

## **EPISODE 124: NOVEL ADAPTATION: TURNING BOOKS INTO SCREENPLAYS – WITH PAUL FITZSIMONS**

Narrator: 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 Blanch: Hello and welcome to The Self Publishing Formula Podcast with Mark and James on a sunny Friday in June from the United Kingdom. We wish you well wherever you are in the world and hope you've had a really good week writing.

And a practical week marketing and selling because that's kind of our thing isn't it? Is our bent, as they say. Mark.

Mark Dawson: I suppose you could say that, yes absolutely.

James Blanch: Because we are traveling a lot this year. And yeah, so what are you going to be talking about when you go to Thriller Fest and the Romance Writers of America Conference?

Mark Dawson: Basically, how great I am. That's the plan.

James Blanch: You are not. I insist you realize that.

Mark Dawson: I know. Well, marketing.

Thriller Fest, I think I'm doing two panels and I'm doing a session on the ten things you need to know to start as a new writing because there's going to be a lot of more traditionally inclined people there.

So, that's the plan for that one and then IWA; I'm doing three sessions for them including one session where I'm going to be taking ads the members have submitted in and trying to improve them. That'll be fun.

I did that for the first time last year. So it was a really good crowd and a good conference, so I'm looking forward to that.

James Blanch: Yeah, that's going to be really good. And Thriller Fest is an unusual one because it seems to be ... I've not been before but it looks to me like it attracts quite a lot of readers as well as writers.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, I think that's the plan. I'm there for signing days and I think I'm doing signing as well, so there'll be issues even in my trying to have ... yeah, I think a lot of it is reader focused. It'll be good. We'll see how that goes.

**And James is taking his recorder and we are going to make sure he gets some George Martin on the pub is the goal.**

James Blanch: That would be brilliant. George RR Martin and Lee Child is going to be there as well. Neither of them are particularly easy to get interviews with and they're going to be crowded but it's going to be obviously my mission impossible task.

And like I think I mentioned last week on the podcast, we are definitely going to host the drinks in New York. We'll find a suitable bar, there's probably a bar or pub in New York somewhere. We'll find one.

Mark Dawson: I don't know. Do they do bars?

James Blanch: I think I said Wednesday, the 11th last week but I'm thinking it might be Thursday the 12th. So, what we'll do is post into the Facebook group the time, date and location with a week or two's notice, but possibly

now Thursday, the 12th of July in the greatest city on the planet, New York City as David Letterman used to say as he introduced his show.

Okay, now, talking off David Letterman and that world ... look at this for a segue. Let's talk about screenwriting.

Mark Dawson: Because David Letterman is well known as a screenwriter.

James Blanch: Well, he's on a screen, right? He by the way, has a more impressive beard than you now. He looks like a hobo now.

Mark Dawson: I haven't seen him since he was off screen.

James Blanch: He manned up, he's doing a web show where he's doing interviews again. His first one was with Barack Obama. Can't remember what it's called now. If you search for it, you'll find it.

He just does these one on one interviews. A little bit more serious than the sit down show, but he obviously can't quite quit the day job like all high profile people. But yeah, he's gone the way of Jim Carrey and all these huge untamed growth of beard.

And you actually shaved. I was going to say Father's Day, did you get a razor, but it's next weekend.

Mark Dawson: No, I actually went to a barber shop in Salisbury. I had a hot towel shave. It was very nice. Gray hair was getting nasty. So, by time I get to New York, I will have the hobo look back again.

James Blanch: Full hobo? I hope that is not a rude expression, hobo. We'd say tramp. Sounds a bit derogatory but I can't keep up with what you can and can't say anymore. I'm north of 50 so I don't care anymore.

We're talking about screenwriting. We have a really good interview with Paul Fitzsimons and he has made a TV series, he has written and made a film, he's writing and making a second film, and he understands not just the art of adaptation, of turning a story into something for the screen, but a lot of the technical side.

It is very interesting listening to him talking about how you fit into the very regimented legacy way that the film industry works and there's really no point in trying to do it differently when it comes to the film industry.

They expect things to be formatted in a certain way. They expect budgets to be put together in a certain way. And you really need to understand that and that's what he teaches.

Now, we'll say right from the beginning he has a really good handout to go along with this. He does an online course, which I think is 100 euros to teach screenwriting. He's incredibly generously discounted it to almost nothing to 25 euros, which is about 25 bucks and probably 18, 19 pounds.

The discount code is on the PDF, but the PDF is basically session one. It's that overview introduction to how screenwriting works and what you need to understand about it. And you can get the PDF and the discount to his online course by going to [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](http://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting). An imaginatively made up URL.

Let's hear from Paul. Then Mark and I will have a chat off the back.

Welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast, Paul Fitzsimmons.

Paul Fitzsimons: Thank you very much.

James Blanch: Because I have been calling you Paul Fitzsimons on various occasions on podcast. As we've just discussed, we do murder names. I

mean, it's one of the things we do on the podcast and frankly your name is not the most complicated one we've murdered.

Paul Fitzsimons: No, probably not.

James Blanch: And I gotta say, I think it's Ninie Hammon that I've been calling Ninny Hammon for about two years. So, I have to apologize to Ninie at some point.

Paul, let's crack on with this. You're a screenwriter, you're self publishing at the moment, you're a writer by career. Let's talk a little bit about you first, get a little context on who Paul is, then we'll move into some of the nitty gritty areas, particularly of screen writing I am particularly excited about talking about.

### **Give us a parcel history of your past.**

Paul Fitzsimons: I've been writing for about fifteen years. The first thing I wrote in was Burning Matches, ... apart from the essays I wrote when I was in school, but I don't count those, was the volume that I just published. So, this is a work of a long period of time.

I started writing it in 2005 and I was with a creative writing group in my home town. And the novel took shape from that group. I wrote a couple of drafts of that and that kind of took me up to 2008 and I was sending it out to publishers, then agents and getting knocked back so as you do.

And then I got an agent who was absolutely amazing. She loved the book and started sending it out on my behalf. But unfortunately she couldn't place this with a publisher, so it got shelved.

In the meantime I was working my day job because we don't really earn a living as a writer when we're starting off, was in the architectural construction industry.

I had a drunken conversation with a friend of mine one night and we designed a TV show based around the office where we both worked. Not so much the office because even around the industry, we knew a lot of creative people and a lot of talented people and the stories and the backstories that came with them, we said this would make a fantastic story.

So, I developed this as a TV drama and brought it to a production company in Dublin and they in turn brought it to our national broadcaster RT and they pitched this and RT didn't really want to at the time and, but they recommended that I work on their own version of Eastenders it's called Fair City.

**James Blanch: They saw the talent in your writing even if they didn't pick up the series you went to them with?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, pretty much. And I think they saw, I think the word used was "raw talent," and emphasis on the word raw.

They saw me as somebody who needed to kind of hone my skills and talents and in hindsight they were right. If I look back at my writing ten years ago, as any of us do, we can see where it needed some polish.

So, I followed the advice and I actually went to work on Fair City for ... I worked as a storywriter there for a month. I got my first ever credits as a TV writer which is a big buzz and I did some shadow scripts which is basically you write a script that isn't going to be produced, but it's their way to see if I'm up to the scratch of actually writing a script.

It didn't actually go any further than that because they went in a different direction. I started doing my own stuff as well. Then I kind of worked on various screenplays, feature screenplays, and I was in another script writing group in Dublin and wrote a lot of feature screenplays. Literally just vexed

off kind of just to get myself ... to hone my skill and get my talents a bit better, a bit more polished.

Then I was approached by a fellow director on the other side of Ireland, the far side of Ireland up in the Killarney and he was developing a short film and he asked me to write the script for it. And I took one look at it and said, "this isn't a short film, this is a feature."

So, after not too much persuasion if I remember correctly, we developed it together as a feature it's called "The Gift." Not to be confused with the Jason Bateman film by the same name.

We shot that in 2014 after a long preproduction process and then got some great talents, got some great crew. Shot in 2014 and it got into cinemas then in 2017.

James Blanch: That actually happened quite quickly.

**You say a long preproduction process but there are people who are listening to this podcast whose books have been in preproduction for a decade.**

Paul Fitzsimons: Absolutely, yeah. And even for the film industry it was quite quick. There are movies that are in development and preproduction for years or decades.

But I suppose from an independent film making view, it wasn't. Probably wasn't that bad because the independent film industry is a bit like sharks. You either swim or die and you keep things moving.

We shot in 2014, we finished in 2015, we did the festival in 2016, then the cinemas in 2017, and now its on Amazon Prime. And it just had its first broadcast on RT, on the national broadcaster in Ireland, last week.

James Blanch: Wow, that's fantastic. So, it's been on mainstream TV in Ireland and people can see it on Amazon Prime, The Gift.

### **Who are the stars because that's usually how you identify films if it's not Jason Bateman, who is it?**

Paul Fitzsimons: The main star, the central character, is played by a guy called Alan Devine and he would have been best known, he was in Vikings and he played a small part in the Veronica Guerin biopic.

And then we also had Dawn Bradfield who has done a lot of Irish television. Una Kavanagh who is in Garage, a film, a few years ago. Then we had Brendan Grace who is an Irish comedian. I'm sure you've probably heard of him. And he was in as well.

We did very well with our stars for the film and Alan Devine was amazing. He was for, unlike most films it's a rarity, he was actually in every single scene of the film.

James Blanch: Alright. Wow. A lot to carry.

### **How did you fund it?**

Paul Fitzsimons: It was a combination. It was independently funded by the director. He put a lot of his own money into it and then we also got funding from non film industry people. So, people looking to get involved in projects that I was doing. They'd put some money in.

The director, Damian O'Callaghan his name is, he had a lot of contacts in his location as well and he was able to raise some funds that way as well.

It came in at around 165,000 pounds, which is fairly small, even for an independent film, but I think we equipped ourselves well enough.



**James Blanch: May I ask, has it made money?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Oh, God, no. Independent film never makes money. No, no. Not your first one anyway.

James Blanch: Unless it's Blair Witch Project.

Paul Fitzsimons: There's always an outlier, isn't there? There's exceptions to every rule and Blair Witch was most definitely one of those. It blew up and made millions and millions.

James Blanch: What a fantastic journey for you. Mark Dawson hates the journey word, but this has been you sitting in an architectural office and you have that conversation that I've had before with friends which is that that'd be a great sitcom in here. We should write this.

**You took an idea. You developed it. And it didn't lead to that but it did lead to you writing a film and having it on Amazon Prime and working on a soap opera.**

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, I agree with Mark, I hate the word journey. I use the word adventure as an alternative.

You're dead right. I coined the phrase and it might not be my own, I might have just picked it up somewhere and decided it was my own, which is "failure is not the opposite to success. It's one of the steps towards success."

I improve with that because I've had loads of failures along the way but for every ten failures you get one success and one success is a big step in your career.

James Blanch: Your book, you don't know how pleased I am to hear that you haven't published it yet and started it in 2005 because that makes me

feel that I'm quite speedy having started mine is 2011 and still not published it. Anyway, that's good to know.

Paul Fitzsimons: Yours is a blip on the industry. My thirteen year epic.

James Blanch: Just getting going.

### **You have presumably now decided to self publish it.**

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, I did. I went through the same journey that I'd have heard so many of your other SPF writers talk about on the Podcast about the fact that they put their book out there into the traditional industry and they've got knock backs after knock backs, and not all of them are to do with the quality of the work.

I found that as well that I was getting creative feedback for "Burning Matches" but particularly towards to latter part where I had really honed the book and put a lot of effort into it, that the creative notes weren't consistent. So, some were saying, "Oh yeah, it's great on plot not good on character." Some were saying, "It's great on character, it's not good on plot." And so, I was kind of frustrated that I wasn't getting consistency in the notes.

Then the other side of it was, the notes that I was getting had nothing to do with the book specifically. It was notes like, "Yes, we would like to publish it but we're working on something similar," or "We'd like to publish it but we're not doing any stories about a guarded sect within Dublin, and on the south side of Dublin, investigating his partner."

### **James Blanch: That's one of our rules, we don't do that.**

Paul Fitzsimons: Oh, absolutely, yeah. I got to the point where I really had shelved the book. I shelved the book for four or five years. So that takes my thirteen year journey down to a nine.

It was when I was working on my current book, which is my next project that I actually started it with purely with the idea that it would be for ebook only. I was basically going to self publish it as an ebook.

It was going to be a series of shorter works, so instead of being a 400 page novel, it was going to be a series of 100 pages stories structured like the episode of a crime TV show.

### **James Blanch: Bound together as well?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Publishing them first as individual stories then doing box sets down the line. And it was only when I discovered yourselves and listened to all the podcasts and realized how much resources were out there, I realized, "hang on, I actually have a book sitting there for years. Why don't I just take it and see what status is?"

I actually thought when I took it down off the shelf, I thought I was going to have to do a lot more work to it than I end up having to do. It was actually pretty well there by the time I started. It needed a bit of a content edit. It needed a proof read. Obviously the last fine proofread, but other than that it was pretty much there.

So, I said, "All the resources are there. James and Mark and filling me in on all the details that I need to know how to do this and the worst thing that can happen is it will never sell any copies." I started off down the adventure of self publishing.

James Blanch: Let's hone in a little bit on screenwriting because I'm guessing you've learned at the Coalface quite a lot about the writing for screen. And I include the small screen in that because you're still writing for a visual.

I guess writing for a stage play, a television episode, and a feature film, do have their differences but they also have one commonality thing, which is that you're writing for a visual media which is very different from a book.

Although I do think a lot of people do write their books with the film in mind. I think Mark probably writes like that, he is a big film fan. I think his books kind of work like that.

**For a novelist who's turning out novels, listening to this podcast, thinking about screenwriting, is it an easy transition or is there a particular type of skill set you need that's going to make that work?**

Paul Fitzsimons: It's a very doable transition. I wouldn't necessarily call it an easy transition because as you mentioned there, it is a certain different skill set that you have to put in place in order to write a screen play initially and then if you're talking about adapting a novel.

But in order to actually write a screenplay from an original idea you do have to start off with the technical mindset or creative mindset.

First of all you're writing for the screen, but you're also writing a technical document. Where you are writing a document that is going to be used by a director, by a production head, by an actor, by an actress, by a crew who're going to be using this technical document as a guide on how to do their job.

So, it's not just a matter of in that writing a manuscript for a novel. You write it yourself and you can decide how to space it yourself, and you can decide how it looks.

With a screenplay you actually have to follow a particular set of established rules and they've been established for a reason and they've been established over the past 150 years the film industry has existed. Most of those rules, you have to follow to letter and if you don't, it'll look like you're

an amateur and your screenplay won't get looked at and honestly, probably your film won't get made because it won't be possible to make.

James Blanch: That's interesting because you can download the templates for screenwriting and I've often thought about that but they look quite rigid.

I knew you were going to say that because I could kind of guess the film industry. I know a little bit about the film industry, that it's stuck in convention. Not stuck for a bad reason, but because that's how an enormous operation that requires huge amounts of ... it's a huge team effort unlike a novel writing exercise. So, I completely understand you have to stick to that convention.

Your basic advice is this is not the point at which to be avant garde. There are of course directors out there who think differently. It's a bit like, don't try this at home.

### **You first have to learn the rules of the game.**

Paul Fitzsimons: You do and as I said there are many directors out there who break the rules and as many writers out there who break the rules, and there are directors out there who make films without a script. They'll write it on the day, then shoot, and that works with some.

I think the main thing about breaking the rules for screenwriting is learn the rules first and then you'll know, as you write your tenth script, your twentieth script, whatever number it is. You'll know by your own practices you're allowed to break.

For example, there's a part of screenwriting which is called the transition, which is from one scene to another and you have like cut to black, cut to fade 2, all that kind of thing.

About five years ago, I stopped doing that all together. I leave out all the transitions. I let the director and the editor decide how that transitions are going to be unless it's a particular story required that it has to fade in this particular way. I haven't included transitions in scripts in five years.

James Blanch: I would put the Star Wars wipe for every transition.

Paul Fitzsimons: As I said, I'm not sure that was actually ever in the script in the screenplay.

James Blanch: I think a lot of that stuff was made up during the edit. I suppose.

As you said that, I was thinking of Sliding Doors which is a great film with Gwyneth Paltrow from a few years ago, but that used two screens of alternate versions of her life as they departed. Very cleverly written, but what's basically the same conventions, just slightly played while the scenes overlapped on screen for a bit, but they weren't talking in both frames at the same time, then it moved over to one frame for a bit.

### **The same conventions but the rules to the game are still there, aren't they?**

Paul Fitzsimons: That'd be interesting to see. I must actually have a look at the script for that film and see how it was written technically because you do have an opportunity in screenwriting, if you are using the screenwriting software applications the industry standard for a final draft, you do have the opportunity where you can write two columns. I wouldn't recommend that.

As a reader, I find that very confusing. I would probably write that linearly and let the editor play around with it as they do. Editing is a big part filmmaking as well, as you can completely change what a film feels like by where you place your scenes much later on in the process that the writer has nothing to do with.

James Blanch: What about, because when you write a novel, you write the dialogue, you write your character, and to some extent, that's the end of your involvement. I'm reading to try to sort of get into my genre at the moment. So I've got his character formed in my mind, I mean apart from the point that Custard has given me in his book. I sort of know what he looks like, what he sounds like, and the way that he talks. But that's all invented by me.

Now, you don't have the 10,000 people who've bought your book doing it all slightly differently, you don't know about that. But you will know because an actor is going to take your part and turn it into something.

**How much guidance at the writing stage do you give the actors, the performers of how this character is going to be portrayed or is that something a bit like the transitions that you're happy to leave with the professionals?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Well, I think you do need to clearly establish in the screenplay the characteristics of your character in the same way you do in a novel.

There are going to be certain quirks that might come from an actor's performance that A wouldn't and B shouldn't write into your screenplay. I know some screenwriters who are starting off, they'll pick an actor they like and pick George Clooney for example and they write the character doing George Clooney's movements and you shouldn't do that because there's a good chance the person that is playing is going to be a totally different person. They're not going to like to be told that level of direction.

So you're better off writing the emotion and writing not necessarily how the character feels because you can't get that across in a screenplay but they and portray the general feeling that the character has and let the actor do

the work to actually get that across and like I said, George Clooney will do it differently than Sean Penn will do it.

You've got to get across in the story, obviously the dialogue is important. The dialogue is a huge part of the screenplay. Almost more so than in a novel because you can only put on to a screenplay what can either be seen or what can be heard. So, action or dialogue.

You can't put emotion or thoughts, unless you're putting in big tracts of voice overs and that you can't actually put into your screenplay and so you can really only have dialogue and action to portray what's going on in the story.

James Blanch: That's also puzzling to me a little bit because really good films aren't dialogue heavy quite often. They do allow the story to breathe, tell itself through visual, through movement.

I'm trying to think of a good example here. There must be films for a couple of minutes at a time there's no actual dialogue on screen.

### **How do you write that?**

Paul Fitzsimons: That's something that's big in conversation in the film industry at the moment because *A Quiet Place*, which is out at the moment, is virtually dialogue free because of the nature of the film.

It's about a family who have to communicate without using sound. I'm currently working my way through that script to actually see how it's done.

Essentially, communication is always going to be part of a story unless you're making a nice, visual montage of scenery.

But if it's an actual story with a narrative, you're going to have some level of communication and what the script with *A Quiet Place* has done is just



replaced the actual dialogue itself with the sign language that is used by the characters to get across the same message. So, it doesn't really change, you're still going to have conversation and you're still going to have communication, it will just be done a different way.

Does that answer your question?

James Blanch: Yeah, it does a bit. So, in that case, it's described in the script, them communicating?

I suppose it's difficult to think of good examples at the moment, but I am trying to think of a film where somebody is brooding you know over something and coming to a conclusion about what they're going to do, but they might be by themselves so there's no dialogue. It's a slow panning camera.

### **Would you literally describe what you envision?**

Paul Fitzsimons: I'm actually at the point now where I've kind of cut back on putting in that level of detail and I literally say, "Bradley is left thinking," or "John is left with something to think about" because you can't, for starters, it's really frowned upon to put any camera directions in there and direct it.

### **James Blanch: So you don't want to take away from the director's free ability to be creative?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Your camera direction will probably be ignored by a director anyway and it's kind of disrespectful to directors to be telling them zoom in, pan out, or pan across, whatever it is.

You have to focus on your job as a writer and say what's actually happening within the scope of this story. And your line might just be, "John is left thinking." Then let the director work out the camera directions and let the

actor decide whether him thinking is him raising his head, dropping his head, hand to his chin. Whatever it is.

I think what I've learned from being on set and seeing my words turned into a film is trust your actors. Absolutely trust your actors because they know much better than we do as a writer what's the best way to get across something visually.

James Blanch: And that brings me on to the point that you must have a teamwork mentality for this and that level of trust and I think that's going to be difficult for some authors and I think there are stories out there.

I think Toby Young who wrote a book called How to Lose Friends and Alienate People, a sort of political commentator in the UK, got thrown off the set of the adaptation of that because he could not let it go about the way that his Simon Pegg, I think was portraying him.

JK Rowling, there's stories about her involvement in the scripting stage of the film.

**Your advice sounds a lot better to me which is to write the story, write what happens, then enjoy the interpretation, the creative direction that comes from other people rather than fighting it and allow them to breathe.**

Paul Fitzsimons: Absolutely and some say and I agree with this on some level, a movie set is no place for a writer.

I was on set on The Gift for two reasons; first of all it was a much smaller budget film and I was also producer as well. I had my producer hat on that day but I also did enjoy seeing my own words being filmed.

A lot of directors, a lot of production won't let the screenwriter anywhere near the set because there isn't much for a screenwriter to do. Their job is

done at that stage. And that also means that it gets very easy for a screenwriter gets caught up in it and say this is not my vision, this is not how I envisioned it to be when I wrote the screenplay.

My response to that is you had your opportunity when you wrote the screenplay. The director is king now. When you go onto a movie set, that's the rule. The director is king. And if the director decides to change what you have in your script, it's really up to them at that stage.

On a larger scale production, like if it's a Hollywood movie, as the screenwriter, you've got your contract. You've probably already been paid. Your job is pretty much done. It's now the director and the editor. I'm a big fan of the editor because the director are, between them, what turns my script into a movie.

James Blanch: Makes it or breaks it. I'm thinking back, I used to watch a lot of, still do watch a bit of the behind the scenes. Been quite interested in the whole film industry and you do see different directors do have very different approaches with working with actors.

Famously, George Lucas said almost nothing to his performers and they've talked a lot about Star Wars where they just got no director from him at all. There's famous quotes of Harrison Ford kind of sounding off about not really being able to say a lot of this stuff. Although, I think the writing is absolutely fantastic in that.

And I think that Ridley Scott is the same. I watched his commentary on Gladiator and he made a couple of really revealing points of being really delighted with how to performers delivered lines. He said, "well you write the lines and you hope they're going to do a good job and they did a great job," and I'm thinking he doesn't really get involved in that.

Whereas Ron Howard, if you watch his masterclass, he's done this tutorial on film directing, he's in ... because he's a former actor himself, he's inside

with the actors the whole way. Reinterpreting each line so there's a myriad of ways of doing this and that is a director thing, not a writer thing.

Paul Fitzsimons: And Steven Spielberg is very much the same. He's very much involved so I watched a documentary about his career recently. When he did ET, he was actually lying on the floor with Drew Barrymore helping her through because she had some fairly ... both kids had some pretty difficult scenes.

James Blanch: You can hear that. They've got the sound of him talking to us and now look up and you've just been given a present and it's amazing.

Paul Fitzsimons: That's it. His approach is obviously for that he's really hands on.

Then you have Clint Eastwood who is so confident in his approach he doesn't even use director language. He gets onto a set and he says ... I'm trying to remember who it was. Might have been Ben Affleck or George Clooney, he just says, "alright, have a go. Have a go." Does that mean action? Yeah, he says, "just give it a go, give it a go." And then he goes, "okay that's enough of that." He never uses action or cut or anything like that.

James Blanch: And I can understand that. I've heard a couple say they're stopping to use action and cut on sets because it kind of breaks the on off thing. Some people find those performers who go into complete character, and Jim Carrey in Man on the Moon went nuts on this, but I'm trying to think of who's the big British actor.

Paul Fitzsimons: Daniel Day Lewis.

James Blanch: Daniel Day Lewis, is he British or Irish?

Paul Fitzsimons: He's ... it depends on the day actually. I think he is British.

James Blanch: But very method ... and some people will laugh, I completely understand that. When you see the amazing performances we get in cinema, it amazes me that anyone can turn that off and on and going into it and not wanting to break to spell every ten minutes.

**That's a good thing about digital now, you don't have to keep stopping and changing film.**

Paul Fitzsimons: I think it kind of comes from that. In the olden days it was big reels, you had to as a director, you were having to watch the cost of every reel you put into your camera whereas nowadays, you can just keep rolling. You can keep rolling the camera and just do the take, like Clint Eastwood, "Okay let's have a go. Okay, no let's do it again. Okay, that's fine, we want the next shot."

Whereas it's said the whole action approach isn't really necessary anymore and a lot of directors kind of use it but it's not as strictly required.

James Blanch: There's a great film, you've probably seen it. I think it's called Side by Side. Is it about the transition from film to digital? It's a really good documentary with a lot of current directors in it and it's a little bit kind of antidigital.

But the point is made by quite a few people in there that it produces a better performance in the end because it's more relaxed and there's not this on off thing.

And, I was just thinking of the big Marvel film, which at the time of recording this is the big film in the cinemas at the moment. You know what? Obviously I won't give you any of these huge spoilers, but what's interesting about it, and you'll see this when you see the film, and all of these are about the same, and if you listen to the interviews that are on the Graham Norton show, a kind of film guy. I show this guy in the UK who is

also Irish by the way. That they had almost no clue what was going on in the film. They had no clue. In fact, one of them, something fairly dramatic happens to the performer. He didn't know until he saw the film. So, that's the other end of the scale where they do use action stop start because it's a hugely technical thing to do.

I guess when you move into this area, you've got to be aware what sort of film you're making. Is it a close study of a human? In which case, less is going to be more, isn't it?

If you want to write a Marvel superhero film, it's going to be very technical.

**And I imagine the writers at that stage are probably more closely related to the director because it's almost the same thing, isn't it?**

Paul Fitzsimons: It absolutely does vary from the type of film that you're making and your approach and that's why certain directors really only are interested in one type of film whereas they wouldn't be interested in another.

So, your approach will definitely suit your type of writing ... or your type of directing and the type of film you want to do. Suppose it gets the same for writers as well. My passion is crime, not from a lifestyle point of view, from a writing point of view.

James Blanch: Pays the bills.

Paul Fitzsimons: You got it here first the passion is crime. Yeah, but my writing passion is certainly crime and that's sort of what I'm working on now. It's the novels that I write are crime. The film that I'm working on is certainly close to crime.

James Blanch: So, your film writing and screenwriting experience, your focus right now is obviously your novel at the moment and self publishing

more and perhaps move on to that in a moment. In terms of screenwriting, is there something you want to move on with?

### **Are you thinking of adapting your own novel? Is there another project in the offing?**

Paul Fitzsimons: I'm not just thinking about it, I'm actually doing this.

I'm developing with the director of *The Gift*, so it's going to be our next project together. It's something that I talked about with him a long time ago even before I actually had made the final decision to self publish *Burning Matches*, we talked about an adaptation.

I pitched the story to him, he thought it was really good. So, I've actually finished the first draft of the screenplay which has brought up some really interesting lessons for me even now that I'm still learning on the goal as to the pitfalls that come with adaptation because I wrote the screenplay ... I wrote the first draft for the screenplay and it went out to an editor that was amazing, a screenwriting editor.

She came back with some notes. I was kinda going, "yeah, I should have known that myself." But also she came back with some notes going, "you only ever learn these lessons when you try it. There's always going to be things you'll learn yourself."

### **James Blanch: What are the common pitfalls? Putting too much of the book into the film?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, I think the main one is, I think it kind of being too close to the story and that's kind of one of the things, one of the main pieces of advice in relation to adaptation is that you need to see it as a brand new story based on the key moments of your novel.

And I think the first step is to kind of go through your novel and go, okay, this is what other people call, the tent pole moments. These are the moments in your film without which the story won't stand up.

So, there might be six, there might be eight, there might be twenty, but you need to know as the writer of the original work what these tent pole moments are and as soon as you know that, you need to be able to say about the rest of the story, "okay, that's all changeable or actually that's all moveable. I can do without that character or I can do without that subplot."

Because you're condensing a 400 page story into 120 page screenplay. You can't keep it all. It's just not fiscally possible.

I suppose that'd be the main one, would be the being too close to the story. That'd be kind of the first pitfall.

The other one would be trying to include things like voiceover and flashback to get your backstory, all that backstory information that you had in your book, "oh, so I'll stick it in as a voiceover."

There's certain films out there where voiceover is absolutely crucial, Good Fellas comes to mind as a film where the voiceover was a big part of the story. He was able to tell us things as an audience that he couldn't say around his mafia guys, or his wife.

And then you have flashback which is a big part of ... it can work well, but just have to be very careful. A flashback was used very well in Lost.

A flashback was a big part of the TV show Lost and it was used very well to kind of get backstory across. But that was kind of the model of that story whereas, if all you're doing is throwing in a bit of voiceover or throwing in a bit of flashback, just to get yourself out of a hole because you feel you have to tell your audience, "oh this guy's daughter died in a plane crash ten years ago, so let's throw in that scene just to have it."



You have to be very careful about these devices because film has been around a long time so these devices have been done to death over the last 100 years.

James Blanch: It could look cliché. And is it fair to say in a novel where, perhaps ... what I'm struggling with at the moment is understanding that people enjoy being with your characters and enjoy the journey, whereas in a film everything has got to be purposeful.

### **There's no time for extraneous stuff in a film? Is that right?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Yes, you don't have the luxury to go off into a chapter halfway through your story ...

James Blanch: Adds a bit of color.

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, and tell the background of that shell you found on the beach ten years ago and the fact that it came from Africa and it was in the sea for twenty years. You don't have that luxury. If you want us to find the shell on the beach, he just takes the shell and that's the end of that story.

Or else, again, this is what's the hard part for the adapting novelist and screenwriter is, you may have to get rid of that shell all together. "No no, I love that shell. It was part of the character's development." Well, unfortunately there isn't room for it here.

So, you have to be fairly brutal as an adapting writer.

### **James Blanch: Would it be easier to adapt somebody else's novel than your own?**

Paul Fitzsimons: As someone who's done both, it probably would be easier for the first time to adapt someone else's because you don't have that emotional attachment to the story as a writer.

I'm working through my own adaptation again and I'm being quite brutal to myself saying, "Having that scene in there, that's just luxury. You just put that in because you know you love this line of dialogue."

As a writer we write these nuggets of gold and they're beautiful and they're poetic and then you come to adapt and you say, "Actually, I have to take that out because it doesn't really apply to anything here. It doesn't matter."

As the writer of the original work, it's quite difficult to do that whereas I am adapting a novel that isn't my own and I'm able to take that out. And I'm working with the writer of the original novel and I'm sending it to her, going, "Are you nervous about if I send you this? I've taken away all your writing."

She comes back with, "Ah yes, that makes sense." So, from that point of view, it's probably an easier process if you want to they adapting first maybe try adapting someone else's and maybe as an exercise, try adapting a novel that you love.

Take your favorite novel off the shelf. It's not going anywhere, you're not writing it again. But as a first exercise for screenwriting, this might be a good way of doing it.

James Blanch: I was just thinking that'd be a good thing to do.

### **Are there any examples of films you'd say are good adaptations examples?**

Paul Fitzsimons: I can think of a couple of bad ones I'll give you in a moment, but of good adaptations. Well, there's some classics. There's The

Shining. Obviously is amazing. A lot of the Steven King attempts have been good. I'm not sure how much control he has over that, but the fact that his stories are good. So, The Shining and Shawshank. Well, Shawshank was a short story I think but it was an adaptation. Of course Misery. So there's three from the main writer.

But some of the more mainstream, some of the commercial ones, John Gresham adaptations were quite well made. The Firm was the first one that was done, that was pretty ... I don't think it won any awards, it wasn't made to do that. It was made to be commercially successful and it was.

I really liked The Rainmaker which I didn't particularly like it as a book, but I did like it as a film. And I'm going, "if you can take a mediocre novel and turn it into a really good film, that's a task."

James Blanch: And you mentioned Shawshank. There's interesting the short story adaptation of Philip K. Dick is another one, Minority Report, which I think is Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep was the short story ... the Minority Report, there's another, it may have been called Minority Report.

But Blade Runner and Minority Report are both good examples of how the detail of the book are less important than the essence of the book and if you can turn the essence of the book into a film and a film's a different thing.

And I mentioned Harry Potter and I know lots of people are huge fans of the Harry Potter films and I thought they crammed far too much of the books into them, personally. And I know there are people screaming at me on the podcast about that.

Lord of the Rings, it went on and on didn't it? And they looked majestic and they're all worth seeing and I saw every Harry Potter film and I read every Harry Potter book, but I just felt the essence of the books, the fun bits,

was not there in the films. It was a rather laborious procedure through the scenes. And that's my personally opinion.

Another which I think is a good example is Atonement which is one of my favorite novels of all time by Ian McEwan and it was a really poor adaptation because again, it kind of just put on screen what was in the book and that is not the point of a good adaptation.

Paul Fitzsimons: I think some of my favorite books have been absolutely ruined by adaption. I mean the book is still there, the book is still brilliant, but the film version One Day by David Nicholls, it's one of the few books in my life that isn't crime that I've read four times.

For me to read any book four times ... I hardly have any time to read my favorite books once. I read Dave Nichols on a dare from a friend who wanted me to read something that wasn't crime and I read it and I just loved it.

I thought the film version was just ... I don't think it was really, a good book to adapt to film. There are certain books out there that aren't really suitable for adaptation. I thought the Cormoran Strike books, which were adapted for TV. The beauty of those books was the inner ... the writing was JK Rowling/Robert Galbraith's writing. I didn't think it adapted particularly well to the small screen.

James Blanch: You can see why people fall over themselves to adapt a JK Rowling

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, exactly.

James Blanch: Good, well that's good examples and I think the short story, the preface of what you've been getting at really is it's not the same as simply putting on screen what's in the novel. It shouldn't be prophecy.

Paul Fitzsimons: I admit, you could argue something I've conversated, but the short stories are really better for film adaptation and the novel is better for TV ... long running TV drama. Just from the point of view from the amount of content that there is to do it.

James Blanch: Yeah, and of course TV is the new Hollywood now. Mark is talking about TV for his stuff.

You've mentioned, is it called First Draft? I can't remember the name of the big screenwriting software.

Paul Fitzsimons: Final Draft.

James Blanch: Final Draft.

**Would you recommend that? Is there anything else you'd recommend if people wanted to have a go?**

Paul Fitzsimons: I've tried them all at this stage.

I would recommend Final Draft. It's the software. It's the industry standard software. It's what all Hollywood screenwriters use and there's a good reason for that. It's been around forever and it's the most developed.

We're up to version 10 at this stage and there are significant improvements every time they bring out a new release of it. It's very much used for the first time writer to write that first draft all the way up to using it on set.

Be a pretty daft individual scenes to give to your actors the day on the day with notes then using it then, bringing it into the editing screen for the post production.

Literally, it's not just designed just for writing your screenplay.

James Blanch: And you've created a course.

Paul Fitzsimons: I've created a course, yeah I did.

It's called Screenwriting From Your Sofa and it allows you the opportunities to learn everything you want without having to get out of your pajamas. I created a modular course because I recognized the fact that not all writers need to learn everything there is about screenwriting. I decided to break it down.

I taught screenwriting in some small colleges around Dublin and that's kind of where I built the course from. It took shape from that. I adapted it then to become an online modular course.

It really breaks down as a modular about writing the story. There's a modular about formatting and that's literally just talking about how to format your script correctly in Final Draft or in whatever.

You can use Microsoft Word to write a screenplay. You don't have to spend a couple of hundred quid on screenwriting software. It just makes your life easier if you do.

Like I said, you can use Word and the course I have on formatting tells you how to format your screenplay using Microsoft Word. Where on the page to place your line of dialogue. Where on the page to place your character name because unfortunately the film industry is cruel and if they open the screenplay and they see it formatted wrong, it'll go in the bin before they read word one.

So, I break it down and say there's seven modules. There's actually eight now. I recently wrote another one just on adaptation which I am going to be giving to you to give to all the SPFers.

James Blanch: Yes, that adaptation is one you're going to make available free to listeners of the podcast.

If people go to [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](http://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting) then we will put them over to you. So, [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](http://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting) and you can get that module free of charge from Paul.

### **How much is the whole cost if people want to buy that?**

Paul Fitzsimons: Well, the whole course retail is 100 euros. But I am actually going to give you guys a code as well for just to get the whole thing 25 euros.

James Blanch: Oh, fantastic. And the euro is about a dollar.

Paul Fitzsimons: The exchange rate changes so many times. I'm actually doing all that at the moment with the book that just come out. I'm having to keep up with the various currencies.

James Blanch: Well, that's really generous of you Paul. So, [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](http://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting) you will get both code and that free module.

Paul, well, good luck with your immediate self publishing plans and we look forward to seeing you on the red carpet at some point to pick up best adaptation. Paul Fitzsimons. But they'll probably announce it Paul Fitzsimmons.

Paul Fitzsimons: Yeah, it will probably be announced ... when I go up and collect my Oscar I'll be called Paul Fitzsimmons and I won't go. I'll just refuse to go. I'll just sit down. Not until you call me by the right name.

James Blanch: Paul, thank you so much for joining us.

Paul Fitzsimons: Thanks, James, I appreciate it.

**James Blanch: The obvious thing to ask you, Mark, is where you are with your big project. Because you're going to become the Hollywood mogul.**

Mark Dawson: I won't be a mogul. That's a dangerous profession to get into these days. Yeah, things are still ticking along as I mentioned as before,

I am going to Los Angeles. I'm in America next month, I'm between New York and Denver. I'm either going to Boston City Book Club or I'm going to go to Los Angeles to see a film producer or possibly I will do both of those things.

As far as I know they're still adapting the novel for TV and they say they think they have fixed some issues that were slowing them down and provided than stands, they'll package up the script, the director, and maybe even a star and then try to shop that to the networks in the autumn when it comes down to pitching season again.

Then you never know. Next year, if things all fall into place, we might be looking at a pilot being shot but we'll see. Things are still progressing and there's very little I can do to influence things, so I'm quite happy just to let them go with it.

James Blanch: Sounds really good.

**Do you have any say at all or any interest in the adaptation?**

Mark Dawson: No, I think they asked whether I'd be interested in it and I'm not that interested to be honest. I'm not a screenwriter. It's a different discipline from writing a novel. I'm sure it's one that I could learn.

James Blanch: Well, there's an online course. I've got a discount code for it.



Mark Dawson: Wow, maybe I'll take a look at that.

From my personal view, I'm lucky enough that they lined up a really good screenwriter that had films made before, so I'm quite happy to let them do that. I'll certainly look forward to seeing it because I think it'll be very interesting to see how she's taken my characters and the way she presents them and the story that she tells but it's a different thing, so I'm very hands off.

James Blanch: I think that's very good and we talked about that in the interview. Of course I just spoke to Paul about not getting too closely involved and I think I probably labeled JK Rowling by saying that I think her influence on the Harry Potter scripts were not positive, were not a positive outcome.

I think the films pack too much narrative and story into them and had she not had anything to do with it and just left pure screenwriters to bring that story to life would have been better. So I think you're probably doing the right thing.

I mentioned who is the sort of right wing commentator who recently got given a job and then immediately taken away when all of his disruptive tweets were published? I had forgotten his name but he was the subject of the film How to Lose Friends and Alienate People.

Mark Dawson: Sidney Young.

James Blanch: Sidney Young played by Simon Pegg and he famously got thrown off the set because he was constantly interfering with how they were depicting him.

We talked about this with Paul. You have a story and then a book. It is a totally different way of telling the story to the way that you sit and have a

story told to you on film and you've got to take the essence and the essence of the story and themes and find a way of doing that on film.

That is not the same as packing in all the narrative bits that happen in the book and I think that's really understanding that's what Paul's course really focuses on, understanding how to get the essence of that right.

That URL again is [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](https://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting) to get the first module, the first session in the course absolutely free and a heavy discount code 75%. You get 75 euros off the price of the course, just down to 25 euros. Really good. Thank you for that.

We should also say, I know what you're going to say.

Mark Dawson: Talking of courses.

James Blanch: Talking of courses, yes. As this goes out on Friday, it is midlaunch for us.

Ads for Authors is open. This is Mark's flagship course, which actually contains lots of courses in it and including AMS, Amazon Marketing Services ads for authored books by Bad for Authors YouTube etc.

We're going to be adding Pinterest for authors this year and the exciting thing about Pinterest for Authors is it's not the paid ads, the paid ads platform is not the one that's being recommended by SPF and the author of that course Pip Reid. It is the organic side of it.

So that's good news for people on a budget and can be very powerful. And the course is available. You can read everything you need to read about the course at this URL: [selfpublishingformula.com/adsforauthors](https://selfpublishingformula.com/adsforauthors) and that's all spelled out with the actual letters, ads for authors. It's been exciting.

**In fact, we never know quite how it's going to go, do we, before we open to doors on the launch?**

We do this because it is knacker, to use an English expression, the onboarding process for us and we're very heavily involved and everybody comes on board and we can't do this all year around so we compartmentalize and it works very nicely for us.

But we're not really sure how it's going to go, but this has been fabulous. We've had a clamor. We almost broke the system on the first couple of hours.

We've also had, interestingly, some really high profile authors have turned up at our door step and we've been exchanging emails with people who are regularly in the Kindle Top Ten list. And they're all excited to take your calls. You're becoming famous, Mark Dawson.

Mark Dawson: More famous.

James Blanch: Of course. I forgot you were a narcissist. You're becoming more famous than you already are.

Mark Dawson: My daughter apparently went to school the other week and they were talking about what their parents do for a living and she says, "My dad is a writer and he is very famous." I'm only famous to her. No one else knows who I am.

**James Blanch: A legend in your own lunchtime.**

We're just getting out about the course. I've made a decision to finally not wait for Adwords to settle down anymore because there's a really strange thing that Adwords created this new platform and I think it's been met with such hostility they can't bring themselves to take the old one away, so you

can switch between them, just in the top right hand corner it just says new Adwords or old Adwords.

They're quite different and I think some people have not discovered the new one because they're just sat on the old one and whatever one you were on last time, that's what it defaults to.

But new people coming on only get the new one unless they go searching for the old one, so it's really unsatisfactory from my viewpoint trying to teach people how to use the platform to have two parallel versions of it. But there seems no indications that they're going to take the old one away.

So I'm going to rerecord the screenflows and bringing in the changes that have been made so the old annotations that we recommended and used in your adverts have gone to be replaced by something called cards. They've made it real difficult for people to get going in the first place, so you need more qualification to be able to use the Adwords platform is now pretty high. Your channel has got ...

Mark Dawson: This is only on YouTube.

James Blanch: This is on YouTube. This is not pay-per-click. This is using Adwords to run YouTube video campaigns, video campaigns they're called in Adwords. But the qualifications for your YouTube channel is pretty stiff now.

We're going to rerecord that. YouTube have made it a little but more difficult for us but, it is worth it because it is a huge search engine. In fact, I believe it is the second biggest search engine on the planet. Ironically, or conveniently, owned by the biggest search engine on the planet. And there you go.

And that's the thing about all these platforms actually, Mark. Is you've got to remember they're where people go searching.

Mark Dawson: More than that. Amazon is a big search engine.

That's a very important thing that I teach in the course is you have to think about it in a way that enables you to show your book to people looking for those kinds of books. That's one of the main lessons that we teach.

So, yeah, is the same across all platforms. The difference between Amazon has your credit card and you can buy things with one click and others are the same, but Amazon is the biggest retailer for booksellers.

James Blanch: And there's a lot of the psychology which you teach in the course and which we learned in the SPF business of when people are in buying mode, which I think is why AMS Adwords works so well is you say they're there to buy. So they're already thinking about buying.

And in fact we can ... well, there's a little secret thing which I'm going to hint at which is, if you do purchase Ads for Authors, you will discover we are employing a little bit of this psychology. It is a very very good offer.

Last time we will ever give this offer at this level because we never really make any money on it, but people are taking it up and it pops up. That's as much as I'm going to say. I could already have said too much.

Mark Dawson: Something that pops up ... that's more detail than anyone needed.

James Blanch: Indeed. Good. Well, it's a lovely sunny week here in the UK so we need to go outside. Actually you're looking quite well tanned.

If you're watching on YouTube you can see the slightly shaved and slightly tanned. I look pale and washed out but that's the look I prefer on this. Every now and again, people complain about the grading on the picture on YouTube of me.

Mark Dawson: And actually they're not saying saying grading. They're saying graying.

James Blanch: Thinning and graying.

Mark Dawson: That's alright. You got more than me.

James Blanch: Well, you know, I went to OMD last night. Do you think anyone in America has heard of OMD?

Mark Dawson: Yes, they have them there, I think.

James Blanch: Yes, so OMD and the Thompson twin now, there's only one of them now, I think there was three of them back in the day. I felt quite young because there were some people looking pretty old on the stage rocking around and they've been doing the same thing for forty odd years.

It was a good place to go. Looking around at the crowd as well, I was about the right age to be there. OMD was sensational by the way. Fantastic man.

Alright, good. I think we've witted on enough. It's been good, Mark, today.

Thank you very much indeed for joining us. Thank you very much indeed for listening. I hope you enjoy Paul Fitzsimons' work and his course which could be opening a fresh new door for you if you got something that's going to look good on the big screen, why not take a punt on that? That URL again, [selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting](http://selfpublishingformula.com/screenwriting) for the screenwriting course and [/adsforauthors](http://adsforauthors) if you want to find out more about Mark Dawson's Advertising for Authors course.

That's it for this week. We will see you next week. Shall we hint at what's happening in the next day or two?

It might not happen, so ...

Mark Dawson: Yeah, potentially, talking about and speaking with someone who is quite well known in the indie space at the moment for legal issues.

James Blanch: Highly likely to be the most controversial episode that we've ever broadcast, but it also might not happen.

Mark Dawson: Might not. It will one of the most interesting ones we've broadcasted I think. Let's leave it at that.

James Blanch: On that note and that bombshell, we'll speak to you next week, bye bye.

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