or there are typos, lots and lots of typos, well that is a red flag.

You need to go back and get that book edited to make sure that those typos go away. So I mean, you can learn lots. There's nothing to be afraid of.

James Blatch: I notice, we used to both work in the film industry, and expectation was a very important thing. The films that got a lot of poor reviews, often were simply people having their expectations confounded 'cause it looked like a rom-com and they went in and saw it and it was full of strong sexual references and swearing.

Closer is the good example of that but there's lots of others actually. Films that slightly miss-sold them because it was a better sell on the side of a bus and the film didn't quite live up to that.

You can pick up bad reviews. So just make sure you're being relevant as much as possible, as you should be anyway to get your percentages up.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Star Wars.

James Blatch: Yes. Although people did enjoy our discussion of Star Wars. Let's not go there now.

Good. Okay. Well I think that's pretty much it. It's been a long interview this. Taken three days.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Oh yeah, absolutely. I'll go wash my clothes now.

James Blatch: He did promise me he'd washed his clothes. And you've had an extraordinary weekend. So you're feeling a little bit spaced out now I think.

Mark Dawson: Oh god. Yeah I posted that on my Facebook profile. We had lots of things including deceased animals. Yeah, it's been a long one. I had an x-ray on Friday for my chest complaint. And my bladder, which is always good to hear.

James Blatch: Nice. Yeah we don't do that on the video version. It was almost a Fawlty Towers moment isn't it. You can walk in and all the cast going on you looked out and there's a dead cat in the utility room.

Mark Dawson: It was a very, very weird moment but I managed to ... I don't think the buyers of my house listen to this podcast. They don't know how close they were to walking in to a room in my house with a poor deceased cat on the floor.

James Blatch: Rest in peace. What was the cat's name?

Mark Dawson: Mabel.

James Blatch: Mabel. Rest in peace Mabel. I know she'd been with you a long time.

Mark Dawson: Eighteen years, yep.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: Yep, she was a good cat.

James Blatch: Yeah good. Okay. Good.

Well I hope you enjoyed that. There is a pdf download to go with this episode and that's going to be found at selfpublishingfoomula.com/reviews.

That pdf will have a summary of the main points that Mark has talked about and something for you to follow and we'll keep it updated from time to time. There'll also be those links in there and you can go and have a look at the prices yourselves.

Good. Okay. Well done Mark. Thank you very much indeed for that masterclass. They always go down well these episodes. They're always a little spike in the downloads the masterclass episodes. People have a thirst for knowledge.

Mark Dawson: They do. No, happy to do it. It's always a fun one to do.

James Blatch: Excellent. Anything else to say? You look like you want to say something.

Mark Dawson: No. That's it. I'm done.

James Blatch: You're done. Stick a fork in him, he's done. Thank you very much indeed for listening and we'll speak to you again next week. Bye-bye

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