

## **EPISODE 111: BOOKLAB – WITH DAVID F. BERENS**

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

James Blatch: Hello, and welcome to a very special edition of the Self Publishing Formula podcast with Mark and James here on a Friday.

A special edition because this is the very first of our Book Lab series. We had an argument this morning over the name of this series. I said the Book Laboratory would be the proper way of calling it, but Mark's the branding expert and he says Book Lab works. Like Space Lab.

Mark Dawson: I've demonstrated I can sell.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: Made you believe that. That would be the first time we've sworn in the podcast. I can sell stuff, James.

James Blatch: We've had swearers on.

Mark Dawson: Have we? Yeah.

James Blatch: Sean Platt swore straight away, like within 10 seconds of the beginning.

Mark Dawson: Okay, fair enough.

James Blatch: I don't think anyone's fallen off their seat yet. Yeah, so the Book Lab. I have to say, I'm going to say this right now, this was the best idea we've had for the podcast.

Mark Dawson: Who had it?

James Blatch: I think I had the idea.

Mark Dawson: No, you didn't. I did.

James Blatch: You dressed it in your own way and said ...

Mark Dawson: I'm going to swear again.

James Blatch: You may have had the idea.

So the idea is that we take one of our Patreon gold supporters, and we bring in the world's experts on various aspects of their book, Mark. The cover, the blurb, and the editorial aspect of the look inside, all the things that are key to selling books, converting sales.

Those experts pour over it and they give their feedback to the person who goes into the laboratory.

Mark Dawson: Lab.

James Blatch: The lab. We've completed the first one. What I'm going to say at the beginning, two things.

First of all is, if you're not out jogging or driving, you might want to download the PDF that goes with this because you can follow along. You can see, for instance, David has already had the feedback so he's changed his cover, changed his blurb. Not changed it online if you listen to this contemporaneously, but will do in a couple of weeks, but you can see the

before and afters so the feedback makes sense to you. I think it's really worth doing that to understand the feedback and learn from it yourself and apply it to your own books.

If you go to [selfpublishingformula.com/booklab1](https://selfpublishingformula.com/booklab1), booklab1, all one word, but one is a digit, and you can download that PDF.

The selected person was David Berens, and that's the second thing to say is if you want to be selected for this, and it is a money can't buy opportunity, you need to be a Patreon gold level supporter.

So if you go to [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast) and sign up to support us, it's just \$3 an episode. It pays for the podcast. It pays for all the equipment and time and editing that goes into this. We now have an independent editor because the editing is getting on top of me.

If you can help support us, that would be absolutely fantastic. Just \$3, a cup of coffee per episode at [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast). And if you are gold level, you have a chance of being in the Book Lab next time around. Let's start, Mark Dawson.

### **You would have liked this, wouldn't you?**

Mark Dawson: I would, yeah. When I started, it would have been very helpful. Things like cover and blurb, I was blundering around not really knowing what I was doing.

It's a great opportunity for new authors, or authors who aren't selling how they'd like to sell, to get some really potentially quite expensive advice for free, or almost for free. It's really, really good fun to see this come to life.

James Blatch: Okay. Well, we need to rack through this, because we got feedback from three people, and we're going to hear from David Berens himself, the author.

The author is David F. Berens. David Berens I think he calls himself with the book that we selected, he put forward for this. The book is called Hat Check. You can find it obviously on Amazon.

It's the Amazon page that we looked at, because obviously it's your main shop window, certainly in the United States and the United Kingdom. We looked at the cover, we looked at the blurb that he's written, and the look inside, which is quite a big chunk of writing.

We're going to start with the cover. If you got the PDF or you're on Amazon ... If you're in the future, a long way in the future like more than a few weeks, you're probably looking at his new cover on Amazon. That's why the PDF is useful to see.

This is what was put in front of our cover expert, who of course is Stuart, the man who does your covers and a whole host of very, very high profile authors' covers. This is a man who knows what he's talking about when it comes to book covers that sell books.

**First of all, let's hear from Stuart Bache about his feedback on David Berens' cover for Hat Check.**

Stuart Bache, finally we get to see you.

Stuart Bache: Yes, I know. Here's my face.

James Blatch: Do you know what I was thinking? Because you always look fresh-faced and young in your photographs, but I'm thinking you've moved house. Your baby must be what, three months old? Something like that?

Stuart Bache: Yes, she's just over three months now.

James Blatch: Why haven't you aged 25 years? How come you're still looking young?

Stuart Bache: It's a really good moisturizing regime. That's not a joke. No, it is sort of a joke.

James Blatch: You're a big moisturizer?

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

James Blatch: Because you're worth it.

Stuart Bache: Well, that's my hair as well. That's the worth it bit.

James Blatch: You've got good hair Stuart.

Stuart Bache: Yes, it isn't bad. It's getting very gray these days, but I don't mind. That's the baby bit, I think, is the gray.

James Blatch: Yes, that's what the baby's done.

Stuart Bache: I've just turned 36 actually.

James Blatch: Oh, okay. Well, you're doing well.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, good genes I think.

James Blatch: Okay. I'll do the comedy. Let's crack on with this then.

We've got a brief period here to talk about Dave Berens' book, our first victim into the Book Lab. If people want to follow this along, as we've said already, it's Hat Check. You'll find it on Amazon.

**I'm going to start things off by saying, at first glance, I quite like this cover.**

Stuart Bache: Yeah, it's very bold. It has some really good strong colors. It actually works quite well as a series. You can see the series on Amazon as well. They sort of all match up really well with these really bold colors.

Obviously, it has the whole thumbnail theory thing, where when it's small it really stands out with the type and everything. In that respect, the strong colors and how bold it is, it really works from an eye-catching point of view.

James Blatch: And there's the definite thought process that's gone into the colors when you look at the other books. There's a very definitive, this will be the orangey yellow, this'll be the bluey, this'll be the red, this'll be the green.

Stuart Bache: Yeah. And often he picks things up with the title as well. If blue's in the title, it'll often be in the cover. It is actually thought through. It isn't just whacked together, which is quite nice.

I get the feeling he's done these himself. I think there was a point where he did hire a designer, but I think these are actually his own. I think considering they're his own, they're very, very good and well thought through.

**James Blatch: Okay. But you're a man with a critical eye.**

Stuart Bache: Yes. I think they're a really good starting point, but from a genre perspective I was a little confused, because I know that there's a bit of comedy. I think there's a bit of humor in the books, but in the genre on Amazon anyway they're in action adventure and crime, and there was another one as well.

Action adventure and crime fiction, that's sort of the area they're in. It doesn't 100% fit in that, personally. It's not the first thing that I think of when I see the covers. I might get a bit of action and adventure from it, but not quite crime, as it were.

I know there's a kidnapping in it as well, and I think one of the genres that he's put himself in is like a sea adventure, which obviously you get that with the wave and everything.

A lot of the books that are doing quite well in that area are authors like Wayne Stinnett. They're much more pared back. They're more a bit of photography with a vehicle of some sort or a person. That's where the narrative is coming from. Overall, if you want to catch someone's eye, he's certainly doing that.

James Blatch: Wayne Stinnett is an interesting comparison. I guess what David would say is that, I don't think Wayne's books set out to have humor in them. At least, they're presented as Jesse's this hard male ex-Marine.

Whereas David, he places the humor quite prominently up into what you're getting into here. There's something slightly whimsical about the way it's set out.

Again, a bit like you, we had a little chat off air, when you look at it longer, you start to see quite a lot of elements to it.

### **I wonder if there could be a bit more simplicity to it do you think?**

Stuart Bache: Absolutely. I think I can be a little bit too harsh sometimes. This is the problem with when you ask someone their opinion they look for things, so you find an opinion.

On the whole, it looks fine, but I didn't understand necessarily what it was about. I think maybe it's because of the hat on the wave with the book

behind it and everything. It just feels a little bit plunked on. I always look for narrative, and it's not really telling me enough about what genre it is.

It feels a little bit clip arty, a little bit in the style of the illustration maybe. I think I'm just being overly critically, really. The fonts that are being used, I think he's probably put this together in something like Word or something like that because he's using things like Impact and I think that's Brush.

That's fine, they're absolutely fine to use those sorts of fonts, but I always say when you start the design process is to look at what's working out there at the moment and what sort of fonts are being used.

He's using a condensed font there, which is exactly right. Trade Gothic Condensed, or if you can't buy fonts then a good Google font is Fira Sans Condensed. Those sorts of fonts are really, really nice, really smart.

I think there's just a lot going on. If you're not going to change the whole thing, actually just a few little things could work.

There's a lot shouting at me at the moment. His author name's very big, the title's very big, and I'm not sure what hits me first. They kind of smack me both in the face at the same time. It might be about reducing one thing and making more of an emphasis of another.

Having the wave and the hat come at you at the same time, it's a lot of things being thrown at you. Personally, this is just how I think he could rework this cover, is just by paring a few things back by reducing some sizes of typography, that sort of thing.

From a series perspective, how it works across the lot, the same illustration style with the same typography and the choice of colors, it actually works really well in that respect.

James Blatch: Yeah, because that is one of the issues, I suppose, if David's going to take on board some of this and make a change or make a couple of changes, he's got to do that across his series because there is a very common repetitive theme.

**Is there a rule of thumb here that you either have the author name prominent and the title less prominent, perhaps if you're Lee Child, or you have the title prominent and the author name less prominent, perhaps if you're James Blatch.**

Stuart Bache: I think you can do either. I've always said that it doesn't really matter. Ultimately with that respect, which way you flip it, I think if you want to have your name large, if it looks good large especially that's fine.

Mark Dawson works really well. I always say like a short name than a long name. My name wouldn't work very well because it's equal amount of letters almost. It doesn't work very well on a large size like David's name does.

It's all about hierarchy. You choose what you want to go ahead first. If you're saying, "I am the brand," then you say my name first, then it should be your title, then your subtitle or shout line of some sort, Amazon bestselling author, that kind of thing.

Or the other way around. If you choose that you want to have the title upfront, then make sure that that's what hits you first, and then you do your author name, and then you do the subtitle. But there should be a hierarchy of some sort.

In respect to this, he is an Amazon bestselling author. His name will sell the book, so maybe his name should remain the same. Then bring back the title Hat Check down a little bit, or put it on one line, or keep it in the same font.

I think scripty fonts work quite well for more romantic and women's fictiony type stuff. I find script fonts fit better with that area of the genre.

**James Blatch: For those of us who don't live and breathe fonts in quite the same way that you do, Stuart, you're talking about the slightly more handwritery type fonts I guess.**

Stuart Bache: Yes, that's it. Like calligraphy, that sort of thing, handwritten looking fonts. You can't get very good ones. You can buy some really good ones, but they often fit with women's fiction, that sort of thing.

I would say that I would probably, just because once again there's a lot of stuff going on, so I would move the word hat into the same font of whatever he chooses for the word check and keep it as a sans serif.

But I would then reduce it in size, and maybe have it span the width of his surname. At the bottom then, you've got a huge amount to play with with the image. That's where the narrative is, that's what will tell you where the book fits, in what genre it fits.

James Blatch: I think, looking at the illustration, if we move onto that now, we've got a bit space now to do more with the illustration. I think, at a glance, our summary of this is probably going to be this does a pretty good job, however it could probably be improved, which is fair enough. It's not like you're looking at this thinking this does not work.

Stuart Bache: No. Yeah, that's exactly it. That's right.

James Blatch: The bits where there are areas for improvement, we talked about the fonts here, and I agree with you that at a glance I think it works.

Then when you look at it for a second more, you think what is that hat doing? What is underneath the hat? I can't tell. And is that a fish? Oh no, that's a bit more of the wave. It is a little bit kind of ... I just wondered if a hat

by itself on the beach with the wave in the background might tell the story a bit better, because he talks about everything changed when he picked up this hat.

Stuart Bache: Exactly, yeah.

James Blatch: This hat's sort of waiting there on the beach, ready to be picked up, and might be a slightly more ...

**Although, would that take away the whimsical nature of it? I don't know.**

Stuart Bache: Potentially, but it depends whether that's what you want to get across in the book in the first place, and is that the same throughout the series? Is this whimsy going to be something that happens throughout the series, or is it just in this book?

And yes, you could do that. You could absolutely have the hat, if you could find the right image and the right setup, you could absolutely have the hat as the main focus because that is obviously, as you say, the focus of the novel itself is he picks up this hat and all sorts of trouble happens afterwards. So yeah, sure, focus on it, but then the word hat is in the title.

You could go down the direction of the Wayne Stinnett. I know it's very different, didn't have the humor maybe, so you might lose that. I think he did do something very similar in a previous incarnation of the book. I think I understand why he didn't think that worked, because you do lose that, as you say, that whimsical feel and the humor.

I think, if he does keep it, as I said before, the wave seems to be in all of the different titles as well. As you say, you probably have to change everything.

We don't want to put him in that position necessarily. It's just about thinking about composition, basically. Thinking about that doesn't look real, and as

my old publisher used to say to me in cover art meetings, it used to annoy me but I'm going to have to say it now, it kind of looks plonked on, and that's not what you want. You want it to feel like it's supposed to be there.

Obviously, I think maybe he's trying to show that the hat came in with the wave and that's why it was found on the beach, so maybe I'm thinking too much about it.

If he is going to keep what he's got, and he's using what he has, and he can't do anything new, then yes, keep the name the same, reduce the title size, and then maybe just rework the illustration a little bit more so you can see it more and you understand it a bit more.

But if he has a chance to try something new, then I would go and look at some better quality illustrations and think about how he wants the actual book to look like.

From my perspective, everything needs to feel as if it should be there. If it's illustration, then you can a bit more abstract with it, but if it's photographic or it's supposed to have some sort of narrative in it, then I feel that you should know what it is straight away.

James Blatch: I can see now with the wave in every cover that that starts to then ... It's an idea for consistency's sake, and obviously selling the series is very important commercially for writers, but then that does hamstringing you a bit, doesn't it? Because you start with quite a big element of your illustration before you've done anything else. How do you then weave a hat into it? Well, as you say, plonked on is probably not a bad description of the way it looks because of that constriction that he gave himself.

Okay. Well look, let's go back to, just to say again, it's a pretty good cover. It's eye-catching, orange and yellow in this particular case, and it works well.

**For me, it definitely does say humor and whimsy and adventure, kind of the humorous moments of Indiana Jones.**

Stuart Bache: It does have all of those things, yeah. Yeah, it does actually. I think it's sort of cartoony Indiana Jones. I don't mean that in a negative way.

On first look, on first glance, it is very good and stands out. But if you want to go a bit deeper and you want to try and make it feel a bit more commercial-

James Blatch: Substantial, or?

Stuart Bache: Yeah, and just to think about the narrative a bit more, think about your typography a bit more, and your quality of imagery.

**But on the whole, as you say, it's worked, hasn't it?**

James Blatch: Yes.

Stuart Bache: I mean, you can't say it hasn't. It's just that when you look at the rest of the genre, all the things that pop up in the genre, it actually stands out against it. Stand out is good, but it's not always number one.

Familiarity, I tend to think, is the thing that works the best, but in this case it's worked.

James Blatch: And finally, if David is going to think let's give this a go, that would involve a redesign of all his books, but that's not a bad thing to do from time to time.

Stuart Bache: No, absolutely.

Mark's done it once or twice. I did his first series, and that was a very stylized look, more almost illustrative in a sense with silhouettes and things. Then we completely changed it and went a more commercial route.

One day, I'm sure they'll change again, or they will look a slightly different look. We've changed some of his covers that have done really well, but are in existence and have been out there for ages, and now we've changed them again just because it gives it a fresh look. That's fine. It's great to do, actually. It gets a new market. It hits new customers.

James Blatch: Okay, I think you and I are going to have a proper chat at the end of this about this. Good incisive comment from Stuart, and you're going to hear from David Berens at the end of this episode.

David did say Stuart nailed it straight away. It's one of those things that's obvious when you hear it, but up until that point you aren't necessarily going to see what was wrong with that cover. Despite the fact it was pretty good effort, there were things wrong with it.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. It was eye-catching before, and I immediately knew Carl Hiaasen would be the inspiration for David's books. That came across from the cover.

But yeah, Stuart saw some stuff that wasn't necessary and felt that it could be streamlined to make it more effective, and I think that that's the case.

James Blatch: Yeah. We should just say, this is going out on Friday, we are in the last five or six days of the 101 course still being open. We extended it for a week because you may have noticed if you get your podcast via the app on the iPhone that you didn't get it for a couple of weeks. We had a stumbling block. We fixed the gremlin, it's now okay.

Mark Dawson: Gremlin's name is ...

James Blatch: Yeah, the gremlin's name. What we've done is extended the launch because that's how a lot of people learned about the launch. Just extended it for a week, until the 28th of March. Late on the 28th of March.

You can go for now to [selfpublishingformula.com/sp101](https://selfpublishingformula.com/sp101) and that will get you to the page.

Now, the reason I mention it is because Stuart does a session in there, as does Bryan Cohen, who is our next person to feedback.

Bryan Cohen is the blurb meister. He had a look at David's blurb, which again is on the PDF, or if you're looking at it right now at the time of the podcast going live is still in place on Amazon. I can tell you David Berens is itching to replace it. Itching to replace it, as you'll find out in a minute. But let's hear what Bryan made of David Berens' blurb for his book.

Bryan Cohen, welcome back to the Self Publishing Formula podcast. How delightful to see you this time. I think this might be the first time, if you're watching on YouTube, you can actually see Bryan in all his glory.

Bryan Cohen: In all my nursery glory.

James Blatch: The star of Illinois. You are in a nursery. You've got some lovely sort of, are they like Japanese type fans on the wall? I'm not sure.

Bryan Cohen: Yeah, actually that was repurposed decorations from the baby shower of my daughter from, she's 13 months now, so maybe 15 months ago. We just said, "Hey, those look kind of nice on the wall." So we have those.

Obviously there's a bookshelf, Curious George and other wonderful books there for Riley. This is also my office, so we lovingly refer to it as the nooffice, the nursery office.

James Blatch: I like it. And if you're naughty, you both get sent in there. We should just say that we may hear Riley, because she's being tended to with viruses and bacteria and stuff that's flying around next door.

Bryan Cohen: Hooray for winter.

James Blatch: Hooray for winter. All right, let's crack on with this.

We are analyzing, looking at, exploring, pulling apart a little bit, and putting back together again David F. Berens' book, his presentation on Amazon. We've done the look inside, we've looked at the cover.

The blurb. First of all, before we start, you're a bit of a blurb nerd, which I think hopefully is a polite expression.

### **Why is the blurb so important, Bryan?**

Bryan Cohen: We need to think of this like a product that we're selling online. Obviously it's a book that we care about deeply.

When we are working on a book and we post it on Amazon, this is something our heart and soul is in. I don't mean to diminish that at all by saying that this is a product, but products have sales pages.

We are optimizing it with our cover, of course. Obviously, people do judge a book by its cover, but there are other things that these browsers on our Amazon or Kobo or Apple sales pages, there are other things that they judge our book by.

One of those things is our book description. We want to make our book sound good. We want to make it sound like something that is part of our genre, and something that readers would really want to check out if they like this kind of book.

We have an opportunity here to make it an easier decision for them by having a book description that sounds really fantastic.

James Blatch: Yeah. We've talked about the two seconds or so that the browser settles their eyes on the page. I guess within those two seconds you've got this chance, if the cover's done its job, the title's done its job, their eyes flick down to the copy pretty quickly, down to the blurb and start reading it.

**You're in a very tight zone here to capture this sale, hence I guess you're going to say every word is important.**

Bryan Cohen: I think of it almost like poetry in that we need to make sure every word has its purpose, we have nothing extraneous here, and that can scare authors because it's definitely a different kind of writing than writing the words in your book.

These are the words outside of your book, and they need a lot of attention for sure.

James Blatch: It's a great irony, isn't it? That you write this 100,000 words that you may spend, in my case best part of a decade sweating over, and normal authors a year or so, and yet suddenly it's really down to these 50 words or so, which are going to make all that worthwhile or not.

That said, you've had a good look at this and you've actually sent me in advance, and we'll give a link out in a minute if people want to download this themselves, a kind of before and after version of the blurb.

**Why don't I ask you first of all what you thought of the blurb?**

Bryan Cohen: I actually think that David's first blurb had some really nice things going for it, especially with the tone, because this is a madcap Florida thriller with a lot of comedic elements.

I think that David really pulled that off with some silly details in here. We've got this main character who's just kicking back to fish, and then he found a silly hat with a peacock feather in it, and he looked Matthew McConaughey good. Those are all really funny elements. I think those aspects of the tone really work.

What I think we miss out a little bit on is that setting up this character as a character in not just a comedy, but a comedy thriller. These genre mashups are sometimes difficult to portray.

How much thriller do we include? How much comedy do we include? We need to make sure we're playing to the base. There are a lot more thriller readers than there are comedy readers, which is unfortunate. I'm a former improv comedian myself, so I know this all too well.

We want to make sure that we get readers who are interested in this genre to be interested enough in both the character and the cliffhanger of where the character is when we leave them at the end of this description. We want to make sure they're interested enough in those couple of things to go click that buy button.

James Blatch: Okay. People can follow along, as we've been saying through this podcast, if you go to Hat Check by David Berens on Amazon, you can read the blurb. We're going to ask him to keep everything in place at least until this podcast has gone out. Then, if he wants to, he can take some of the advice that's been handed out.

So you think he did a good job, and the Matthew McConaughey, I actually quite like that, and I mentioned that to Jenny. Whilst not everyone's read Carl Hiaasen and so on, you can certainly compare yourself with the other. That's a very important thing to do. Matthew McConaughey, that transcends a lot of people will be familiar with him.

**It does evoke a certain quirkiness I thought fitted quite well to this.**

Bryan Cohen: Yeah. I agree that details like that are fun. In my version obviously, if you guys can see the version on the site and follow along with it, you'll see that my team and I did end up extracting that version.

But as I always say, nobody is perfect in their creation of these things. If you work on a blurb, try to decide on it, maybe even post it for a couple weeks, and you see maybe the sales aren't as high as I want them to be, you can tweak these as much as you want.

This is one of the joys of being a self-published author. You can tweak the inside of the book as much as you want, and tweak the outside of the book as much as you want, and see where you end up.

I tend to leave out more specific details like the quirky Matthew McConaughey thing because I don't want to accidentally find this cross section of 40% of people who like madcap Florida thrillers who don't like Matthew McConaughey.

You want to avoid offending people or losing some people here and there, so that's why I tend to go more top down, more vague, less specific in order to try to appeal to as many people as possible. But hey, this is the quirky details that you want to include in these. You may as well try them, because it's worth a shot.

James Blatch: Yeah, testing and not thinking that the version you write is the final one that lives there forever. Have a look and start tweaking. I think that I'm not going to read out both blurbs because it'd take a while to do that-

Bryan Cohen: It would take a while.

James Blatch: People should look this up, and we will give out a URL hopefully by now that people can download the blurbs and other bits from this dissection.

He started with I think a fairly traditional sentence, headlining with the character Troy Clint Bodean had everything he needed for some peace and quiet, a good fishing pole, a pickup truck, a beach house on a small island in South Carolina.

All was right in the world, until he found the hat, a straw cowboy hat. Then a little bit of detail and stuff, and he ends up then moving into the comparison of other authors. You have started an unlucky hat, an unsolved murder, one man's trash is another man's death warrant. Now, I have to say, that is a signature Bryan Cohen opening.

Bryan Cohen: It is.

James Blatch: You can recognize your style, but straight away I have to say, and I hope David will think the same, that is a more compelling, snappier opening than David was able to do, and I would probably be able to do in the first draft.

### **Just before we go on, do you think it's easier to write a blurb for somebody else than to write it for yourself?**

Bryan Cohen: I think that it is easier. I think you have a little more distance from it. Obviously, I have a business that writes book descriptions, Best Page Forward.

We don't ask to read the book because one, it would take a long time, and we would probably have to charge much more because it would be that many hours that we would have to put in, but also I think that getting a more step back view, the bird's eye view of things, it allows us to focus on what's important.

I'm coming around, this is with a lot of help from my cowriter, Abigail Dunard, who also helps out with the Sell More Books Show. She has put this quite eloquently that you're not trying to take an 80,000 word book and condense it into the 50 to 100 words here. That would be too hard. That would be too complex.

It's much easier to condense the 80,000 words into something different and then use the smaller compact version to create the description, or to create a Bryan Cohen style headline, as you put it.

Every book has one main conflict if it's fiction, or it has one main takeaway if it's nonfiction. Obviously, books have lots of conflicts, or lots of takeaways. If you can say what is the number one conflict in this book, it's that Troy Clint Bodean has found a hat that makes him look fantastic, but there are people who want to kill him for wearing it.

That's really a conflict here, obviously, because he wants to fish and people are trying to kill him for wearing this hat. **This headline is based not on the entirety of the book, it's based on this conflict.** That is a much easier way to condense something that's very big into first that headline, and then keeping in mind, we're not trying to explain the entire plot here because it's too hard. The brain explodes from just the attempt of that.

But if we base it on this conflict, if we base it on what really the main crux of the book is, and what genre readers who like this kind of story would appreciate, then we are going to have a lot easier time of handling it.

James Blatch: I wonder if a good exercise to try and get that right, where you don't have the emotional baggage of it being your baby and trying to tell the whole story, is to write the blurb for another book, a book you know well, but you've written ... *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in my case. Write a blurb for that because you're obviously got a bit more distance to that.

Again, it's having them look at that and think let's take that same neutrality, that slight distanced where you're just thinking about selling the book to your own book, just as an exercise.

Bryan Cohen: I agree. Like anything, it's a muscle you have to build. I would absolutely recommend that exercise.

James Blatch: We've got the rest of your blurb here. Again, I'm not going to read it out, but I like the way it layers it up. You're basically saying, okay, if you're still reading this, you're up for a little bit more. It takes you one sentence to the next.

Each sentence is carefully crafted here, and it looks and feels like that. Quite short sentences as well, which I like, and then a kind of dot dot dot at the end of the conflict description, if you like, the hook.

Then you've got a penultimate paragraph, which is a little bit description about the book. First book in by Troy Bodean, adventurous series of hilarious island thrillers. That's where in fact, funnily enough, up until that point, and I can see this is a deliberate thing, up until the word hilarious it wasn't completely clear that this was a comedy.

You have really gone with that thriller, that intrigue first. There are some quirky elements in there that might just hint at it not being a straightforward dark noir thriller, but you don't spell it out until that penultimate sentence. That's obviously deliberate.

Bryan Cohen: I think that we need to, almost subconsciously in a way, start telling the reader that this is not just a straight thriller. We have some puns in a way. There's the line Troy wonders if his favorite new fishing hat could throw him overboard. We have if he can't crack the case soon, instead of catching bass he'll be swimming with the fishes.

These are not the kind of lines I would use, or that my company would use for a straight thriller, because it's silly. Now, it's not hit over the head silly, but it is silly.

So to realize that this is going to have funny elements and it's a thriller, we try to clarify that towards the end, because there are turning points in a description.

Some people will make a decision on buying after the first line. Some people will make a decision after reading the synopsis and ending with that dot dot dot.

If people haven't made a decision to buy at that point, we need to start telling them what are they going to get out of this book, because they're still reading this so they still haven't made a decision.

We need to make it clear, this is a funny book with thriller elements. There are some things, madcap murder mysteries, gripping suspense, zany characters, that if you like those things, you'll love this.

And then that it's a rollicking thrill ride at the end. If they haven't made a decision by then, maybe they'll look at some more of your customer reviews, but you want to give them the opportunity to know this is what the book is, and this is why we think you should get it.

James Blatch: Yeah. Great. We're going to allow people to download these before and after as example of how this works. We'll find out what David thinks.

I have to say, he's completely up for this analysis. He's very excited about hearing everything, and who wouldn't be, from these experts. Our point about this is to use the specifics of one book, and we'll do this at least two more times this year, to try and talk in more general terms about the

importance of this, and I think you've done that well, Bryan. You're not David.

In particular, this concept of hurdles people are coming up to, how do you get them over? How do you get them onto the cover? How do you get them off the cover, onto the blurb? How do you get from the blurb to the buy it now, to stick it in there?

You've got to look at it like that. You can't be slack at one point. You can't think I'm going to be slightly self-indulgent. Every word is critical. It's a numbers game, right? A few thousand people will browse your webpage.

**You need to get that small percentage as big as possible for conversion.**

Bryan Cohen: I completely agree. It's a small percentage increase of sales when you improve the cover, small increase of percentage of sales when you improve the blurb. You make those tiny incremental changes, and they really do add up.

James Blatch: Bryan, until our next one, thank you very much indeed from Chicago, Illinois.

Bryan Cohen: Thank you for having me. This was so fun to work on. I can't wait to work on victim number two somewhere down the line.

James Blatch: We really hope that all the bugs and illnesses in the Cohen household are eradicated shortly.

Bryan Cohen: Me too. We'll keep going to the pediatrician until they give us the right cocktail.

James Blatch: Yeah. Get those drugs, get those meds. Brilliant, thanks Bryan.

I think that was probably the most significant feedback. Not to belittle, the cover is absolutely huge, but significant in the way David marketed and placed this book was not optimal. That's something that Bryan nailed very early on.

He basically said go for the mass market. You've got a thriller that's got comic elements, sort of comic thriller. If you start with that, you've immediately narrowed down your potential audience to people who think they only like comic thrillers.

What you need to do, as Bryan made obvious, is go for the huge market which is thrillers and then start narrowing it down later so you've already got people drawn in.

Bryan's blurb is fantastic. We're huge fans of Bryan and the way he writes his pithy blurbs anyway, but I loved his delivery in this. David fell over himself when he read it.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, definitely. Bryan knows what he's doing. He's written lots of blurbs. He's written a couple for me actually. He certainly knows what he's doing.

It's really good advice to go slightly wider, to make your targeting thriller readers, because then you'll catch people who like Carl Hiaasen, obviously he writes those kinds of funny thrillers. But then also you get people who are Elmore Leonard's fans. Elmore Leonard wrote not necessarily funny books, but there were moments of lightheartedness for sure in most of his books.

By widening the scope of the blurb out just a little bit, David's able to encompass those as well so he's potentially fishing in a slightly larger pool. That was very wise advice from Mr. Cohen.

James Blatch: On the PDF you can see the before and after, and it's quite striking, those two differences of that copy.

Okay, the final bit of feedback, our most difficult in a way, is for our resident editorial expert. Jenny Parrott has done some interviews on the podcast in the past. Jenny looked at the look inside.

We're trying to work out in the interview with David, somebody will know this, how much the look inside is. He thought it was 10% of the book. Seems like a lot to me, but it is a lot of page in the look inside. I'm not sure how they cut off, at what point.

But anyway, there's a decent chunk of book there. We've reproduced that on the PDF as well, as it was at the time that it was submitted to Jenny. This was Jenny Parrott's editorial feedback on the opening few pages of David Berens' book Hat Check.

Jenny, first of all, welcome back to the podcast. I have to tell you, your appearance was one of the highlights of the podcast in the last year or so. We had so many compliments about that. People lapped up the way that you spoke very incisively about writing and story and narrative. Welcome back.

Jenny Parrott: Thanks very much for saying. It's lovely to be back. I wasn't expecting to start off with that, so how nice.

James Blatch: No, it's absolutely true. There's lots of requests to get you back to do a proper chat, which I know you're snowed under with work at the moment, but at some point in the next year we'll get you back.

Jenny Parrott: Oh yeah. No, I'd be happy to come back. Happy to come back.

James Blatch: Great. I was just saying off air that Bryan Cohen's looking at the blurb and Stuart's looking at the cover of this book. You've actually got quite a difficult task, because it's not really an editor's role to look at eight pages of a book and give critical feedback, but I suppose it is a consideration in this day and age where there is this look inside element.

**Suddenly, it does become an almost added extra, how the beginning of your book works.**

Jenny Parrott: I mean, the thing is you get probably five seconds for a grazer on Amazon to be hooked. The whole package has to be right. I think it can be quite hard to get over to authors, and actually some publishers, just how crucial that is.

That starts completely from the metadata that is pushing how people discover the book, the keywords that they're doing. But it also means that everything's got to make sense instantly, and that isn't always very easy to do.

James Blatch: There's got to be a clarity. Every small thing has got to immediately convey what it is, like the genre, whether it's humorous, all the rest of it, so you don't have a lot of scope.

**I know Stuart says this in the cover, it's not a time to be clever and subtle.**

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely not. It really, really isn't. I think what often happens, particularly with cover designs, is authors get very hooked on how they want their cover to look, but they don't realize what it looks like if someone's searching on their phone on Amazon. That's the thing, make it easy for someone to want to at least press on your button, to go inside your sales pitch to see if they do want to buy.

James Blatch: Yeah.

## **What did you think of David F. Berens' presentation of Hat Check?**

Jenny Parrott: Right. What I thought was he's done it for the US market, and what he needs to realize is that territories are different. For me, instantly I was thinking the cover looks too American. The blurb isn't too bad, but he needs to get a couple, or at least one British writer as a comp writer.

James Blatch: When you say a comp writer ...

Jenny Parrott: He references Carl Hiaasen. I did make a note of the others. I think it's Tim Dorsey and Randy Wayne White, neither of which I've read. Randy and Tim, neither of them are published straight into the British market, so you're buying through the US publisher. That just isn't as appealing for British writers.

If you click on book pages on Amazon, you wouldn't necessarily go there. Actually, I think his writing's fine. I can completely see that people who enjoy Carl Hiaasen would like him, but he's just got to get a bit more market smart.

James Blatch: I did like the way he mentioned Matthew McConaughey in the description, because that's universal, isn't it?

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. Matthew's been in True Detective. He's hip at the moment. He's a bit current. He won an Oscar a couple of years ago. I'm thinking he did win an Oscar.

James Blatch: That translates, doesn't it, to the UK? And probably Spain and France and Australia and New Zealand as well?

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely, yes. But then you get a bit further down the page and you see that the author hasn't populated his author page other than to put a photograph on there.

Under the book description, there's a biography which is very tennis based. It's not talking really about his writing, what he's doing with his books. But then the other page which the authors have to fill in themselves, where you can link into your various books, all he's got is a photo there.

That is the opportunity for him to kind of set out his manifesto. I love to write books around rivers or whatever it is. Years of reading Carl Hiaasen made me wonder whether I could do the same. At that point, you can put in your own website and those links.

The reason being is you want to engage your readers, and it is harder in a different country. Some of those smaller, almost domestic seeming details, they might be the thing that makes some people want to read one of his books.

James Blatch: Yes. Okay, I can see that. Just looking at his page, you're quite right. In fact, there's even that slightly embarrassing thing saying, "Are you the author? Why not fill in these details here?" So obviously he hasn't clicked on that and done that yet.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely, and that is something that all writers need to do. Actually, a lot of people, even when they're published, their publishers don't tell them that that is the page for them to fill in and to control.

**James Blatch: You'd think for that 82% they might fill that in for them.**

Jenny Parrott: It doesn't work like that. Also, because it's sort of in my own life as a writer, I publish under two pseudonyms with different publishers, so neither would have access to that.

Particularly with crime writers, say, it could be in 10 years time someone like David would have four publishers, or you'd go to different imprints or whatever.

You need to be in control. That is the slot where you display your whole career. But it is different to the author biography that is linked into that specific book.

James Blatch: Yeah, okay. In terms of the writing.

**Actually, the look inside part; what would you say to somebody in general terms about the opening pages of your novel?**

Jenny Parrott: Right. What has happened, and we cannot escape this, is that since people have been reading on devices, people give up much earlier. It's a difficult line to walk because I think in a way, for people who are reading in a genre and they're very familiar with it, the start that tries to pull you in, but it's very abrupt, very deliberately shocking, those get to seem samey after a while.

On the other hand, you do not have 20 pages to gently tempt your reader. If you're a literary writer, or if you're an established writer already, those rules grow. You have a fan base that wants to read you and wants to return.

What you want is you want to engage your readers, you want to interest them, and you want them to turn the pages, but you don't want to seem like 100 other books.

**James Blatch: This James Bond opening, the fire and fury, that you think becomes a bit repetitive.**

Jenny Parrott: I think it can do. I was at an event this week and they had five debut novelists who had just been published this month reading, and nearly all of them did the first bit of their books.

Actually, it was no surprise that C.J. Tudor, whose novel *The Chalk Man* sold for a seven figure advance in the UK ... I mean, it is a phenomenal

book, but it's no surprise I think that her intro really made you want to go on.

James Blatch: Right. Intriguing, or?

Jenny Parrott: It just talked about a dead body in a wood in a really imaginative way. It also then set up the story. A dismembered body in the wood, because this bit of the story is 30 years before the action of the book, but somebody who is in the later section takes just the head. The bit ended with the quite philosophical paragraph talking about the police and their investigation and the body being put back together on the table in the morgue, except the head which was never found. You just think, "I want to know."

James Blatch: Yes.

Jenny Parrott: A very, very clever one.

There was another crime writer there called Will Dean with a book called Dark Pines. He's a British writer living in Sweden. He's written a Scandian noir novel, written from the point of view of a deaf woman journalist, so he's broken lots of rules here.

That book starts with a moose attacking this journalist in her car in the middle of a forest. Again, only at the end does it move on to a slight hint that this is going to be a crime story, but what it does do is give you this really, really atmospheric, dark, threatening atmosphere.

James Blatch: I was just going to say, I know what you'll end up saying. It's basically, the rules that apply to why somebody wants to read your book will apply in the same way to these first few pages, it's just that you've got to use a lot more skill to somehow get that.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely. You've got to be a people whisperer. You've got to understand the psychology of how people read.

I think what happens with most writers, because you spent hours and hours in front of your screen, you're really invested in your book, and you naturally think other people will be invested in your book.

But people who really do believe that, I really would recommend going to a supermarket and watch people grazing. WHSmith's, people lift a book up, "Mm, no," back. It's kind of the same online. You know that if you key in, I don't know, Florida detective humor in Amazon, I'm sure you get a whole host of writers up. What you have to say, if you're David Berens, what can I do to make sure it's mine they want to click onto?

James Blatch: Okay. Well, let's talk a little bit before we finish about the actual writing.

In these early pages that we can see in the look inside, we meet two characters. The first one is a kind of aspiring politician, and there's a fairly gripping opening. It is a bit of a Bond opening scene. I do like the opening line about tasting the gun barrel in his mouth.

Jenny Parrott: I liked it. Yeah, wearing my publishing hat, this whole opening section I have no criticisms with at all. This is a pacey writer. He writes well. He's good with dialogue. Everything kind of feels the right length. There's not a massive information dump.

Literally, an energy is set up that is kept going forward. Actually, that is something that I would encourage all writers to think about, is to try and keep the tempo moving, because that's what makes people want to read. He nicks in characters very quickly. You've got the person who gets murdered. You've got the police coming in. Then you've got the people that find the body. And then you've got the young woman who kind of fancies the, I can't remember what he's called now, Troy.

You've built the character of Troy up. This author actually is quite good, master class, on getting a lot going quite soon. He really did make me think of Carl Hiaasen for that.

What then happens, certainly in Carl Hiaasen's case, you know that then you can get almost into a madcap caper because you're just really organized. Other writers who do it, anyone who wants to write in this genre, I would say read more Elmore Leonard's *Get Shorty* and whatever the other one is that's back-to-back with that. Is it *Back Out*? Anyway, I can't remember.

James Blatch: Listen to *Me* or *Talk to Me* or something, isn't it? What is it now? It's the line that's repeated in *Get Shorty* is the name of the next novel, but I can't remember it now.

Jenny Parrott: Yes, that's right.

James Blatch: Look at *Me*.

Jenny Parrott: That's it, yeah.

James Blatch: Was it? Anyway.

Jenny Parrott: I can't remember. Actually, this is one of those things to show, but titles, they're double edged sword.

*Get Shorty*, what a brilliant title. Everyone remembers that. We're groping for the one that's a bit more difficult. I don't like the title *Hat Check* because it feels a bit 1930s black and white musical to me. Or otherwise, you're thinking *Hat Check* of SoHo Jazz Club.

James Blatch: Yeah, it's a bit incongruous, isn't it?

Jenny Parrott: Yes. You can see right from the off why it's called Hat Check. A hat is involved, and it's literally got a check in it, but of course that's a pun that doesn't work brilliantly in British because we spell check differently.

James Blatch: But you also needed to have read the book to get the title. I was told when I was coming up with title for my debut novel not to put something that only made sense when you read the book, doesn't make sense as a title.

Jenny Parrott: Absolutely, yeah. I mean, you know, everybody can name titles that shouldn't make sense, and they've become iconic because that book sold many hundreds of thousands. But most books don't sell anything like that, and titles are really crucial. The other thing about Hat Check is it doesn't say it's crime.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: That is something that ideally you'd want to be nodding towards that genre a bit.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jenny Parrott: Particularly these days, I think.

James Blatch: Yeah. I completely agree with you about the writing of the look inside, for what it's worth. It doesn't really matter what I think, but I did think that it's quite difficult.

For me, I don't know what it is, but you need to get to like a character. Something has to happen. It usually takes me longer I think than most people to feel ... But actually, by the end of this 10 pages, whatever it is, I really liked Troy, and I loved the moment where the boat kept chasing him and you're going, "Get out of ..." That really did a lot of character building very quickly.

Jenny Parrott: Yeah, that's it. In fact, this author did an absolutely brilliant example of that, and it shows how deftly character can be built, not using very many words. He does it through showing rather than telling.

It's very visual, the writing. You see what he's like. He's sitting there and he's looking around, and there's the boats in the water. It just suddenly all starts going a bit wrong, but then it's kind of going right for him. He doesn't realize this. He's got the simply hot girl watching him, the hat's coming his way that's got this huge amount of money tucked in the place that presumably he's going to discover later on.

It's very engaging. He doesn't seem two-dimensional. He seems like a real person, in a way. Or a real person in a film. You can imagine Matthew, I don't know how you say his last name.

James Blatch: McConaughey.

Jenny Parrott: Yeah, McConaughey being this character.

James Blatch: Yeah, quirky. Absolutely. I thought that he did a really good job of that. Good. Just to round off, is the look inside something that's come across your table before?

### **Has anyone ever asked you about it, specifically about the beginning of the novel?**

Jenny Parrott: Yes. Actually, what I would have done with this author, I would have moved the pictures of the other books. There's an acknowledgments bit. I'd put all of that at the back.

Don't waste your pages on something that no one cares whether you're dedicating your book to your cat or whatever. I mean, he hasn't, but it doesn't matter him thanking his agent or whatever he does. If the book is

good enough, at this point you don't need to advertise the others, because once people have read the book, they'll find the others. If you're not hooking them in enough, they're never going to read those other books anyway. I would always say just get on with it.

James Blatch: I'm pretty certain in a moment Mark's going to say exactly that as well. I think he's already picked that up. Yes, I mean, there's a mailing list signup, but that's about it. Mark's the same.

Acknowledgements, dedications, who cares? To be frank. You care, I care in my book, and I desperately want to say thank you to people, but all the advice is stick that at the back and get on with the book.

Jenny Parrott: Stick it at the back, yeah. In print books, you get the, I can't remember what it's called now, like the copyright page. Sometimes that's where authors, there will be a link right at the start to their website or whatever. You can always put it in again at the back.

You can tell in print editions, if there's lots of pages at the front, it's because of printing and the way that works, because all books are printed in bundles of pages of 16 pages.

James Blatch: Because the way they fold.

Jenny Parrott: Yes. It's called choirs, I think. But if, say, all your multiples of 16 are there and then you get a one, then suddenly you're thinking I don't want to have 15 blank pages at the end, and that's where you might spread things out.

Often by paperback, there's been a bit of wriggling. You're just literally one page, "Oh, we're starting now." That can be a difference between your first publication and your second.

James Blatch: Brilliant. Jenny, thank you so much. Incisive feedback, as always. I'm sure David will appreciate that.

I'm really pleased also that you did take a holistic look at it, because it's a bit unfair to say to you just talk about the writing here, because you're absolutely right, it's a presentational matter that goes together in those precious seconds.

Jenny Parrott: Completely, yes. I would say the balance of the presentational to the writing probably 60 or 70% presentation, 30% writing. And actually it absolutely does what it sets out to do.

I would think he could have a really good career, if not necessarily a worldwide good a career, but certainly a good career in America if he just tightened-

James Blatch: There's some tweaking to do, isn't there? Okay, well that's useful.

Jenny Parrott: Yes. The rest of it. The reason he might not translate necessarily across the world brilliantly is it's so American specific, and because it feels a bit like Carl Hiaasen. That might be a problem long-term, but that doesn't mean he can't come up with another series that has that way of working.

James Blatch: Yeah, slightly more international accessible. Brilliant.

Jenny Parrott: Brilliant.

James Blatch: So that was Jenny, somebody else who nailed a few key points quite early on.

Straight away to say that both Jenny and I really liked the look inside. It's a really well written book from its early glimpse. You got a lot of character. I

mean, that's the trick, isn't it? To get people to like, have empathy with the character, and want to know more about him.

I thought he did all of that straight away, and Jenny thought he did as well. But Jenny picked up a few points about whether it was going to travel internationally, and I think that David is going to make some changes to that as well.

Mark Dawson: I liked it as well. Without giving away too many trade secrets, I picked this book for the first of the Book Lab segments, and I thought it was certainly highly proficient. I liked the sample as well.

David's a good writer. I just felt that it needed a bit of tweaking, and that's what Jenny has been able to do for him. I'm looking forward to seeing what changes he makes when he gets a chance to sit down at his laptop and make those amendments.

James Blatch: I think it's time to hear from the man himself then, David Berens, who's actually a tennis instructor in Tennessee. He has been thrilled, to say the least, as you will find out in a moment.

Let's hear from David, who's had all the feedback. He's read it. He's already at the point, we did this interview just a couple of days ago, he's revised his cover, he's revised his blurb. I think he's taken word-for-word effectively what Bryan said. Let's go through it with David now.

So David F. Berens, here you are in the flesh.

David Berens: Here I am. Finally.

**James Blatch: You've been our first victim. How did it feel?**

David Berens: It was great. It's fantastic. Little bit nerveracking at the beginning, but everything turned out fine. Everything was great, and I learned a lot from all these guys. Well appreciated, for sure.

James Blatch: I think it's been a really good thing. I have to say, Mark had a really good idea with this Book Lab. As we started to do the interviews, the devil's always in the detail in every walk of life, right? You can talk in general terms, you've got to have a great cover.

The devil's in the detail, so when you start to get experts looking at specific things, you learn. What should we start with? I mentioned the cover there in passing, should we start with the cover then?

David Berens: Sure.

James Blatch: You had this cover for Hat Check, which we showed to Stuart. Stuart gave his feedback that it looks a little bit cartoonish in places. Stuart's always one who looks at what is this cover telling me about the genre expectation of the book, and he felt there was a little bit of a mismatch there.

### **How did you feel about that feedback?**

David Berens: I agree. That was part of a struggle that I've had for the entire publication of this book, because there is a bit of a genre mashup there.

You've got elements of thriller and elements of humor, so drawing that line is pretty tricky. I had two professional covers done, and the first one I got back was pure romance. Bare chested Troy, the whole bit. Turned that down of course. That wasn't at all what I needed.

Went back to them and they sent me a silhouette of Troy and sort of a sunset scene in the back, and that was passable. Then I gave up on designers, because I was obviously going in the wrong direction with those

guys. Their work was great, but it was a really tough thing to nail down what I needed.

It's funny because the interview started with Stuart and you said something like, "We're going to go down and deep dive into Dave's cover," and he got this really maniacal grin on his face. I was like, "Oh no, here it comes."

But he made some incredible points, and in going through that I was able to see what I needed to do with the cover much more clearly than I had done before.

The main thing that he said, I think he said it 10 times, if not more, is he says narrative. "I wanted a narrative from the cover." Though my cover was attractive and bright and fit the genre and all of that, I think I was definitely missing out on narrative. I went back and of course redesigned it with some of his tips in mind.

James Blatch: Originally you had this wave and hat, and the book ... I can't remember now since we did the interview. What is it underneath the hat?

That is one of the problems with the cover. I'm looking at your original cover now, still trying to quite disassemble it. You did a bit of work having listened to the interview, and you've already sent over to me and to Stuart your reworking of it.

**I think Stuart's already given you some feedback on that, hasn't he?**

David Berens: He has. I emailed him and said, "Hey, this has turned it around." I think one of the points he made was I was looking at it from a thumbnail point of view and I literally designed my cover for a thumbnail size.

When you look at it, you can see the name is huge, the title is huge, the elements in the middle are huge. He said things are competing with each

other. Obviously, it's more illustrated, and I think I was leaning into the humor element maybe a little too much.

I went back with the thought that ... He was very kind to me and said, "Oh, Dave must be a bestseller." This book has been very successful for me, but it's not enough probably for my name to sell the book or to sell my work, so I decided that the title would be much more important and should dominate the top, rather than my name, so I sort of flipped those two.

Then he talked about the clip arty look to it, and I did that intentionally, because again, I was leaning into the humor more than I was the thriller aspect. Luckily, he said, "Don't sell yourself short. You might be going into that niche genre too much, and people might be turned off that might otherwise read a thriller."

I think a great example of that for me was I went back and looked at some covers of thriller writers who had elements of humor, but they weren't full-on Carl Hiaasen or zany works, and said, "What do their covers look like?"

I worked on it from there with a much more photographic element, even though I still made it illustrate some, I still gave it some illustration look, and tried my best to create a narrative. That's where Stuart I think lead me in the right direction. I think it looks a lot less, he said plonked on. The elements come together a lot better.

James Blatch: It looks great. It looks terrific. I love the new cover, and I agree with Stuart that it's a huge improvement. This was, I think, an initial try.

**Are you going to stick with this or have you made some modifications to the one that people can see on the PDF we're giving out?**

David Berens: I've polished it a little bit, but not something that you would notice. There are parts that I wanted to stand out a little more, or not be so dim in the background.

I changed some of the lighting. But for the most part, that's the way it'll appear, and it'll guide the look of the series now too.

James Blatch: Yeah, I was going to say, my final question on the cover really is the series, because one striking element of the original covers, and a really positive element is very identifiable. You used colors very well there.

### **Changing one cover means you've got to change them all.**

David Berens: Yeah, and it was a good experience because I had the layout of the first one done. I had fonts and things all chosen, and he made mention of my fonts that were bad. Again, I chose those from a standpoint of a thumbnail, so I chose the biggest font I could get, the boldest font I could get, and maybe that wasn't the best way to go. I still tried to stay true to ... I wanted to be able to recognize everything in the thumbnail, but I tried to get ... He mentioned a couple of fonts, and I did use those.

Once I had that layout set, it was easy to go through the covers and say, "Okay, again, what's the narrative? What's the major element?" Not try to get all the elements in there, and again, stick with that same theme throughout.

Instead of the background of the cover being a major color, I now made the title bring out that color. If Hat Check is sort of orange, part of the title's orange and part of my name is orange.

And in the next one, Ocean Blue, the background of course is blue, so part of the title is blue, part of my name is blue. I carried the theme together with the colors in a different way, so it's really neat. It's a pretty cool experience.

James Blatch: Nice. You've got a nice eye for design.

**You feel that you've learnt something, not just specifically about these covers, but you've learnt something about cover design through this?**

David Berens: Oh, absolutely. I mean, Stuart nailed it. As I listened to him, I was like, "Oh, my goodness, he is spot on." He's obviously a professional.

When I was watching some of the footage that you sent me of him, I thought, "Why did I not see this?" But that's what he's so good at.

His guidance led me in a way that I could make a cover, again, on my own, so that I took elements from his expertise and was able to make I think a much better cover, I hope. It's been excruciating not to launch it, but I hope it comes across really well.

James Blatch: We appreciate the fact you've held off until this moment. This is probably a good time to mention Stuart's cover design course, which is available at [selfpublishingformula.com/design](https://selfpublishingformula.com/design). Would be remiss of me if you want to learn directly from the master on that.

Okay, let's move on, because there's something on this cover which leads us to the next point. You can see a little bit of tagline, I guess it is, above your author name which says an unlucky hat, an unsolved murder, one man's trash is another man's death warrant. What a natty bit of blurb.

**How did you come up with that? So let's talk about the blurb and what you got from Bryan Cohen.**

David Berens: Yeah, Bryan is obviously another genius at what he does. It's so funny because we talked about it, I agonized over the blurb.

Writing the book, no big deal, right? That's an understatement, but writing the book was much easier than the blurb. Boy, again, listening to him talk about it, I was like, "What was I thinking? Why didn't I think of that?"

His major point was what's the conflict. You're not summarizing the plot. You're saying, every book supposedly has a major conflict, and what is it?

There's no doubt in this one it's the hat, and there are people that want to kill our major character to get that hat because it's got a lot of money in it. That's the major conflict, and he just boiled it down to this two or three phrase sentence that just grabs you.

I said, "Oh my gosh, that's perfect, and it needs to go on the cover for the blurb." It's going to go of course into the Amazon page where the description is in bold. It just nailed it.

I think the phrase he used is he wanted a 10,000 foot view of the book, rather than a detailed list of what happens, and that's what I was trying to do because every author leads that way.

James Blatch: I think so, and I think that's a very common thing. I think it's a very common thing to really struggle with the blurb. You're joking about easy writing a book, and I hear that joke, but it is easy to write things when you've got 10,000 words to do it, and difficult when you've got 150 or whatever, which is why tabloid newspaper journalists actually work harder than the guys who write for the New York Times, because they get a lot more time to tell stories.

David Berens: Exactly.

James Blatch: You've taken that on board, and again, I'll ask that same question:

**You feel you've learnt something about blurb writing, not just specifically about this thing?**

David Berens: Absolutely, yeah. It's similar to Stuart's advice in that I want the cover to have a narrative, and that's it. Don't try to tell the story on the cover, just give it a little bit of the feel of what's going to happen inside.

Bryan's advice is where is the conflict, and really hone in on that conflict for your blurb. In his advice also, personally for my book, he said maybe I was getting a little too specific with that humor thriller niche, and I don't want to ostracize a regular thriller reader who might be interested in this by saying it's a zany Florida fiction style book, and they might say, "Oh, that's not for me," and move on.

Bryan's advice was perfect, dead on. Play to the base, which is thriller readers, instead of playing to that niche category. Hopefully with all this help, I'll expand a little bit.

James Blatch: I think a very clever bit of blurb that Bryan came up with, and I think one of the things it does is it does both that, because two thirds of it is really at that base, at that thriller base. It just narrows down towards the end, by which point I think hopefully a thriller person ...

**Actually, a lot of readers reading that blurb will think, "I'd quite like to read that book." It's a really appealing description.**

David Berens: I wanted to read it. After I read his description, I said, "You know, I should go back and read this again." Yeah, it's fantastic. His work fortunately did the entire blurb for me, so I will keep it as-is because it's just genius. It's pure genius the whole way through.

I know Bryan a little bit off of the show, and I said, "Man, this is fantastic. I want you to do the whole ..." He's going to do my whole series. I'm going

to contract him, and he's got a special going on right now, so I got to jump in and get a special price. Absolutely fantastic working with him too.

James Blatch: I'm pleased Bryan got a bit of work out of that. He will get some work from others as well, I think.

David Berens: Absolutely.

James Blatch: And again, on the PDF that goes along with this episode is the before and after of that. Okay, which brings us onto, not the whole book because it would've been lovely for the sake of completion to hand your entire novel over to an editor to give us notes on. In reality, we had to work with ... Actually, the look inside sections are, I don't know how they limit it, but it's a fairly chunky size of the opening, isn't it?

David Berens: I think it's 10% maybe. Maybe it's 10%. I'm not sure about that.

James Blatch: That's not bad. So you heard Jenny talk about this.

### **What were your feelings on what she said?**

David Berens: I started with the idea that I would try to broaden the authors that I had mentioned in the blurb. I actually listened to her interview first, and she mentioned that some people might not know some of these writers if they were a UK audience or an international audience. I said, "Okay, I'll go and search for some authors," and I did that and I came up with a list of a few.

But then when I got to Bryan's blurb, he had sort of removed those references and I thought, "You know, I kind of like it without them." So I may not put those in there.

But I did learn that the author central page on the US site does not automatically propagate to the UK site. You guys were not seeing my author page, but it's there on the US. I went and you sign in and it says, "Oh, is this you?"

You still have to copy and move over your bio, but now the UK page is there. I did not know that. I had no idea that that was not showing up, and that you have to double the work.

**James Blatch: Well that's a good learning point for all of us.**

David Berens: I had started my publishing career doing a little bit of nonfiction too. I'm a tennis instructor, so I have a couple of tennis books. I had put a bio up that was very tennis centric.

Well, that has not been my major writing focus. The thriller line, this series, has come through and been my major focus. I had just forgotten that the bio was like that, so I went in and, to her suggestion, I said things that were much more related to the genre, much more related to my writing, and much more related to the field that I wanted my readers to get from me, so that's definitely changed.

I loved the part where you guys were talking about Elmore Leonard and his books, because they are a major influence on the style and the tone and that sort of thing. I really enjoyed listening to her, and it gave me a lot of really fine points to adjust on my author page. And frankly, I think she liked the look inside portion.

James Blatch: She did, yeah.

David Berens: But soon after we set that up, I hired an editor to go back through and just polish it one more time. I had bought a fairly inexpensive editor in the beginning, just because it was the beginning.

I went back and hired a professional that I met through the SPF Facebook page and said, "Look, I want you to go through and, a little bit of proofreading, but more story editing and plot editing and that sort of thing." I think the whole book should click along at a pretty good pace that I think she picked up on and liked, and I appreciated that comment as well.

James Blatch: Yeah, well I liked it as well. I think that both of us thought that you somehow, in a quite short period of time, put a lot of character in there.

Immediately, Troy became somebody who you liked, was intrigued by, and you kind of got this sense, which can take a long time to get a sense of a character. I had a sense of him almost straight away, I can't believe this is me again, this is happening to me. The reluctant hero type thing sure came across quite early on, and that's a trick to pull that off.

David Berens: Troy is inspired by a real person, so it's easy to write from that perspective. It's easy when you have a very defined picture of what a character is, especially when he takes on characteristics that you know in real life, it's a little bit easier to write it. I can't say I take all of the credit, but at least I put it on paper.

James Blatch: No, it was great. Good.

David Berens: Thank you.

James Blatch: That was the most difficult, within this framework we've created for Book Lab, the most difficult, because you can't rewrite big chunks of the book.

**But some of that, I guess what Jenny talked about, obviously it's related to your author page and presentation, but some of it might relate to your future writing as well.**

David Berens: The part I think that was most difficult about her interview was the title. The title, and I've agonized over it many times, what to call the book, what to name it.

I went into a formula of two words, wanted to keep it really simple and really recognizable. Of course, I named it again trying to define the plot in two words.

Do I like it? I like it now because it's been there for so long, and I probably won't change it for that reason. I don't want to lose the continuity. It's funny, because I think it'll guide me going forward, what's the name of the book from now on. I might have some titles that are a little more thriller-esque because you want that reader to say, "Ooh, I like that. I want to read that."

That was the toughest part. I agonized over whether to change it, or to fix it, or mess with it a little bit. It's been there so long that I think it's tough to go backwards, but I can definitely take that advice and go forwards.

**James Blatch: Hat Check, the panel, the double meaning is it refers to checking your hat as you go into a restaurant or something, is that?**

David Berens: Correct.

James Blatch: Okay, so I don't think that translates into UK particularly well. We don't use the word ... We do actually, because most American language is being used every day here now just because of TV and everything.

It didn't quite resonate with me either. It didn't quite work. I think that's one of Jenny's fears actually, was good writer, you've can build yourself a good career, but she worried a bit about how you'll travel internationally.

David Berens: Yeah. I definitely thought she was spot on. Even the spelling of check is quite different. When you look at it, most certainly it's very

American, obviously. And that, unfortunately, is my bias writing from that perspective, that I didn't think of that.

But it's nice that she's alerted me to that, and I've said to myself I need to consider those things. It's very odd, because I just ran a couple of ads with A/B testing and I tried to think of an international audience, and the one that I actually spoke a little more internationally is performing way better. Who knows.

It could just be a simple change of a few phrases here and there that lead people to be more comfortable with it internationally. Any sale is a good sale.

James Blatch: Absolutely. It's good for the import market. Good for the trade deficit over there.

David Berens: Exactly.

James Blatch: Every bit helps.

David Berens: That's right.

James Blatch: Brilliant. It's been great talking to you, David. You're out there in Knoxville, Tennessee.

David Berens: Knoxville, Tennessee. East Tennessee, eastern United States. Beautiful sunny weather. You can see, I had to try to close down all the blinds and everything.

James Blatch: David, it's been awful here today. And you're a tennis guy.

**I hope your tennis school is called don't go for Tennessee, get a tennis A. Is it called that?**

David Berens: It's not, but I'm writing it down. I'm writing it down right now.

James Blatch: You can have that one for free.

David Berens: Thank you, James.

James Blatch: That's brilliant. Well look, stay in touch, David. We'd love to see how you progress.

David Berens: Will do.

James Blatch: This will go out shortly. In fact, I'll liaise with you exactly when it's going to go out. I think from that point onwards, you're free to launch everything and put everything into place, and we'll see what difference it makes to those numbers.

David Berens: Excellent. James, it's been fantastic. If there was a product called Book Lab, I would buy it again for every book that I've been in.

Just the knowledge, the absolute expertise, and just within a few minutes nailed down things that I honestly do feel like will change a lot of what the series looks like.

Any good positive change you can make, you can only expect great things from that. It's been a blast, it's been really fun, and a great learning experience. Thank you for choosing me. I appreciate it very much.

James Blatch: Hey, you've been an absolutely perfect first victim of Book Lab, and we're really pleased about it.

David Berens: Thank you very much.

James Blatch: There you go. I hope you liked my joke about the name of his tennis school should be don't get a Tennessee, get a tennis A.

Mark Dawson: Good god.

James Blatch: I'm on fire.

Mark Dawson: I'm almost speechless.

James Blatch: The Book Laboratory is all I'm going to say. There you go. David was really thrilled to get this.

And let you know, you can tell a lot by the way someone takes criticism. Although it was nicely delivered by lovely people, it is effectively criticism.

We do get, you and I, funnily enough, we did have an email yesterday did we not? From somebody who said that he could not learn anything from you, has nothing to learn. We both clicked on his link to his books and it was possibly the worst author website I've ever seen in my life.

Mark Dawson: I'm struggling to think of any worse than that. The covers also were absolutely diabolical.

James Blatch: Covers were terrible. And actually, when you read what they were, he's got a thriller series that has some legs potentially too. I'm thinking, you're sitting there on a potential thousands of pounds of income a year. Don't tell people you've learned everything.

Mark Dawson: To be honest, I didn't look far because everything else was so poor. No one is going to look that far. You went further than I did.

It's important, you need to be able to take criticism from people who are in a position to give useful advice. Obviously, David is wise enough to see that. We've got some really talented people working on Book Lab.

That would have cost ... I don't know how much it would've cost to get that kind of advice, the time they would've spent on his book and suggesting those improvements. It's certainly four figures for the three of them. He got all that, and of course, he's sensible, now he's going to think about it.

He's not obliged to take the advice. He can think about it, muse on it, and decide to go another way if he wants to. We get quite a lot of these people who'll say, "I know better." Well, okay, fair enough. Maybe you do. I've sold a million books, and I doubt Joe Bloggs whoever it was yesterday has sold more than a handful. There you go, but it's up to him. He's completely within his rights to tell me where to go and to stay on his own path.

**James Blatch: And in contrast, David Berens was all smiles, loved it, and couldn't wait to implement the advice he got. It was a big difference.**

Mark Dawson: We saw a lovely picture of him as well with his SPF mug.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: It was very nice to see.

James Blatch: He posted a picture on Facebook to say how pleased he's been with the whole process. We'll give it a couple of weeks. We'll give it a week for this podcast to get the majority of its listens out the way, and then I'm going to give him the green light to change everything.

And of course, we're going to keep in touch with David and find out in the future what difference it's made to his sales, because that is ultimately what this is all about. It's all about converting all that effort you put into writing a book, converting that into sales of the book so that you can fund your life with book sales.

Mark Dawson: I expect the next interview will be with him on a yacht. That's the plan.

James Blatch: Good. Well, I hope you've enjoyed this episode, because I really think it's been a great idea that I had some time ago to come up with this Book Lab.

Mark Dawson: You're fired.

James Blatch: And just to reiterate that, I have control of the nozzles here. I can twizzle your knob and turn you down.

Mark Dawson: Oh god.

James Blatch: Just to tell you that if you want a chance of being the next victim of our Book Lab, you can go to [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast) and sign up to be a gold level supporter of the podcast. I mean, you don't just get the opportunity to get in the Book Lab, you also get an SPF pin.

Mark Dawson: I've seen them, and they're great.

James Blatch: Are they?

Mark Dawson: They're really nice. We call them badges in the UK. If you say badge in the US, people won't know what we're talking about, so they're pins or badges, same thing really, but they look great.

For things like meetups, like at LBF, we'll give a few of those out I think to people who go to LBF and RWA and NINC for the rest of the year. They're really nice, something you can just pop on your lapel if you want to. Also, you get ...

**What else do you get, James? Someone gets both the courses, don't they?**

James Blatch: Yes, they get an opportunity. We give the 101 course away, and the ads course for the gold level subscribers. Silver is just 101.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, not everyone gets those.

James Blatch: No, no, no.

Mark Dawson: We pick one lucky winner.

James Blatch: You automatically get sent all the downloads and all the books as they appear. In fact, Damon Courtney emailed. He emailed not just me, but everybody who's a BookFunnel member, to say that they have linked BookFunnel to Patreon, which is fantastic.

We can now automatically deliver the books to our gold level supporters. Catherine, our VA, and I are going to work out the mechanics of that. It's really good little thing. I love these companies, they're constantly innovating.

Just on that note, Draft2Digital this week have also announced quite a good set of innovations. We have Kevin Tumlinson posting videos into their Facebook group, so check out Draft2Digital.

**Can you remember what that innovation is? Because I've now started this sentence.**

Mark Dawson: Author pages I think, if I'm not mistaken.

James Blatch: That's right, that's what it is, author pages. Good, we'll catch up with the D2D guys at some point probably in the States this year, because they're always around. They may even do their karaoke again, which they did in Florida last year. You missed that, Mark. Check out the voice, get yourself ready.

Mark Dawson: No one wants to hear that, trust me.

James Blatch: Okay. Look, we've managed to get through a whole episode without mentioning John Milton's escapades in Salisbury, but it's getting worldwide attention. Salisbury has never been so famous.

Mark Dawson: We had the prime minister here yesterday. We've had press helicopters overhead for most of the week. And I discovered yesterday that I know the people who discovered the two on the bench. They're parents at the school my daughter goes to.

James Blatch: Keep your distance.

Mark Dawson: Well, yes, exactly. Yeah, it's all pretty weird at the moment, but I'm calming down a little bit.

Just after this, I'm going to do a broadcast to my readers. I'm trying to do Friday Facebook Lives now for the readers, and that is something that I know will come up. There's a lot of people interested in that.

**James Blatch: You're broadcasting to the Dawson's Creek. Did you like that?**

Mark Dawson: It's very good. Yes. For those who didn't see, I was asking for people to give me a name for the show, as I'll probably look at it. I had maybe 150 suggestions between my readers and the SPF Facebook group, so we've got some good ones in there. That, unfortunately, will go very funny, James. It's not going to do a live take.

James Blatch: Dawson's Creek. I guess Dawson's Creek is a few years old now, so it might date. Mind you, your readers are all old. Okay, good.

Thank you very much indeed, Mark. Thank you very much indeed particularly to our three guest contributors.

Bryan, as you heard in the interview, got some work out of this because David Berens immediately placed an order for Bryan to do the blurb for all his other books. That's what Bryan does, so if that's piqued your interest in that service as well, Bryan is fantastic at that, so you can get hold of Bryan. Just [bryancohen.com](http://bryancohen.com). Should we check that?

Mark Dawson: Best Page Forward.

James Blatch: Best Page Forward. Yes, of course, that's Bryan. So thank you to Bryan, thank you to Jenny Parrott, and thank you to Stuart Bache, I always struggle to say his surname, for that, and particularly for David being a good sport.

We are about to go into our Patreon gold, we'll give it a couple weeks if you want to sign up, go into our list and we're going to choose our next person, because I can't wait to get going and do this all again.

Keep away from the nerve agent and we shall see you next week. Bye bye.

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