

EPISODE 119: SPF FOUNDATION WINNERS

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 with Mark and James, on a Friday in May. A sort of month that Shakespeare wrote sonnets about, in the Northern hemisphere I should say. The people listening in the Southern hemisphere are going into weeks of gloom.

Mark Dawson: They don't do gloom in Australia, it's always bright and sunny.

James Blatch: No gloom mate. I think in Kiwi land it is.

Mark Dawson: That's true, yes.

James Blatch: It can get rainy. Anyway, we're living in the North, so for once, the North will rise again and get it right.

Are you having a good week there Mark?

Mark Dawson: I am yes. We're recording this in the past. Am I having a good week?

James Blatch: You live in the past.

Mark Dawson: Lots of work at the house at the moment. We're actually going away tonight, well tomorrow night, because we've got someone

coming in to lay a wooden floor, which is quite smelly apparently. We're going to be going to my mother-in-law's house in the meantime.

What else have we been doing? Buying furniture. It's all very busy because we moved three months ago. We're still in the process of filling the house with new stuff. Lots of money going out at the moment. I need some more books.

James Blatch: Yes. Well, you're selling quite a lot of books.

A little update on your move to Kindle Unlimited, which has been going great, according to the posts in the Facebook group.

Mark Dawson: I think probably when this, how much would I have made? About \$400,000 since I went back into it. It's been, while you can't really address it any other way. It's been an unqualified success. I'm very pleased with how it's gone.

James Blatch: A seven figure year.

Mark Dawson: At the moment, it looks that way. We'll see

James Blatch: You're going to stay in SPF, right?

Mark Dawson: Yes, I'll stick around.

James Blatch: Once your film deal is done and your seven figure author career, we'll never see you again.

Mark Dawson: We'll just be filming from Malibu.

James Blatch: Yes, that's fine. We'll do that. You will be, presumably, I'll still be in ...

Mark Dawson: I'll fly you out every week.

James Blatch: Oh, thank you. I look forward to that. Think of the air miles.

Look, it's Patreon time. We should really get into the habit of greeting our Patreon guests on every episode. We're doing it sporadically at the moment. I'm going to say welcome to the newest members of our Patreon group.

Most of them are golds, I noticed. Let's move into saying hello to Ron Yarish. Ron, we've met Ron, haven't we? In Florida. He's a lovely guy and has been a longtime member of the SPF community. Delighted Ron, that you are joining us on Patreon, supporting the podcast with a very small donation for each episode, that helps pay for everything that we do. It'll have to go up a bit, when we start flying me out to Malibu.

I'm also going to say hello to Ron Radcliffe. Ron is from the United Kingdom. Say hello and thank you to Sara Tansy, Sara is also from the United Kingdom, from Devon. To Ninny Hammond, and Ninny's also a longtime member of the SPF community. Ninny, welcome to Patreon. Thank you very much indeed, from Louisville, Kentucky.

We got into so much trouble with the two letter abbreviations of states last time. So many people ticked us off, didn't they? I thought, "How many American citizens would know the two letter abbreviations for English counties?" Yet, we got told off for not knowing some of them.

Mark Dawson: I wouldn't know the abbreviations of most of the English counties.

James Blatch: It is a foreign country to us, but there you go. We do our best. We love America, and we try to learn your states, but please don't tell us off for not knowing all of them.

Ronna K. Williamson, who is from Fort Worth, TX, which I think must be Washington DC.

Mark Dawson: No, I think that's Texas.

James Blatch: I know.

Mark Dawson: Thank you.

James Blatch: Careesia Divertia, what a great name, Careesia Divertia, who is from Toronto. Jennifer Ellison, hello Jennifer. Thank you very much indeed for sponsoring us on Patreon, from Parkland, Florida.

Maria Eshova, hello Maria, thank you very much indeed for you, from Rotterdam in the Netherlands, just over the water there. Nikki Danforth, hello Nikki, thank you so much indeed for sponsoring us on Patreon, welcome to the podcast, from Far Hills, NJ. She must be the Jersey Coast set, I can see Nikki doing that.

Hello to Mary Lee McDonald, hello Mary Lee, thank you very much, from Santa Rosa, California. Bill Duncan, Bill thank you, from Boral, New South Wales, Australia. Bill's Australian. Blair C. Howard, let's make sure I'm actually getting these. I have very long lines on this Excel spreadsheet. Actually, Blair is from Cleveland, Tennessee. It says Cleveland, TN. Is TN Tennessee? We're going to get in trouble again.

Mark Dawson: Cleveland is ...

James Blatch: Cleveland is Ohio, I know, but there must be more than one Cleveland in America.

Mark Dawson: I see, yes.

James Blatch: Thanks for the United States of America. Angelina Kalahari, hello Angelina Kalahari, thank you very much indeed for joining us on Patreon. To Nell Godden, hello Nell, and Jared Goulian. Jared, thank you very much indeed. Don't have locations for those last three.

If you want to join the podcast, if you want to help us, you go to patreon.com/spfpodcast. All the gold level members get what Mark?

Mark Dawson: They got lots of stuff. They get into the draw once a year to get the courses that we put out. They get a pin.

James Blatch: They get a pin?

Mark Dawson: They get a chance to be a Book Lab guinea pig as well, and we've just selected the second one.

James Blatch: We have. That will have been announced via email to our Patreon audience, but I suppose, when are we going? This is going to go out on the week on Friday. I suppose we could announce it now, couldn't we?

Mark Dawson: We could, yeah.

James Blatch: It is Helena Hahm. Helena Hahm is the author and I was just going to get out the page. I'm going to ruin the video if I do that, so I won't do that. Helena Hahm, and it's called An English ...

Mark Dawson: I can't remember, but yeah, it's a kind of Scandinavian themed romance I think. Yes, we're going to be looking at the first book in that series.

We will look at the cover with Stuart. We'll look at the blurb. We'll look inside with Jenny and we'll put it all together and see if we can make some suggestions to improve her sales.

James Blatch: As a budding author myself, I absolutely love that Book Lab episode. I thought it was really insightful. I think this could be, just in itself, a really useful series.

I'm delighted we're doing this again, and I think a good choice Mark, to move into a different genre, so that we can cover the way things are different between genres, so romance is the next one.

Sorry Helena, we've forgotten the name of your book. I know the English is in italics on the cover, and I'm already intrigued to know what Stuart's going to say about that. We'll get all that information together.

That episode, at the moment, is scheduled to go out on the 22nd of June. Put a date in your diary.

We're also talking about, SPF today, not Patreon, not Book Lab, but something called the SPF Foundation. As you know, we put together premium courses, which are available. They are an investment.

For some people, it's a bit too much. We understand that. We always want to support new authors. We want to support authors who are there in everything else, in terms of their writing, their approach, and their attitude, but they're not there, in terms of being able to afford the outlay at the beginning of their careers, to get all the stuff in place that they need to have. That can be various people.

We've chosen a small sample of people. We've got three interviews today with those people. They're cracking interviews in their own right, so this is not just meeting somebody who's got a Foundation status. They are cracking interviews.

One of them in particular is somebody who has been through, I was going to say been through the mill publishing. A bit like you Mark, has been

through that journey of traditional publishing, that became a little bit despondent and it didn't work, and is buying rights back from books, wants to self-publish and is struggling to get going. She's a good choice. That's Diana Duncan.

Laura Fife is up in Scotland, not in Fife in Scotland, but actually in Sterling, from memory, and Ronnie Viridi is in Fairfax, Virginia, near DC in the United States. They are, all three of them, very different characters. They're quite interesting to hear them.

We're going to have these interviews, Laura's and Ronnie's, about eight minutes or so, but Diana I expect a little bit longer, because I think she was very interesting on method and approach to writing and marketing.

I think we learned something talking to her, just about that journey that certainly writers who are a little bit further on than where Ronnie and Laura are at the moment, who've been involved with the old traditional industry, and they're now trying to transition into indie publishing. I thought it was interesting in its own right.

Let's hear from our new Foundation scholars.

Laura, one of our Foundation students. Tell us a little bit about you. Tell us about your writing, to where you are now.

Laura Fife: Right now, I have published a few little pieces, and self-published, mainly because I think that applying for the self-publishing formula gave me a little bit of a kick, a bump, to say, "Okay, right. Let's just go for it." Even just applying for the self-publishing formula and scholarship was a great experience.

I've done a bit of poetry, short stories, and mainly I'm working on novels at the moment.

James Blatch: What sort of genre are you writing with your novels?

Laura Fife: I'm mainly writing, sort of half memoir at the moment. I'm writing about an English teacher who goes away to a Buddhist retreat, and that changes her life. Very memoirish.

James Blatch: Another thing that you've done, and in fact it arrived just, if you're watching on YouTube, you ought to see this. It arrived about 10 minutes ago, which is very appetite for this interview, is a short book called *Wellspring*, which is already quite gripping for me as a writer, or trying to write, because it starts with the words ... In fact, let me read out the first words of this book. "Hello, I'm Laura and I'm a procrastinator."

That's what this book is about. It's called *Wellspring*, which is a kind of writing methodology.

Do you want to just talk to us a little bit about this?

Laura Fife: That's the main book that I have published actually. I don't know why it slipped my mind. It's to help other writers. I've been a creative writing tutor to adults for about six or seven years.

I recently gave that up, so I could start taking my own advice for a change. This book is written to sort of say farewell to the writing class, so I can start taking my own advice. Teachers are very good at, "Do as I say, not as I do."

James Blatch: Yeah, of course.

Laura Fife: I thought I better stop that and get on with some writing.

James Blatch: This book, which I just want to talk about for a bit, because I think it's really interesting, is to help people stop dithering and start writing. A lot of it's a little bit about understanding how your brain works.

You say at the beginning, "This is not a psychology text." This is anthropomorphized to help make it easy, so we understand things like muses and influences and so on.

Also, you seem to refer to, and obviously I've only had it for 10 minutes, so I've not read it yet, but you seem to refer to a particular methodology called Wellspring, a type of writing.

Have I got that right?

Laura Fife: It can be called various different things, free flow, writing, or usually in writing class it's called six minute writing. There's something about that six minutes sort of tinkering.

It's basically about how to use a prompt to help you get your writing going again, and help build people's confidence. I think writers tend to struggle with confidence quite a lot, they're their own worst critics.

It's about getting past that critic, and just letting ideas come, and reconnecting with the joy of that, and the enjoyment of it really.

James Blatch: You mentioned a Buddhist retreat in your intro, about your novel. You said it's semi-autobiographical.

There appears to me, to be some Eastern influence potentially in this. Is that right?

Laura Fife: I think that free flow writing is a very mindful experience. It can be quite meditative when you're in that groove, it's very meditative. Maybe not restful, but it can be that idea of ideas coming from another place, and the subconscious, you connect with the subconscious and you're letting that go out.

I think it's about letting yourself get out of the way and taking your judgment and self-criticism, taking all that out of the way, so that you can just write.

You can always edit it later on, but at the moment, and that's what the theme of the book is all about, is just about letting yourself go.

James Blatch: You've got the Foundation behind you now. You've got a bit of cash to invest in some of the elements of writing.

Where's your focus going to be? Is it going to be on the novels?

Laura Fife: To build my own novels and to build my own writing, is to take that regular practice, and I think that having a regular writing practice, I think for building out, whether it's 100 words a day or 1,000 words or day, or some writers manage 10,000 words a day. I have no idea how.

To take that a little bit at a time, and then with each of those ... You won't use all the writing, and I won't use it all, but to take what I do produce and take the best parts of it, edit it down, hone it down, that's what I really enjoy doing. I love it.

Just taking the key notes. I think this was about 20,000 words initially, but I've got it down to 10,000 words, just honing it down to what I really wanted to say.

I think taking the Wellspring moments I have myself every day ... Stephen King talks about writing processes being like archeology.

I like to think about it as sculpture. Just hacking at a great big bit of rock, get the general shape of it, and gradually, through the editing process, then start chinking in, chinking in, just a little bit at a time, and then eventually you've got your finished product, if it's ever finished.

James Blatch: There's another famous quote, isn't there, or a film director, I think I've used it before, which is, "A creative project is never finished, it's just abandoned at some point." I think it's Francis Ford Coppola maybe, about films.

I should say it's an appalling line, despite the fact we're in the same country, and my last interview was somebody in Portland, Oregon, thousands of miles away, and it was crystal clear. Here we are, really struggling. We can't keep the interview going that long, because of the quality of the line.

However, I just want to finally get from you Laura, is where you see yourself as a result of this new invigoration.

Do you want to be earning your living from writing in a year, two years time?

Laura Fife: Where I really see myself is with this being published, being self-published, having my novels out there, having various different collections of writing out there, I've been a lot more confident about marketing those, just the marketing, getting the word out, that is the tough bit.

I've already learned so much from the podcasts, from you guys, and working my way through the course already. It's so motivating. The fact that your podcast, I can actually engage in, really helps with that.

James Blatch: That's great to hear Laura. I think people can learn from you as well.

We should just say that this book is definitely one for writers, particularly if you're struggling to find the time in the day every day, and knuckle down, and there's some imaginary thing that's blocking you from getting your words down. I would recommend, from my first look at this book, Wellspring.

Where can people find this Laura?

Laura Fife: You'll be able to find that on Amazon, if you look up the keywords Wellspring and Laura Fife. At the moment, I also have a litany of books on my website, just on publishing.com.

James Blatch: Right. It says five pounds on the back, which is about \$3.50, which could be a wise investment.

Laura Fife: On Kindle, it's only \$1.99, an absolute bargain.

James Blatch: There you go, absolute bargain. What I'd like Laura is for you to come back on in a year's time and let us know how you're getting on.

Laura Fife: Okay, I'd love to James. Thank you very much.

Ronnie Viridi: I'm Ronnie Viridi. I'm an author. I write under the pen name R.R. Viridi.

Right now, I'm predominantly published in the urban fantasy genre specifically. I am working on getting a space western out this year.

I'm messing with a small publisher, just to try to see how that will work out. I haven't signed another contract, that I might get the rights back if things don't work out according to my liking, so that's very nice. I'm new to the SPF world and the scholarship recipient for this year, one of the four. It's been absolutely amazing so far.

James Blatch: That's great and a good introduction.

From the scholarship point of view, what are you hoping, what are your sort of writer ambitions for the next 12 months or so?

Ronnie Viridi: I want to get my production up, in terms of speed and producing material, but the biggest thing that I know I've been ignorant on and lack is the marketing know how.

I am very tech savvy. I grew up as part of that generation, but I've never learned how to implement it properly. How do I guess, which is one of the things you've been covering so far, in the SPF courses, is how to convert people who are browsing or looking at my stuff into dedicated readers.

A lot of my hardcore fans have come naturally through social media, which I admit I'm very good at. I'm very talkative. I'm naturally extroverted. People like me.

I can get people in person or through Facebook to buy my books, like within a 10 second conversation with me. How to do that on a broader scale through Facebook, Twitter, and how to just get readers off Amazon to buy into my work has been an issue of mine.

So far, with what I've been going through in the classes, I've learned a lot. The biggest thing I've learned is how to change my mindset to embrace what I'm naturally good at and capitalize on it, which is something I was very ignorant on.

I didn't know until now how good I was with social media, and through you and Mark's courses, I've been understanding that this is a good thing and something I should be pushing harder on, instead of trying to run around everywhere. Learning to play to my strengths.

James Blatch: I guess it's a case of ultimately you can persuade a few people to buy your books on a kind of one on one basis on social media, but to be successful to pay our salaries every year and become wealthier, it has to be an automated process.

I guess that's what you're looking at?

Ronnie Virdi: Right. The automation of it, how to make sure I come across as natural too, to everybody.

When I first learned about SPF, when I started looking at some of the authors that are implementing it, some were doing it and it seemed very cold, their automation process.

It was a very chain setup, where it's like, "This is my book, buy it. Do this, do that."

When I started looking into you and Mark and how you do it, you guys definitely seem to make it personal. It seems like you guys are doing a great job as treating readers as friends.

That's something I definitely wanted to learn and master when I set up my automation. How to make people feel like they're more a part of my process, than just on the reader end, that they're invested in me and my career.

James Blatch: That's a really good point. I think the fact that if you're good at that one-on-one stuff, social media, it's those principles that work on the one on one, that you just somehow need to roll into it on a bigger scale.

Ronnie Virdi: Right.

James Blatch: You're talking to a small publisher. You've got some books written.

Where are you at the moment in your writing career?

Ronnie Virdi: My career's been kind of weird, in a good way. I did come into the indie side very ignorant. I was trained by a lot of traditional authors.

I've been fortunate to have learned from guys like David Farland, Kevin J. Anderson, some stuff with Brendan Sanderson, Jim Butcher, through emulation, and both some workshops and seminars.

When I launched, I was going with the traditional mindset of best book possible, but I was very ignorant on marketing, production speeds, getting the right covers to the market, for example.

I have very unique covers that I've branded to my specific series, but they don't necessarily scream the genre, which is something that I've been learning about.

I've been fortunate in that I've been really well received. As an indie, I've gotten a lot of traditional blurbs and editorials from guys like Larry Correa, who's a New York Times bestseller, a Hugo nominee.

I've been nominated for the Dragon Award twice, for best fantasy/paranormal, in 2016 and 2017, along guys like Jim Butcher, Brendan Sanderson, Larry Correa.

I'm doing conventions now, which is really cool as an indie. I've been a guest at Dragon Con last year. I'm returning this year to do panels under the science fiction/fantasy tracks, and I'll be going to Raven Con next month as a guest, where Chuck Wendig's the guest of honor.

James Blatch: It sounds like you're a perfect candidate for this, but you're obviously a talented writer. You've been well received, as you say, so far. You just need that little injection, that little bit of help here and there.

We're delighted that you're a recipient in the first trunch of our academy.

Ronnie Viridi: Thank you.

James Blatch: How do we measure your success here?

How are you going to measure your success over the next say 12, 18, 24 months?

Ronnie Virdi: I hope it's not arrogant or crass to say it, I'm trying to measure by financial metrics now.

I've gotten to the point where I'm finally becoming confident in who I am as a writer, in terms of the quality I'm producing. As I've stated, the biggest thing I've been ignorant, is just the marketing aspect of all of this, how to properly build that brand, how to get my craft out there on a lot of people's eyes.

I want to measure it by increasing metrics of sales. Hopefully, they stay consistent every time I have some sort of bump. I don't dip below a certain point, if that's possible.

Trying to, I guess, get more brand recognition out there. I've already done some of the stuff that you guys have mentioned, like a fan club, and it's been growing. A fan group I should say, away from the page.

I'm getting a lot of loyal readers now, who are doing things like fan art, which was something I never thought I would get. I have custom Funko Pops, I don't know if you're familiar with them.

James Blatch: No idea what you mean.

Ronnie Virdi: Collectible ... I can show you one, if that's okay.

James Blatch: Yeah, yeah.

Ronnie Virdi: That somebody made. Let's see.

James Blatch: I'm fascinated to see what a Funko Pop is.

Ronnie Virdi: Here we go. Funko Pops are essentially, they're very popular geek collectibles. A lot of famous TV shows, books, will have their characters made into these little guys. You might have seen them.

James Blatch: Oh, okay.

Ronnie Virdi: A lot of younger generation are collecting them. I've had fans who have gone out and custom made some of my characters into these little collectibles. They've shown up on social media.

Funko Pop actually saw that, the company that makes that, and they sent me a really nice letter. They featured that my little characters were being turned into these.

James Blatch: Wow. That's great. Look, in terms of what we do, in terms of visiting you, keeping up the story, let us know how you're getting on.

Ronnie Virdi: Oh yeah.

James Blatch: In terms of that kind of tangible thing, are you employed somewhere else at the moment?

Do you see yourself in 12 months time living on your writing salary?

Ronnie Virdi: Oh yeah. From what I've been learning already in this, absolutely. I think it's going to make a huge difference in my financial income, to where my living status will be going up.

I'm fortunate right now with my particular living situation, I'm getting by with what I'm earning on writing, but I will admit it's not ideal.

What I've been learning already has been teaching me how to capitalize on so many strengths I've already just been fortunate to have. I think it's going to make a probably exponential difference in my writing income, and I'm confident saying that from what I've been learning so far.

James Blatch: Okay, fantastic. I'm very excited Ronnie, to follow your career. Just remind us of your author name, your pen name.

Ronnie Virdi: R.R. Virdi.

James Blatch: I can't help noticing there's a bit of Game of Thrones stuff going on behind you. The R.R. can't be a coincidence, right? In the same way that it's not a coincidence with George R.R. Martin.

Ronnie Virdi: Yeah, both my legal names, Ronnie and Ramir, I figured that would be a good idea, and then after I did that, I realized that J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin, and it's become a very popular thing in the fantasy genre of fiction, so I figured I should capitalize on that.

James Blatch: Perhaps I should become J.R.R. Blatch. I am J.R. Blatch at the moment. I'm only one name off.

Ronnie Virdi: An extra R wouldn't hurt.

James Blatch: Yeah, exactly. Ronnie, thank you so much, we're really excited about what's going to happen over the next year. We're going to catch up with you again in probably I guess 12 months time, is the most likely. If I'm passing through Fairfax, Virginia, I'll drop in.

Ronnie Virdi: That would be awesome.

Diana Duncan: Books were always there for me, my old favorites, Little Women, and Secret Garden, and all those books I grew up with. Then as I

got older, I started reading Mary Stuart, and some of the Gothics, and that's when I got really interested in romance.

I got married pretty young, had my kids, and when they got older, I finally decided it was time for me to pursue my writing career. I wrote for five years, and I actually got started writing fanfic for the Highlander TV series.

James Blatch: Okay.

Diana Duncan: The hero in that series was the epitome of my hero. He was always just pretty much right on, as far as that went.

I was in a group of fanfic writers and readers, and I had written all this fanfic for Highlander, and I had never let anybody read it, because I was pretty scared to let anybody read my work.

I got friendly with one of the gals in the group. Her name was Bernie. She convinced me to let her read my Highlander fanfic. I sent her some things with great trepidation. I got an email back from her, and it had a picture of her standing in her library at home, and she had dozens and dozens of romance books behind her on the shelves.

She said, "Do you see all these books back here?" I said, "Yes." She said, "I read every single one of those, and your writing is better than any of them."

James Blatch: Wow.

Diana Duncan: I said, "Oh really?" She said, "You should write a romance novel." I said, "Oh really?"

I started out writing a romance novel about a Highlander. Bernie and I eventually went to Scotland together for a 10-day trip for research. That adventure is on my website, under Diana and Bernie's Excellent Scottish Adventure, which is pretty fun for people to see. There's pictures.

I wrote that book, and of course then I started sending it out to agents and editors and everything, and got your usual list of rejections. Then I decided I should write something about that time, it was a time travel.

About that time, the bottom fell out of the paranormal market. I thought, "I need to write something more viable." I decided on romantic suspense, because that's one of the things I like to read. Plus, my mind kind of automatically goes there.

A friend and I will be talking about say, "The mail didn't come today," and it's like, "Maybe somebody kidnapped the mailman and stole all the mail, and they're going to run an identity theft ring." She's like, "Wow, okay."

I wrote a romantic suspense, and I based it on my own adventures. I was in banking and we got robbed one day. The robber was quite charming actually. He was cute. He was charming. When the FBI came to interview me, I said, "Gosh, he was so cute and charming." They were just like, "Oh lady."

James Blatch: They call it Stockholm Syndrome, don't they?

Diana Duncan: Yeah, I don't know. I started thinking, "What would happen if a bank teller got involved with a bank robber who was cute and charming?"

I had written eight books before that. This was the first one that kind of came together really well. I don't remember what I titled it, but I sent it out. About a year later, it took 13 months ...

James Blatch: The eight books you'd written at this stage had been sent out, all of them?

Diana Duncan: Not all of them, because some of them I knew weren't viable. I had been sending around about three or four books to every place I could think of.

James Blatch: How much interest did you get?

Diana Duncan: I got a lot of interest, but it's interesting, I would get these really opposite reactions. For instance, I got two letters on the same day from agents, from two different agents.

One said, "I love your plotting, but your characters don't do anything for me."

The other letter said, "Wow, your characters are amazing, but your storyline doesn't do anything for me."

James Blatch: Useful.

Diana Duncan: Yeah, it's very helpful. I have a very strong voice. It's been described as sassy, as kind of sarcastic, and people react one of two ways to that voice. They either love it or they hate it.

I would get really disparate reactions to what I was sending out. This was a five year period that I sent things out and kept getting rejections, rejections.

I had about 150 rejections by the time I sent my book to Harlequin. It took 13 months for them to respond. I figured it was just propping up a wobbly desk somewhere in their office, my manuscript. I had pretty much given up on it at that point.

I remember I was sitting in my kitchen and the phone rang. I picked it up and a woman said, "Hello, I'm looking for Diana." I said, "This is Diana." She said, "This is Susan Litman from Harlequin. I love your book and we want to publish it."

James Blatch: Wow.

Diana Duncan: I think I probably screamed in her ear, poor women.

James Blatch: After 13 months, you've forgotten about it really, haven't you?

Diana Duncan: Yeah, yeah.

James Blatch: That's a plot from the blue.

Diana Duncan: I pretty much figured it was dead in the water at that point, yes. I did the happy dance around my kitchen. Luckily, we didn't have video on the phone, so she couldn't see what I was doing. I'm sure she imagined what was happening, from all the happy noises.

That book that I had written about the bank robbery, that became Bulletproof Bride, is what they titled it at Harlequin, and that was my first book.

Then I went on to write five more books for them. Four of them were a series of books about four brothers who are SWAT cops. Each book took place over a 24 hour period, with each chapter being about an hour of the story. That was a very popular series.

I just got the rights back to that, and I'm going to revamp it and publish it indie.

After the six books for Harlequin, we got a new senior editor and she wasn't as enamored with my work as the previous senior editor. My editor was still really on board with my writing and everything I was doing, but the senior editor had a different vision for the line, which happens very often in publishing.

I sent in, oh gosh, probably over a dozen proposals to Harlequin over a 13 month period, saying, "What about this?" She would say, "I really would like to see a serial killer," so I'd write up a proposal about a serial killer and send it in.

Then she'd say, "I'd really like a military series," so I'd write a proposal about a military series and send it in. Every time there was, "It's not quite right. It's not quite this. It's not quite that."

I finally got a clue that she wasn't going to buy anything from me anymore, so I decided that indie publishing would be the way to go.

I published six more books, indie publishing, and then I got seriously ill. It took me three years to get back to where I could actually even walk around the house again and do my regular things, before I could kind of function, even physically and mentally. That's when my career really stalled out. I couldn't write, I couldn't really do anything.

Now I'm just kind of trying to come back from all of that, and rebuild what I had started.

I made a mistake with indie publishing, in that I didn't focus on one particular area of the romance genre, or subgenre. I did a couple of romantic suspense. I did a couple of romantic comedies. I did a paranormal. I should have narrowed my focus and just done one subgenre at first. That's where I'm at now. I'm trying to bring things back.

James Blatch: That's a good marketing lesson anyway, isn't it?

People do write in multiple genres, but life just becomes easier in so many ways when you focus on one.

Do you know what? You're going to think this is a strange paradox to draw, but there's a company opposite us doing a loft conversion. We're interested in it, so sort of talking to them. They are run off their feet and that's all they do. They just do loft conversions. They're all builders, they could do anything. They could do flooring, kitchens, but you know what? It's so easy, it's not easy, but once you say, "This is what I do," all the decisions just become a little bit easier than trying to have all these plates spinning, and imagery, and branding.

It's going to be very different across two different genres, aren't they?

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: Even subgenres within romance, the look, and feel, and tone between romantic suspense and billionaire romance is very different, whatever.

Diana Duncan: It is. Right, it is very different.

James Blatch: That's lesson number one.

Diana Duncan: Right. My heroine is Nora Roberts and I love her work. If I could be her, oh wow. If I could wave a magic wand and be Nora Roberts, I would be.

I was kind of taking a page from her book, but unfortunately she writes everything. I mean she writes paranormal, she writes romantic suspense, she writes her JD Robb series, which is futuristic. She's so prolific. She writes six books a year or something, while Diana isn't able to do that.

James Blatch: There's always exceptions, but you shouldn't try and write like other people.

You've got to write like yourself, haven't you?

Diana Duncan: Right, right. Yes.

James Blatch: How successful was it under Harlequin? Were you seeing sales and getting into lists and making any money from it?

Diana Duncan: I was very successful at Harlequin, yes. My first book especially, Bulletproof Bride, they still have that. They won't give me the rights back to it, because it still sells.

I was nominated for two RITA Awards, which I don't know if you know what that is, but that's the Romance Writers of America, it's kind of like their Oscars or their Emmy's. Two of the SWAT series were nominated for RITA Awards. I was doing pretty well with them.

The one thing that I didn't care for under Harlequin was that, as much as I love Harlequins, and as much as I love reading them when I was growing up, and as much as I love writing for them, they do tend to put you in a little box and you can't write outside their box.

They have certain parameters that they want you to follow. It's very strict. I'm loving the fact that in indie publishing, I can be as sassy and as wild as I want to be, and nobody's reining me in saying, "Oh, no, no, no. You can't do that."

James Blatch: Also nobody's telling you, "You can't write that book."

Diana Duncan: Exactly, exactly. "You can't write a bank robber hero." I don't know how many times I heard in my rejection letters, "You can't write a bank robber hero." Yes, you can.

James Blatch: Of course you can. Ever heard of Bonnie and Clyde, and Thelma and Louise, well Thelma is not quite the right comparison.

The most interesting baddies/heroes, are the complex ones, the ones where there is that tension.

We're watching a detective series called The Tunnel, in the UK at the moment, it's season two, and they've got this fantastic baddie. She's beautiful and very tender, and very loving, but we know she's got this really dark element to her and it's coming out.

That makes her so much more of an interesting person, character, right?

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: Why does a bank robber have to be a bank robber in a two dimensional world, and a hero's got to be a hero? Hey, forget that.

Diana Duncan: I cheated a little bit, in that he was an undercover cop, and he had a really good reason to rob the bank, even though he probably broke a whole lot of rules doing that.

James Blatch: It sounds ethically dubious at least.

Diana Duncan: Yes, it was, just a tad.

James Blatch: Okay, that's good. You're making a bit of money, commercially.

I know with the traditional contracts, actually it's quite difficult.

You get your advance and so on, but longevity in income is a little bit more difficult to achieve like that.

Diana Duncan: Yes, it trickles in. You get paid every six months with a royalty check, and it just kind of trickles in a little at a time, after you get

your first advance. You have to earn that back, before you get any more money, and that takes a while.

I would say I wasn't making a whole lot of money, but I was making enough to help out with our income and that sort of thing, and that was my goal, to just make enough to kind of supplement.

Toward the end of my career, Harlequin changed so many of their lines and they changed a lot of their branding. They changed a lot of their marketing. The final books did not sell nearly as well as the early books did.

James Blatch: You moved into indie, and I think you said to me in an email before the interview that you, by your own admission, have struggled a bit with the marketing.

It's not something that's come naturally to you.

Diana Duncan: Yes, marketing is just not in my purview at all. I can write all day long, but marketing elludes me.

I have actually done your module, your first module of your classes. As I finished each lesson, I would put that lesson into effect. I did the website lesson, and then I rebuilt my website from scratch, which for a technologically impaired person, I was pretty proud of that.

James Blatch: Yeah, that's great.

Diana Duncan: Your tech library is very helpful with that. I switched to a completely different web host, so I could use ... I went to WIX actually. I'd followed some of the lessons in your tech library for some of the other sites, and being so technologically challenged I thought, "That's not going to happen." I went to a place where I could pretty much drag and drop into a template.

James Blatch: I don't know whether you're going to like to hear this or not, but we have just received the new three part WIX module, which is going into 101.

Diana Duncan: Okay, great.

James Blatch: Which you probably could have done with six months ago, but it's terrific. It's both drag and drop, and also Stuart Grant's done the module.

I've been looking through it, doing the editing, it's drag and drop, but there's also a kind of WIX ADI I think it's called, a kind of artificial intelligence that helps to build the website for you in WIX. It all looks very clever anyway, but he's done a step by step, which goes into our 101 course.

Diana Duncan: That'll help me going forward, as I add to the website.

James Blatch: There you go.

Diana Duncan: It'll be great. When I finished that, then I did the module on newsletters. I went to Mailer Light, because it was kind of a less expensive version of MailChimp, and I made a newsletter, and I made it automatic to send out to people who subscribed on my website, which I was very proud of being able to do that. I embedded a subscription form on my website. I did that.

Then I just finished the module on cover art, and I decided to go back and have different cover artist remake some of my older covers, based on what I learned from your cover art module.

I don't do my own cover art, because again, like marketing, that's just not my forte. I think it's better to go to the experts for things that I don't know

about. I've been struggling and that's where your advice is going to come in to help me out I think, so much, with this new career path that I'm taking.

James Blatch: You've definitely got to want to be somebody who wants to design their own covers.

It is possible, and we've actually got a new course, which is teaching people how to do that themselves. In fact, Stuart, who does the course you would have watched, is doing that.

It's definitely not for everyone. In fact, a really interesting aspect of Stuart's course, which is, as I say, about designing your own covers, there's a section on how to work with a cover designer, so you understand that conversation in the brief and how to work with revisions and so on. He's still pushing people that way, if that's what they want to do.

Diana Duncan: Even though I don't design my own cover art, the cover art module was very helpful to me in getting a vision of what to tell the cover artist though.

Especially helpful was the advice of, "Don't try to duplicate a scene exactly from your book." You're telling a story with the cover and it just needs to be your story. It doesn't have to be necessarily specific to what the content of the book is. That was very helpful to me in seeing the broader terms of what should go on a cover.

James Blatch: How's it going with the indie world? You're selling some books Diana?

Diana Duncan: No, I am not selling anything. I have a permanent freebie up, and people seem to get the freebie. I think now there's so many freebies though, that people are glomming all the freebies, and I'm not sure they're even reading what they're getting.

My sales are pretty pathetic actually. I sell, in a good month, maybe \$30 worth of sales in a month. A lot of my books have been up for a long time. I haven't had anything new going up, and that makes a difference.

I just don't know how to market and I don't know how to get people to find my books. Once they find my books, they like them I think. Getting people to find them is a very difficult thing in the indie market.

James Blatch: Getting that visibility.

Diana Duncan: It's saturated, it's very saturated.

James Blatch: You can do this. You can do this.

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: You've got the books that people like, we know that from the history you've had in the trad world. It is a case, you've got to carry on plowing through that 101 course and get to the more marketing bits, the Facebook ads and so on.

Diana Duncan: Yes, that's where I'm going now.

James Blatch: My hunch is that we'll catch up with you in 12 months or so, and I think you will have found a way of making this work.

It is competitive though, isn't it out there now?

Diana Duncan: Yes. It is, it is. The thing is though, with my four SWAT books that I have, that I got the rights back to from Harlequin, and before I got sick and during my illness, I kind of pecked away at ... I have three time travel books.

I have two and two-thirds of a time travel series, Highlander time travel, which I go back to my Scottish roots every time for that. When the Outlander series became a series on TV, I had read it in book form, and fallen in love with Jamie Fraser.

I love time travels. I love paranormal romance. I thought, "Well gosh, I should write a time travel series, because that's going to become really popular with this new Outlander TV show."

Again, spreading myself a little thin there, I had gone back to paranormal. I potentially have the ability to get seven books published this year. I think that's really, once I get the marketing part of your class down, that's really going to take off, I hope.

James Blatch: Definitely getting product on the shelf is an important part of it as well.

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: How do you write then Diana? When do you write?

Diana Duncan: How do I write? I write by the seat of my pants, which unfortunately tends to come back and bite me a little bit. Hence the two and two-thirds Highlander books, because I'm waiting to figure out how the series ends in the third book. I sit down in the morning, and mornings are not my best time, I'm not a morning person. I usually think to myself, "I'm going to start writing now," but what really happens is I end up doing email, and Facebook, and that sort of thing for a couple of hours.

Then about 11:00 I think, "Oh gosh, I haven't done any writing yet." Then I'll go open my file and between 11:00 and say 4:00 in the afternoon is usually my best writing time. I just kind of make it up as I go along.

When I wrote for Harlequin, I did have to write synopsis for them, to sell. I sold on proposal after my first book, which they had the full manuscript. You have to write three chapters in a synopsis, of what's going to happen in the book.

James Blatch: You have to write the first three chapters, or just sort of random beginning, middle, and end?

Diana Duncan: No. You have to write the first three chapters. You have to write the first three chapters of the book, and then tell them what's going to happen in the rest of the book.

James Blatch: Okay.

Diana Duncan: Oftentimes, I just again, would make up things off the top of my head, and what I told them was going to happen, didn't. Things that I never told them would happen, did.

They were okay with that. They were all right with that. I'm trying to do a little bit better, and plot a little bit better, so I don't write myself into a corner, or so that I at least have an outline of what I'm going to do for the day, rather than sitting down and thinking, "Okay, what happens next?"

A lot of my writing process takes place away from the computer. When I'm in the shower, at night before I go to sleep, in the morning when I first wake up, that's when my brain is thinking of, "What happens next in the story?"

James Blatch: Do you have a notepad, not in the shower, but a notepad and pen by the side of the bed and stuff, or do you just mull things over?

Diana Duncan: I actually do. I have notepads and pens everywhere. I actually do have one outside the shower.

James Blatch: You can always write in the mist.

Diana Duncan: Yeah. Write it on the wall in soap. My husband bought me a pen that lights up, because I would up wake up in the middle of the night and turn the night light on. I would lean over the edge of the bed and scribble notes.

James Blatch: Waking him up.

Diana Duncan: Waking him up. He bought me a pen that lights up. I have a little notebook and a pen right on my nightstand.

When I wake up and I have thoughts, I can just jot them down without disturbing him now.

James Blatch: They're great those pens. Mark Dawson, John Dyer, and I used to be film examiners in a previous life, and we were the only people who had those pens in Britain.

You'd sit in cinemas with your notepad and light it up, so you could look down and write your notes. We're the only people writing notes watching films, that's what we used to do. I know those.

You're a pantsier.

Diana Duncan: Pantsier, yes.

James Blatch: Pantsier, seat of the pants stuff. In terms of your kind of word count and stuff, it all sounds very familiar, the slight procrastination before you get down to writing.

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: Are you disciplined about your word counts and so on?

Diana Duncan: I try to be. I don't write fast, that's another thing that goes against me in the writing world, is I tend to be kind of perfectionistic about my writing, and I'm trying to get better about that as well. If I get 1,000 words a day, that's a pretty good day for me. That's what I shoot for.

James Blatch: Are you trying to write it in perfect form the first time?

Diana Duncan: Yes.

James Blatch: You don't allow yourself to write scrappy and leave errors and then come back?

Diana Duncan: No, no. Although I've gotten better about that. My critique partners and I, we've developed this system where if we don't know what to say, we'll say, "Then he went to the," and we just write in, "Blah, blah, blah." "Then he went to the blah, blah, blah. Then he did a blah, blah, blah. He met a person whose name was character name."

We're trying to be a little bit better about that, and not be so perfectionistic. The way that I write is I go back to what I wrote the day before, before I start into the new stuff. I kind of enhance that or hone that, kind of edit it a bit, so that I'm in the mindset to jump into the new stuff.

When I get done, I pretty much have a finished draft. I don't have to do a whole lot of revising when I finish. It's slower, but then I don't have that time ... I do go back and revise several times, but it's not usually major revision.

James Blatch: You pick up some time there, when other people may redraft. Other people, like me, may redraft three times, trying to get there.

Diana Duncan: Right.

James Blatch: Diana, it's been brilliant speaking to you. We're so pleased, you had a serious illness of five years, and here you are smiling, laughing, and talking to us here, which is the number one thing we should say.

Congratulations for getting yourself to where you are now.

Diana Duncan: Thank you. I think this is going to be so fun, doing your course and following all the steps. I think it's just going to be fun and exciting, and I can't wait to, like you said, come back a year from now and tell you that, "Wow, my sales are through the roof, and everything is just really spectacular."

James Blatch: Honestly, I feel optimistic about it.

We criticize the gate keeping, and I think this interview has illustrated why that gate keeping wasn't a great thing, a positive thing overall, because you're getting to write now, and people will appreciate that.

You know what? To get through that system, even though it took 13 months for them to get around to calling you, to get through that system, to get published, and for them to be interested in that, that shows a very high level of writing that you've got, just to start off with.

You're going to be successful, you just need to crack this next bit, and we'll join you perhaps in a year's time Diana and find out where you are.

Diana Duncan: Sounds wonderful. Thank you James.

James Blatch: Really lovely interviews. I love speaking to them.

I loved Ronnie. I think he's going to be a big star online, Ronnie. He's got the charisma. He's got the whole Star Wars geek thing going on, which of course I'm hugely admiring of. He's got a lot of personality.

This was an idea we had knocking about for a little while, and it's taken us ... Probably we should say to Mrs. Dawson, actually, is the one who's really pulled a finger out and organized it and made sure this has happened. All credit to Lucy there, for getting it going, and a good thing for us to do.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it's a good deal for these guys. They get both of the courses.

I can't remember exactly how much it was now, but it was a decent amount of money to spend on Reedsy, on pro-services it covers, and two and a half thousand was it each, something along those lines?

James Blatch: Two and a half, three thousand, something like that, yeah.

Mark Dawson: So quite a good chunk of change to get their books ship shape and ready for action. It's nice to be able to do that.

We've been thinking about it for a little while. It was Lucy's idea.

We're taking applications now. It's an annual thing, so we'll do it again towards the end of this year. If people are interested, there's a place to sign up on the website at selfpublishingformula.com.

There are some requirements that you need to meet, but provided that you meet them, you can apply and we'll take a look at your books and what you've got to offer. We'll select some more scholars towards the end of the year.

James Blatch: It's going to be really exciting to follow up on Laura, Ronnie, and Diana, in time to see how they get on. I've got a good feeling about all of them actually. I think that certainly a couple of them, I think, could fly. We'll see where we get to with that.

It's been a very SPF orientated episode, but that's good because we are SPF.

Mark Dawson: Very good. Well done James, well sorted.

James Blatch: We are Sparta. We should get t-shirts done. I still haven't got my pin. I'm a bit disappointed about it. Have you got your pin yet?

Mark Dawson: I have, I've got one pin. I should probably wear it. I know that they're all over the country now. They're being shipped. I think I've seen a couple on social media.

James Blatch: I think Catherine at RVA is actually coming around for dinner in a couple of weeks, and I think she's going to bring the pins then, so I'm excited about it. If she comes empty handed, she's going home.

Mark Dawson: Empty stomached.

James Blatch: She's going home empty stomached. I'll take the wine, obviously, that she brings, but if there's no pin, that's it, she's off.

They look very Star Trek esque I think. A little communicator type pin, which is how we're going to communicate in the future.

Mark Dawson: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Good, okay Mark, thank you very much indeed.

Thank you so much indeed for listening to this episode today. I hope you enjoyed it and thank you to our Patreon, and our Foundation application, just to reiterate what Mark said, if you would like to apply to be a scholar in the Self-Publishing Formula Foundation, as Mark says, there is some criteria to meet. All of that is clear on the website. Go to

selfpublishingformula.com, and on the top banners, sort of drop down menus, you will see an SPF Foundation tab. Click on that.

Great, thank you very much. Have a good week writing and a good week selling, and we will speak to you next Friday. Bye, bye.

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