

## **EPISODE 130: THRILLERFEST PART 1**

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

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to The Self-Publishing Formula podcast. We are sort of live in New York City and we've moved, Mark, haven't we?

We spent the week in the insanity of midtown. We have moved up to the relative tranquil peace of the Upper West Side, and I think you look like a man at home here. Yoko Ono lives down the road here and-

Mark Dawson: Lee Child.

James Blatch: Lee Child lives up here.

Mark Dawson: Not too far away. Yeah, you never know, in 10 years' time maybe.

James Blatch: Coincidentally, you mentioned Lee Child. We have Lee Child in this series of episodes from New York where we're going to talk about indie publishing, its impact on the traditional publishing, but most of all really writing. We're going to talk to some of the really world superstars of writing, particularly in the thriller genre but not exclusively.

Mark Dawson: Because I'm professional-

James Blatch: Did I say professional?

Mark Dawson: and you are not. We're actually here for ThrillerFest.

James Blatch: We are.

Mark Dawson: ThrillerFest was the conference unsurprisingly about thrillers, and it's finished now. We had the gala yesterday evening, which was quite entertaining, where we made an effort and scrubbed up nicely, so three days of really excellent festival that we really enjoyed great authors.

It was me, James, and John behind the camera. We have been very busy and we've got some really fantastic interviews with some top class authors. I wouldn't even like to guess how many copies of books they've sold, but it's-

James Blatch: It's millions.

Mark Dawson: Many millions.

James Blatch: I was just going to come on and talk about ThrillerFest, but you've done that, so well done.

Mark Dawson: Thank you.

James Blatch: We should also talk about behind the camera. We have been staying in hotels, as people do in New York, but for this day, it's a real treat for us because we've been invited to somebody's actual home here in the Upper West Side.

His name is Cameron Mattis. You won't know his name but he's a big part of what SPF does. If you're a member of either of our courses, he is one of the team at Teachable, which is based here in New York, a startup.

James Blatch: It's been a really successful startup. We've been a part of their story from the very early days. It's not directly author related, but we mention it because they host our courses.

You will be familiar with them if you are on there, and if it's something that people, particularly non-fiction authors are thinking about, well, I'd just say that we would recommend the Teachable platform.

Mark Dawson: Absolutely, yeah. Fantastic, really good.

James Blatch: Thank you to Cameron and Melanie for a fantastic-

Mark Dawson: Fantastic bagels, and we watched the World Cup final here, which was great, with mimosas and bagels, smoked salmon. We've been very well treated.

James Blatch: It's been great, and I feel slightly better about England's exit at the semifinal having seen France demolish Croatia.

Mark Dawson: At least we didn't lose to the French.

James Blatch: We didn't lose to the French in dramatic style in the final.

Okay, look, we have three super interviews in this episode. I'm going to trail ahead a little bit to the superstars. We have Karin Slaughter, a very well-known thriller author, is in this episode.

In the next episode, we have Lynda La Plante, who is world famous in the UK, if that makes sense, but I think a household name in many countries around the world. She's a police procedural and is the author behind Widows, which is being rebooted at the moment on TV, and the Prime Suspect-

Mark Dawson: Prime Suspect.

James Blatch: I'm groping for the name, Prime Suspect series in the UK.

Finally, in part three of our New York stories, our podcast episode, we have an interview with Lee Child, a byword for thriller writing on the planet today, one of the most successful authors.

Mark Dawson: Yes, if not, at some point, probably the most successful, so we've done very well.

It's been a team effort. Mr. Dyer behind the camera there has been fantastic at approaching these authors and basically dragging them bodily in front of the camera where James has interviewed them. So it's been a lot of fun.

James Blatch: We have Peter James and Karin Slaughter coming up in this episode. You're going to enjoy both of those interviews.

One of the joys actually, of coming to a conference like ThrillerFest is you can sit and listen to the panels and because we like to interview anyone who's got something interesting to say, you can suddenly pick up people who clearly are those who I think that you, as our listener, would benefit from listening to.

James Blatch: One of those guys was a guy called J.D. Barker. You may have heard of him. He's quite a prolific and a good writer. He's a very good writer in his own right, but he's done some collaborations that have raised his profile.

In fact, we had the ultimate collaboration moment in this interview, which I won't give away as a spoiler, which is coming up in a moment, but the really exciting thing that J.D. Barker is doing is that he was invited by Bram Stoker's family. Bram Stoker, of course, wrote one of the most famous gothic horror books of all time, *Dracula*, to write the prequel to that book.

How cool is that? He's currently co-writing with James Patterson. He's a really interesting guy to talk to and talks a lot of sense. He's traditional but enthusiastic and wants authors to hold high standards in everything they do.

So he talks the kind of indie language that we talk, and that's why we picked him up. We are going to, first of all, hear from J.D. Barker.

James Blatch: J.D. Barker, thank you so much indeed for joining us on the podcast.

J.D. Barker: Absolutely.

James Blatch: I've just listened to you on the panel. You sat there with Mark, and Mark, John and I looked at each other and said we've got to get J.D. on our podcast, because you were on a panel talking about indie and trad and which is a better route and so on.

It was really interesting discussion, and we'll cover some of that, but I want to start with some of your personal experience of writing. You've had some great success, some great collaboration success and really interesting moments in recent years. So just tell us a little bit about where you are in your books now.

J.D. Barker: I've been crazy lucky as far as my career goes. I wrote my first book and in the novel, I had to explain where the wife in the story bought a journal. So just to get the book done, I had her go into Needful Things, Stephen King's store, and buy the book there and fully expected to have to change that.

But when you write a book, you just want to get to that last page, so I put that in there. I figured I'd go back, have to rewrite and I would change it. My wife read it and she said, "I like this. I think we should just get Steve's permission to use it."

James Blatch: Because that's easy, right?

J.D. Barker: Right, how do you go about getting Stephen King's permission to do much of anything? Turns out we had a mutual friend. I reached out to him.

He gave me Stephen King's email address and said, "Go ahead and send it to him. If he likes it, you'll hear back. If you don't hear anything back, it

probably sucks. Leave the guy alone.” Then I got an email back from King and he said, “Go ahead and use it. Let me know if you need anything.”

I stared at that message for probably about four months waiting for the retraction to come in, expecting it to be for John Grisham or somebody else, but it never did. It never came, so the book came out and I self-published it mainly because I had trouble getting an agent.

Looking back on it, I wrote a terrible query letter. I basically used a form letter, which is a big no-no. So I self-published the book and it ended up selling really well, enough to the point where it landed on the radar of traditional publishers.

When I finished up my second book, I fully expected to self-publish that one again because I understood the model and I understood how to market it. I liked being in control of everything, but again my wife’s way smarter than me. She said, “Go ahead and send it out to a couple agents to see what happens with it.”

I ended up getting a seven figure advance deal for that book, which was tremendous. It allowed me to quit the day job and basically become a full time writer.

James Blatch: So you started self-publishing.

J.D. Barker: I did. I was ready to self-publish.

I had the cover designed. Even now that I’m traditionally published, every one of my books, I go through the same process. They go through alpha readers, beta readers, copy editors. All that stuff happens before I even turn it in to my agent and my editor.

I try to get the book as perfect as possible mainly because I don’t want the editor to have to do a lot of work. The less changes that they have to make, the more of my own story remains, so I try to get the novel as close to perfect as possible.

James Blatch: That's interesting, but it's also a slight indictment on where traditional publishing is today, because we had a conversation on this trip actually where someone said 40 years ago, traditional publishes far fewer books.

Each book was a work of art. They spent a lot of time with them. In the commercial environment of reality of traditional publishers, as an author, you're doing the right thing.

You are looking after a lot of the detail of your marketing, a lot of the detail of your book and not leaving it up to the traditional publisher, because they simply don't have the time with the volume they need to do these days.

J.D. Barker: No, and it makes a huge difference. I was a book doctor before this. I did that for about 20 something years.

James Blatch: You were a book doctor?

J.D. Barker: A book doctor. Somebody would write a book. It would be good, but it wasn't quite where it needed to be, or an editor received a book and they knew that it needed work, I was the guy they gave those to.

I would either offer suggestions, or I would do a complete rewrite depending on what the situation called for.

But over that 20 years, I basically learned what agents were looking for, what editors were looking for. My plotting became extremely tight. I learned how to write a book through other people's books.

One of the things I did pick up on, and you just touched on, that editors are crazy busy. If you talk to any editor at a publishing house, they've got a stack this big on their desk, and they don't have the time to take on a project.

So if you can turn in something that's going to require minimal effort on their part, two things are going to happen, they're going to want that book

and you're probably going to get paid more for it, versus turning in something in that ... a stack of pages that are taped together and written on this type of paper and maybe a couple of laundry receipts, whatever you might find. I've seen them both ways.

James Blatch: You did traditionally to get a fantastic advance, seven figure advance. That would be awesome, a six figure advance, and with that book and that deal.

### **From where you are now, are you happy that you signed that deal and went that way?**

J.D. Barker: Yeah, absolutely. I'm on, I think, my third book now coming out through traditional publishers.

The biggest headache that I honestly have right now is I've got multiple publishers and I'm juggling publishing dates. As an author, you want to make sure you stay in front of your audience.

Between my first book, the independently published one and my second one which was traditional, it was almost a two year time frame and that really hurt me.

I write at a speed where I could put out two to three books a year, but I have to get everyone else on board with that. I've got multiple publishers.

I'm with H & H, Putnam Random House, Harper Collins overseas. It's a bunch of different ones, but I still can't control their actual release dates, so I'm actually considering independently publishing some novels in between to fill some of those gaps just to make sure I get two to three books out on a decent schedule.

James Blatch: It would be fascinating to see how those two processes run alongside of each other, and you're very clued up on the whole process, so you're in a perfect position to excel, I would imagine, at indie publishing as well.

Now, you've mentioned Stephen King. We're going to do some proper name dropping there, because you are the man who can collaborate with the stars, right?

**Tell us about the Bram Stoker family story because that's incredible.**

J.D. Barker: I tell people I've captured lightning in a bottle a couple of times and there's things that should only happen once to the same person.

Bram Stoker's family read my first book. It was called Forsaken, the one that Stephen King helped me out with, and they reached out to me. It was up for the debut author award for a Bram Stoker award.

It didn't actually win that year, but Stoker's family basically said, "Listen, we've read it. We've been trying to find somebody to write a prequel to Dracula using Bram's original notes. Is that something you'd be interested in doing?"

At first, I thought they were punking me. I thought it was a joke. I was waiting for Ashton Kutcher to come running out of the corner with a camera, but it turned out to be for real.

So I signed up a bunch of NDAs and ended up meeting Dacre Stoker who's Bram's great grandnephew. He had a cabin up in the Carolinas and on our second day there, he brought out a big old box of basically the stuff that Bram had on his desk when he wrote the novel.

A lot of people don't realise it, but Dracula, the novel that we know actually starts at page 102 of the original manuscript. The publisher pulled the first 100 pages out of the book.

Bram tried to push it as a true story. He basically felt vampires were real, and a lot of that first section of the book was autobiographical.

At the time when this was going on, Jack the Ripper was running around London, so his publisher said, "There is no way we're putting a vampire

story out with Jack the Ripper on the streets. It's just going to freak people out. We can't do it." So they pulled all of that out and the book that finally got published started at page 102.

Bram kind of snuck around that because in today's world, when I write a book, I send it off to one editor and one agent and then it gets farmed out from there to the various publishers around the world that translate it into different languages.

In Bram's day, he actually sent those books off from his own desk, so some of the stuff that got removed in the English version of the book, he left it in when he sent it off to Germany. He left it in when he sent it off to France.

Different parts of his novel and his story basically got pieced out in first drafts throughout the world. So they were out there but you'd have to find a first draught. You'd have to translate it, and you'd have to find it.

James Blatch: That's amazing that you have this. You're up in the Carolinas, in a cabin.

J.D. Barker: Can I just stop you guys?

James Blatch: Oh yeah.

J.D. Barker: That was actually Jim Patterson calling.

James Blatch: Oh, it was?

J.D. Barker: Yeah, I've got to take that one.

James Blatch: That's the coolest name drop we've ever had, James Patterson's calling him.

J.D. Barker: Yeah, I've got to call him back real quick.

James Blatch: You do that. You take that call and we'll pick this up.

J.D. Barker: Okay, sorry.

James Blatch: That was the coolest interruption we've ever had on the podcast. Jim Patterson is calling me.

J.D. Barker: Sorry about that.

James Blatch: And we haven't even mentioned James Patterson, so we're going to come to him in a moment.

I was just going to say you're sat in the Carolinas. You've got Bram Stoker's old original notes in front of you, and the family are asking you to write a prequel to Dracula.

**I can't think of a better moment for a writer.**

J.D. Barker: No, and it was an amazing experience.

One of the other things I got to do, Paul Allen, one of the co founders of Microsoft, he owns the original Dracula manuscript. He invited us out to Seattle to actually look at it.

We spent about a day in a conference room just looking through those pages, and being able to see first of all just the typewritten script, but then Bram's notes written on the side, notes from his editor.

His brother, Thornley, was a doctor and there's a scene in the book where Renfield, they drill some holes in his head to relieve some pressure from a brain bleed.

His brother actually drew out a three-dimensional skull in the side of the manuscript and said, "You need to drill here, here and here." He basically explained in modern day technology at their point, how it would have to be done.

Being able to see all that, literally cut and paste, this section had to be moved to here, so they literally cut it out and they taped it over here on this page and that kind of thing, it was amazing.

James Blatch: Copying and pasting with a bit of sticky tape.

J.D. Barker: Yeah, absolutely.

### **James Blatch: Where are you with that book?**

J.D. Barker: That book's done. It actually comes out in October. October 2nd I believe is the release date.

### **James Blatch: What's it called, J.D.?**

J.D. Barker: Dracul.

Paramount bought the film rights. The same team that made the remake of 'It' is working on the movie for this, so it's an exciting project for sure.

James Blatch: Dracula is, I think, as a gothic story, it's at its best when it's to the original Bram Stoker ideal. When they made the film, it was years ago now, when they did stick to the original story, it was without question the best.

J.D. Barker: The Francis Ford Coppola, yeah absolutely.

James Blatch: It was fantastic, so I guess that's what's running through your mind when you're doing this.

### **You must have felt the pressure, almost literally, of a vampire breathing down your neck here, because who knows if Bram Stoker may appear at some point?**

J.D. Barker: More like Bram Stoker breathing down my neck. A lot of the novel is actually his own words because we worked with his actual notes.

We pieced together basically what was in those hundred pages and then filled in the gaps.

It really did feel like Bram was standing there in the room with us at certain points and reading what we were writing and sending us in a particular direction.

James Blatch: Maybe he was.

J.D. Barker: Maybe. You never know.

James Blatch: Okay, so that's the collaboration with the Stoker family. We should say it's a break between the sessions. It's getting a little bit noisy in here, but we can hear each other fine.

You just took a call from James Patterson, which brings us on to another collaboration area. I know that you're working in legal areas when you write with somebody else and for quite right reasons, you don't discuss a lot of that openly.

**The bit I'm interested in is what you discovered about the power of having a good quote as part of your marketing, so tell us about that.**

J.D. Barker: Absolutely. Again, I self-published the first book, so I learned what I call guerilla marketing, which is a lot of like what Mark does. I saw his presentation earlier and we hit a lot of the same things. It's really just about finding your niche.

There's certain things you can do as an independent. There's certain things you can't do. I basically looked at whatever models that traditional publishers were using and what was successful for them and tried to mimic that, but a lot of the times, you can't. You've got to find little things that work.

One of the things that's very popular in just the writing world is obtaining blurbs. You write a book. You reach out to somebody who's doing well. You ask them to read it. They give you a quote for the back of the book.

That happens all the time, but a lot of them I think, there's a twofold problem there. I think a lot of the blurbs just disappear. A lot of the big name authors, the last thing you want to do is go to them over and over again and for every book, ask them to read it and give you a quote. I don't want to do that.

So with Patterson, to give you an example, I asked him to give me a quote that comments more on my writing style instead of the actual book that he just read.

For my first book, he actually did give me a blurb. He called Fourth Monkey ingenious, which was awesome, but then he gave me another one that said, "Don't miss anything J.D. writes."

Immediately since I got those, I created Facebook ads, Amazon ads and Twitter, Instagram. I put those out everywhere and started testing them, and they do really well.

I find that taking certain things like that, most authors will just allow it to show up on the back of their book and then it's forgotten.

When I get something like that, I try to figure out how I can take it to the next level, how I can use it to market my other material.

**James Blatch: So you noticed an immediate difference, the impact?**

J.D. Barker: Absolutely. 1 out of every 17 books sold in the world is one of his. It's a name that resonates pretty much everywhere.

James Blatch: And there's a safety for it. If you put yourself in the position of a reader, browsing, thinking about what to read, buying a book is an

investment in time. It doesn't really matter about the seven bucks, whatever you've paid.

It's a bit like going to see a film. It's two hours of your life you won't get back if you make a bad decision, and you are looking for that safety net, that comfort area.

**James Patterson says read this guy. I can immediately see why that is a reason to click and buy.**

J.D. Barker: It's an endorsement.

I'm in the same boat. I love to read but I can't read everything. Something might nudge you in one direction or the other, so an indie author or even a traditional, you want to try to find those things that will nudge people.

**James Blatch: James Patterson is a great collaborator now. He's just collaborated with Bill Clinton, so he's one of your fellow stable mates there.**

J.D. Barker: He actually just hit the New York Times bestseller list, I think for the fifth week in a row with that book. It's amazing. What's really crazy is I think that's ... I'd have to check the numbers, but I think it's number 70 or 71 number one New York Times bestseller that he's had. He's been on the list I think around 300 times already.

James Blatch: That's incredible. We've sat in the Oval office. The London Book Fair, they put up an Oval Office.

J.D. Barker: I saw that.

James Blatch: We were there promoting that.

**How is that experience, from what you can talk to us about, with James Patterson? How does it work?**

J.D. Barker: It's a crazy learning curve. It's like going back to school. He's commenting on everything that we write. It's back and forth.

We came up with the idea for the book together. It's amazing. I wish I could share more detail with you, but I'm learning from one of the best. He's really teaching me a lot.

James Blatch: That's obviously going to be traditional published. That will be his publishing side of things, but you are indie publishing ...

### **Let me get this right, you're indie publishing the Dracula book?**

J.D. Barker: No, that was bought by Putnam Random House, so they're putting that out. At this point, I don't have any indie published titles that on the horizon.

James Blatch: But you're thinking about it?

J.D. Barker: I'm considering it.

James Blatch: You have a great area of expertise in book marketing, so like I alluded to earlier, I think you're in a really strong position.

Let's go to the substance of the panel you've just been on alongside people like Mark Dawson. What's your view on where the future is on this?

### **Are we going to see the traditional industry further decline, or are they going to find a way of surviving in the long term?**

J.D. Barker: I think it's going to survive. We touched on that a little bit.

Kindle was a major disruptor for sure, but if you look at it, really all it did was replace mass market. We used to have mass market paperbacks, which still exist, but if you were in the States, you used to be able to walk in anywhere and find it, whether it was a drugstore or a grocery store, or K-Mart, Wal-Mart.

They were always right in front of you at the checkout line. They're not there anymore, and that was because of the convenience factor. You had your selection of books. You would pick one and you'd just walk out the door. The Kindle has kind of replaced that.

Now, you just jump on your computer and you've got your list, your virtual shelf, but I think the novelty of it has worn off a little bit. People have figured out what device or how they like to consume a book.

Personally, I use all of them. I listen to audiobooks when I run every day. I read a Kindle at night. I read paperback books when I'm sitting down at my desk or out on my deck. I enjoy all of them.

I think all of us find whatever works for us, so as an author, what I'm trying to find is what is going to be the next big thing? What's the next disruptor that's going to come along?

I think the traditional bookstore is still changing, but they seem to be doing better. They're doing better than they were a couple of years ago, and I think that model itself is going to stick around. I really do think we're going to see print on demand type devices at some point soon.

I mentioned in there a red box type of situation where you walk into the grocery store and there's a box right outside the store, and rather than selecting a movie, you're going to select a book and it's going to print it for you right there on the spot. I know the devices exist. I've seen them in some independent bookstores, but they haven't saturated the market yet.

James Blatch: What's your advice then to authors starting out? There's a lot of people here who are, like me, writing their first book and thinking about the future.

**Would you say still try and get an agent, still try and go down traditional route, or would you say to people it's more rewarding for you to do it independently?**

J.D. Barker: I would still try to go the regular route. I mean, I went independent.

Typically, I think you've got to look at the scenario. I had offers for the first book, but the advances weren't quite where I wanted them to be. So then you have to start looking at the metrics of that.

If you independently published book, you're getting about 70 cents out of a dollar.

If you sign a publishing deal with somebody, whether it's a small press or a big traditional guy, you're going to get about 25 cents out of a dollar, so then you're going to have to do the math there.

Is the money that they're giving you as an advance going to make all of that worthwhile? Because as an indie author, you can make that money and you can make it back pretty quick if you do everything properly and you do it well.

I think you have to weigh that. I'm kind of against the smaller press model unless I know they're going to put money behind marketing. They have to do something that's going to move the needle because otherwise, you're taking a small check as an advance and you're basically giving the book to somebody who's going to do the same thing that you would have done as an indie author, except they're collecting a big chunk of your royalties.

So again, always do the math, but I would start with agent and see where it goes from there. You never know.

James Blatch: I sometimes think if you think your book is really going to do well, then indie route is quite good for you for the long term.

**If you're really uncertain about whether it's going to work or not, that advance looks very tempting.**

J.D. Barker: It is, but you have to understand what it is you're taking on as an indie author. You're basically becoming Random House.

In order to succeed as an indie author, your book has to be on par with the book that Random House is putting out. That means you need a paperback. You need a hard cover. You need an audiobook. You need to put dollars behind marketing.

You need professional editing. You need a professional cover. All of those things have to happen. The biggest mistake that I see people do is they write their indie novel. They get to that last page. They just hit the publish button on Amazon and they sit back and they just wait for the money to come rolling in.

That never happens. What ends up happening is the book has mistakes in it. People will read it. You'll get five or six terrible reviews because of those mistakes and you basically get blackballed.

That reader is not going to come back and other readers are going to find out that you're putting out something that's not up to par and your career is over. Your name is burned.

So if you're going to do the indie model, make sure that book is just as good as if it came out with the big house.

James Blatch: That's one of the reasons that we wanted to talk to you because you talk the same language as Mark. Mark's job in life now is to teach people to do that professionally.

His rule number one: your book should be indistinguishable from the traditional published book. Anything short of that, you're doing a disservice, and that's why he's doing so well, I think.

J.D. Barker: There's a number of them here that have sold well, and if you ask them, they'll all tell you that exact same thing. There's no shortcut for sure.

James Blatch: Let's conclude on a bit of direct advice then, to authors.

**What should they should they be focusing on regardless really overall?  
What's the most important thing authors need to think about now  
getting going?**

J.D. Barker: Just create the best possible product that you can. That book needs to be a five star book. If it's not there, if there's something wrong, if it needs to be edited, get all those things done.

Make sure you get beta readers and alpha readers, people that are going to be critical of the writing, people that are going to tell you what's wrong with it.

One of my beta readers is one of the only people that gave me a one star review on my first book, but she was right. She gave me a very long list of things that was wrong book, so I brought her in for every title and she's given me the same kind of detail.

Your chance to work those things out are before the rest of the public sees it. Get that book perfect, and that's a very small part of the battle.

After that, you've got marketing and you've got everything else that you need to do, but none of that stuff will matter. You can have the greatest marketing campaign in the world, but if the book sucks, it's not going to matter. You're just going to throw money at the problem.

**James Blatch: I wonder how many traditionally published authors like you have an advanced reader team.**

J.D. Barker: I don't know.

James Blatch: You're all over this stuff and you're absolutely right because editing is hugely important, but people like Mark and yourself talk about the impact advance readers have on that and the positive impact they have

on shaping the books. It's such an obvious thing, but it's more of an indie thing than traditional I think.

J.D. Barker: Yeah, I think just because in the traditional model, authors used to write their book, they would hand it off to their agent who would send it off to their editor. Their only interaction would be with that editor and the people at the publishing house.

When it came out, they didn't market. They didn't do anything else. They basically went right into their next book, and I think that's changed quite a bit.

The people like me that have come up in a world where that doesn't exist for us, I think we've adapted. We've learned. It's not even a factor. The older school authors that grew up with that particular model are trying to adjust and realising that they have to market. They have to do this. They have to do that.

They're adapting as well, so I think the publishing industry is just so fluid. It's changing constantly. You have to be willing to adapt.

**James Blatch: You speak really well, J.D., about publishing. You seem to have an energy about it. I guess you seem to really enjoy your life at the moment writing.**

J.D. Barker: It's great. It's funny. I joke about this, that I've got two and a half degrees. I've got one in information technology, another one in business, and I got halfway through a psychology degree, and now, I get paid to make shit up.

James Blatch: You couldn't make it up except it's exactly what you do.

J.D. Barker: It's a wonderful way to make a living.

James Blatch: J.D., thank you so much for joining us and congratulations on your stellar success over recent years, and we look forward to learning what made Dracula.

J.D. Barker: Thank you very much.

James Blatch: J.D. was great, full of enthusiasm. You were actually on the same panel as him, and the panel was, I think, trad versus indie or indie and the trad world.

Mark Dawson: Sorry, a phone call, James.

James Blatch: Lee Child is not calling you.

Mark Dawson: It's President Clinton.

James Blatch: Another famous James Patterson collaboration.

Mark Dawson: He was on a panel with me. I've never met him before, but he's a great speaker with lots of interesting stories.

I'm agnostic about how books are delivered. It's all about the stories for me. I don't really care if it's in paper or bytes. He's done a fantastic job and he's approaching the way that he sells his books with a very similar way that I do and I'm looking to sell mine.

I wouldn't be surprised in 5 or 10 years' time if we both come back here again, he's diverged into other ... become a true hybrid author with lots of different ways of delivering his stories.

James Blatch: It seems like an obvious move for me. He's got all the enthusiasm and the know how to make a great success of that. We'll talk a little bit more about indie and trad at the end of this episode, but bottom line is I think he's got all of the assets necessary to make more money from his writing, which is one of the things indie writing can deliver for you.

We have two more interviews in this episode and they're really fun interviews. The first one is with Peter James.

Peter James is a very famous police procedurals guy in the UK, a hugely prolific author, a man who is very well known for being very supportive of the UK police force. He does a lot of work with them. Quite an international writer as well. I think he does an international role for ThrillerFest.

### **You've actually been to his house before, haven't you?**

Mark Dawson: I have, yeah. Me, Joanna and Nick Stevenson all went to his about three years ago just outside Brighton, and it was for the founding meeting of the International Thriller Writers UK chapter.

It was about 20 authors there, mostly trad. In fact, all of them were trad apart from us, and I remember quite well they were all asking us how we were selling books, because they possibly didn't think they were selling enough, is it was very interesting.

Peter is lovely. He's a great host, really good storyteller as everyone we've got on the podcast. Unsurprisingly being authors, they also tell a really good story, all great raconteurs and Peter is no exception to that.

James Blatch: Well, let's hear from Peter.

Peter, first of all, thank you so much for spending some time talking on our podcast, and welcome to a fellow Brit here in alien New York.

Peter James: It's very nice to see a friendly face here in New York.

James Blatch: We can commiserate about the World Cup perhaps after the interview. I know people come here to listen to you.

### **What do you get out of a session and a conference like ThrillerFest?**

Peter James: I think we authors spend so much of our lives inside our caves, and it's a great opportunity to meet fellow authors. That's what I love.

I've done a panel yesterday with Lee Child and Karin Slaughter and Lynda La Plante, who believe it or not, I've never met before. So it's almost like you go to conferences and meet people you've never met before and often your hearers as well, so I love that.

Also, I love teaching. I don't get enough time to do it, but I do a session here on a Wednesday and I talk to 100 people and try to give them some of what little wisdom I have about writing.

It's really satisfying when you meet someone that says, "Hey, that really helped me," and to spend a week in New York I realise is not a hardship.

James Blatch: It's not a hardship at all. When you sit next to someone like Lynda, who we spoke to yesterday and frankly could have spent several hours listening to Lynda talk, do you pick up anything?

**You've been writing a long time, hugely successful, but do you sit there and think about method or process that you get from other authors?**

Peter James: Oh yeah, I think we all learn from not just our peers, but each other. I've got a lurker in the background. We all learn from ... If Karin Slaughter is my lurker, I'm happy about that.

James Blatch: Not a bad lurker to have.

**So in terms of learning from Karin and Linda and other people, you're still able to take on tips and ideas?**

Peter James: Oh gosh yeah. I think that somebody will often say something on a panel and you think actually, that's really smart. I haven't thought about that, or some aspect of writing.

If you look at the bestseller lists on any given week of the year, half the writers on those lists are going to be people north of 50, some north of 60, north of 70, north of 80.

Alfred Hitchcock once said, "There's only three things that no man can do with dignity, conduct an orchestra, direct a motion picture, or write a novel."

There's a lot of truth in that because with writing, you're not just reading a story like a chewing gum for the eyes. You're reading to learn. I think people who read, but then the fact they're reading, are smart. Therefore, when we read a book, we don't just want to learn. It's not a puzzle that we want to solve.

That's part of the fun of it, but what we're really looking for I think is to learn something about human nature, about the world in which we live, something new that we didn't know.

Peter James: That's what's really good writing is about. I think as writers get older, hopefully, we get more life experience that we can then put into our books.

James Blatch: How do you feel about the industry and the amount of people reading, because things are changing a lot with the digital revolution? I have teenage children who spend a lot of time on electronic devices and not as much time reading as I'd like and so on.

**From your perspective as an author, does it feel still vibrant? Are you optimistic about it?**

Peter James: I think people will always want storytelling. It's an interesting step change, because in 1993, Penguin published my novel, Host as the world's first electronic novel.

**James Blatch: I was going to ask you about that. I think that's a great credit, isn't it?**

Peter James: Back then, people were going who's going to read a book electronically? Hello, but today, there's another interesting step change happening, which is audiobooks.

I actually have my novel, *Absolute Proof*, which is published in print and all the other formats in the UK on October 4, and October 4 here in the US, it's being published exclusively on audio by Audible for 12 months before it goes into print.

I think audio right now had jumped to about 10% of the whole book market, which is astonishing from where it was even a couple of years back.

I think that's possibly part of the publishing revolution that's happening right now. Our cleaning lady at home, she walks round listening to audiobooks while she's cleaning.

People have suddenly realised even if they're doing something really boring, they can actually ... I can remember who it was that said reading a good book gives us all a second life.

James Blatch: That's a fantastic quote. There's a small thing about the advent of the Kindle that meant I could go to bed and read, which I always used to do, but since I've been married, my wife goes to bed before me.

It's a small thing, but I couldn't go to bed and then turn the lights on ... it's a bit antisocial ... and read.

**Suddenly, I think I've read far more books since the Kindle came out, so digital can be an enabling factor for many people.**

Peter James: Completely, and I think it's really exciting. I think what's interesting though, I remember in the aftermath of Host coming out on two floppy discs, I became a world expert, the way you do, on the future of the novel. I ended up being the keynote speaker at UCLA campus.

On my right was Steve Jobs. On my left was Nicholas Negroponte who ran the media lab at MIT. We had the president of Time Warner, and I was doing the talk.

I bumbled into the speech and I said I think the digital book will catch on when it becomes as nice to read as the printed page and more convenient. That's pretty much where we're at.

James Blatch: That's the trick, to make it elegant and nice to read. So this podcast is listened to by aspiring writers and some very successful writers as well.

Process is something we always like to hear about, so I'd like to know a little bit about how you approach your writing. I know you're very close to the police, a big supporter of the police in the UK.

**Is that kind of author intensity and research still a very important factor for you?**

Peter James: It's everything for me. I think that people who read, by the fact that they read, as I said earlier, are smart. I think that a reader can tell very quickly if you know what you're talking about or not. Books have smack of authenticity or they don't.

For me, the three essences for any aspiring writer listening to this is inseparable towards your character, research and plot but in that order, because we read books to find out what happens to characters we engage with. They don't have to be nice. They could be a monster like Hannibal Lecter, but character.

Then secondly research, because if you don't believe the author knows what he or she is writing about, you're not going to waste a week, two weeks of your life reading that book.

Plot comes a long way third. Plot is important, but for me, the research is the very guts of my books. I'm writing about the world of the police most of the time in my Roy Grace novels, and I spend a great deal of time out with the police.

Absolute Proof, which is a kind of standalone, very different book is a thriller about what would happen if somebody credible claimed to have absolute proof of God's existence.

I've been working on that book for nearly 30 years, so I've been learning a lot about religious aspects, although it's kind of a Dan Brown, Da Vinci Code.

James Blatch: Sounds great. I'm in. It's funny. I'm a first time author. Mark, my colleague who co-hosts the podcast is a very successful author.

I spend a lot of time sweating over plot and so many people tell me exactly what you've done. It's the telling of the story and plot comes a low way down, but it's difficult not to be obsessed with plot when you're writing a book, because that's what it feels like you're doing. You're telling that story.

Peter James: I make a very simple graph when I'm planning a book. I have a three step graph which you can't see so easily, but I literally go three high points.

The first one should be a moment. Stephen King calls it the gotcha, but in my first Roy Grace novel, Dead Simple, it's a bachelor party, a stag night. This guy has pissed off his friends. They bury him alive in a coffin. They're going to come back in two hours and dig him up and they all get wiped out in a car wreck. That's the first highpoint.

The next highpoint has got to be bigger than that, and then the next highpoint, which is the climax, has got to be bigger than that. That's my starting point. I think as I write, what are those three high points?

Personally, I always like to know the ending so I've got a vanishing point on the horizon. Some writers do. Some don't go that way, but I always say you wouldn't get in a car and start driving if you didn't know where you were going. Are you going to go to the supermarket or the other end of the country?

Half the time I write, the ending's changed and I've got that, but at least I know where I'm headed.

James Blatch: Obviously people do write differently, and I think Lee Child told us yesterday he just sits down and writes, which works for him.

But for you, there is some plotting that's got to happen. It must be a little bit more detailed than simply the three highlights.

### **Do you have chapters and scenes?**

Peter James: I plan the first 20% in detail. It's around 100 pages out of 500, but then I love it when it takes on a life of its own.

I love to drink. I write in the evening. I have a vodka martini with four olives. I get music, and I get in the zone, and I love it when something pops in my head that literally wasn't there 10 seconds ago.

James Blatch: Peter, you're having a stellar career.

### **My last question is now that you're famous and well known and you have a huge audience, is writing different now than it was at the beginning when nobody knew you?**

Peter James: It's much harder because ... In fact, I was talking to Karin earlier about this. I think you want to try and raise the bar with every book. I remember my hero writers when I was a kid, somebody like Alistair MacLean. The more successful he got, the lazier he got, or I think his editors got scared to edit him.

I'm determined to raise the bar with every book. I never want to write a series that peaks and then oh, he got lazy. I think the fear of one of my fans picking up a book and thinking oh, Peter's got lazy, hasn't bothered to do this, that's my worst fear. I'll never let that happen as long as I possibly can.

James Blatch: It's a great ethic to have. Thank you so much indeed for spending some time with us and great talking to you.

Peter James: Pleasure. Thank you.

James Blatch: Peter James. John Dyer is standing on the other side of the camera there doing the second camera shot, described him as Austin Powers to me, which I think was about right.

Mark Dawson: Interesting description. He's very much an Englishman. That's certainly true but yeah, loads of great stories.

I saw him in a couple of panels with Lee Child, Karin Slaughter, Lynda La Plante, and there was a lot of banter. It's quite clear these guys have hung out, in New York probably, lots of times in the past.

It's really fun to see them riffing off each other and telling the kinds of stories that all authors would be interested in hearing.

James Blatch: There was some really filthy riffing off each other between Karin Slaughter and Peter just after we'd finished recording. We couldn't possibly broadcast it.

Mark Dawson: Karin Slaughter is pretty naughty.

James Blatch: So is Peter James.

Mark Dawson: Yes, that's true. Karin actually did it a panel that you weren't there about mentioning things that she would ... The question was asked, what item would you have on a desert island? Peter very romantically said his wife. Karin Slaughter, I won't say on a family podcast.

James Blatch: It's something electric?

Mark Dawson: Yes, it was, yes.

James Blatch: It's something battery operated?

Mark Dawson: Something red and battery operated, which was very funny.

James Blatch: Karin has a glint in her eye. She was a mischievous interviewee and she actually comes across very British, I think in this interview. Very deadpan and very straight, but she is joking.

There's a few things she says in this interview are clearly jokes rather than her being straight.

Let's finish this first part of our episodes from New York City with Karin Slaughter. Frankly, one of the biggest names in thriller writing and probably in a minority, and women are in a minority looking around the room, quite significant minority looking around the room at ThrillerFest, I would guess generally in terms of this particular genre.

The reverse will be true for you next week in the Romance Writers Association, but Karin is a standout thriller author and is brilliant to talking about the process and how she writes and the thoughts that go into it. So we've picked up a really great interview with her, and let's hear from her now.

Karin Slaughter, thank you so much indeed for joining us. Now, you've just stood and watched us interviewing Peter James and some of the similar questions are going come this way, so if you could feign surprise when I ask them, that would be great.

Karin S.: Okay.

**James Blatch: The first one is what do you get out of being in a place like this despite the fact people have obviously come to listen to you? Do you get something?**

Karin S.: Well, it's good to see friends. I mean, I wouldn't call Peter James a friend, but it's good to see other authors and spend time with them. You get to talk to readers you normally wouldn't get to talk to, so that's a good part of it.

**James Blatch: Do you learn something being you're a very experienced writer, a successful writer, but are you still always on the lookout and listening carefully?**

Karin S.: Well, a writer's job is to notice people and the things they do. Being in New York City in this particular hotel, you see a lot of people doing crazy things, so in that respect, yes.

James Blatch: It is a crazy city, isn't it?

Karin S.: Yeah.

James Blatch: I've never been. I've never been able to learn how it compares, but it is slightly insane in New York.

Karin S.: It is, but it's also a nice place to see people who are completely out of their element and how they deal with it.

James Blatch: Am I right in thinking your successful writing career happened a little bit later for you?

Karin S.: No.

**James Blatch: When did you start? What age?**

Karin S.: Well, maybe later because I was 29 when my first book came out. I was really lucky that it came out at the right time in the right place and was pretty successful from that point, but my mid-twenties were filled with rejections from publishers.

James Blatch: So it was always something you were aiming for, writing? It wasn't something you just decided later in life.

Karin S.: Yeah, absolutely.

James Blatch: This podcast is very much writer centric, so we're all interested in how each other work.

**Do you plot? Do you pants? I know your research is very important for you.**

Karin S.: I'm not sure, because I hear that question a lot about plot or pants and it sounds like the name of a porn movie, but I mostly just think about stories.

Definitely by the time I sit down to write for a period of time, I've already thought about what I'm going to write and I'm very clear about where I'm going, but most of my writing takes place in my head, so I'm not sure if that's plot or pants as much as Karin.

James Blatch: So structure is coming. You're thinking about it a lot, and so it's there in your head?

Karin S.: Yeah.

**James Blatch: Physically, do you write at home? Do you write on the go? Do you dictate?**

Karin S.: I write on my laptop. I have a cabin in the north Georgia mountains, so I leave Atlanta and go up to the mountains where it's a bit cooler and I just sit there and write.

I go there for two weeks at a time and I'm just always focused on the story, what I want to do. Sometimes it's a 12 hour day, sometimes it's a 16 hour day. It just depends on how the story is going.

Then after two weeks, I go home and I recover, and then I go back up again.

**James Blatch: Wow. Is this a cabin with no internet and distractions or ...?**

Karin S.: Oh no, I can't live like an animal. I've got TV and all that stuff, but I don't check email really, and people know when I'm writing that I'm not going to respond to them. So it's just mostly me and the computer.

James Blatch: The industry is changing a lot at the moment as independent publishing is becoming blurred lines really. A lot of the writers we talk to are a bit of both.

**Is it something you watch and think is it an exciting movement? Is it going to change the industry positively, or are you more concerned about it?**

Karin S.: I wouldn't say I'm concerned from a business point of view. I think I worry about people who sign contracts and are not aware of what they're signing over, because it is a business and there are a lot of corporations who are really good at exploiting people's desperation.

One thing I think is dangerous just from a writing standpoint is every writer needs an editor. I don't care if you're me or Lee Child or whoever. You have to have an editor because you can't have perspective on your work. It's just not how it is.

Having a good editor helps you change and grow as a writer and I think for some people who don't have that, or who are self-published, or going a route where they're not really developing a relationship with someone who can give them critical feedback on their work, they're never going to grow as a writer. You just can't do it.

That's just from a writing standpoint and a reading standpoint. If my first novel had been self-published, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be writing the stories I'm writing today.

**James Blatch: Yeah, although I don't think we know any self-published authors who listen to the podcast who don't have editors. I mean, everyone has an editor.**

Karin S.: Well, it just depends on the author. Are you listening to your editor? Is this editor really involved in what you're doing and your process?

From what I've seen just knowing authors who are self-published or who are going alternate routes, there's not someone who is at that point as invested in you being a good writer as you are. To me, that's the most important thing you can have.

James Blatch: I think that's really good advice for people at my stage who are just starting out. Mark's much more experienced than I am, but I've now decided to work really closely with an editor, chapter by chapter developmentally teaching me how to write a book.

Because it's not like you get in a plane and just teach yourself how to do it, but a lot of people do seem to write 100,000 words and then they hand it over to an editor. It seems an odd way to do it.

Karin S.: I think it just depends on what your process is, but just having someone to backstop you is really important.

My editor had been editing me since the second book, so we really have a good relationship. She's very important to me. I call her my brain's best friend, and she's able to say, "Hey, I don't think this works."

I think the biggest note most editors give is I know it's in your head but it's not on the page, and so just having that relationship with her is probably the most important relationship in my life as far as my business is concerned.

**James Blatch: Karin, do you write for the same reason today that you wrote when you were 29 or in your 20s?**

Karin S.: Yeah, absolutely. Every book I write, my only goal is that it has to be better than the one I wrote before. I have to do something different. I have to challenge myself. I have to make sure I'm not just telling the same story over and over again.

I want new characters, and even if I'm working on old characters like I'm busy right now writing the Will Trent book for next year, I'm really focusing

on what I can say and do differently with these characters that I've written about. Sara, I've written about for almost 20 years.

James Blatch: You heard Peter James talk a similar ethic really of wanting to better themselves. That's a personal thing that drives you and Peter. It's a really positive thing as well. It doesn't always happen to all authors, so it's a good trait, I think, to have.

**You also heard me ask Peter what it's like writing when you're a superstar compared to the days when nobody knew you. What's your feeling on that?**

Karin S.: The writing is the same for me because I love my readers. I'm so grateful for them, but I don't think about them when I'm writing. It's just me and the book, so that part of the process has not changed.

Just having the number of books I've written behind me, I think has made me look at writing differently. I've gotten older, and I think as you grow older that you look at the world differently anyway and hopefully, I'm bringing that to my work.

The big thing that's changed is I know they're going to publish at least one more of my books, so that stress is taken off, but there are other internal stresses once the book is delivered.

I worry about the things that you think an author would worry about. It's like oh, I got to be number one again and all the business of it, but I also want to make sure my core readers who brought me here know that this book that I'm giving them is the best book that I can write.

I still remember when I was college student and I went to school at night. I worked in the daytime and I was paid an hourly rate.

I remember it took five hours for me to earn enough to buy a hardcover book, and if it was shit, I felt personally attacked by this author, because I

think I've given you this great life by being a fan of yours and you couldn't even bother to write a good story?

So I'm always mindful of that and I make sure my readers know that I'm giving them the best story I can, that I care about the things that they like, the characters and the plotting and the details of the story and everything that makes them like a Karin Slaughter book. I want to make sure that I'm putting all these things in and doing the work.

James Blatch: That's great. Your decisions about series, because I'm trying to work out from memory, at least three series and standalone books now.

Karin S.: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

James Blatch: Do you make those decisions because this is what you want to do, you explore different areas?

### **Is there a commercial aspect to that as well in your decision making?**

Karin S.: I never let the commercial aspect ... I mean, the tail can't wag the dog, right? It's what story I'm ready to tell, and my publishers all agree with that, because in some countries, the series will sell more than the standalone, in others, the standalone.

So it's not really something that I could weigh and would want to weigh, because the story that I write is the one that's ready to be written.

### **James Blatch: Finally Karin, a piece of advice for authors starting out and want to get going in this industry?**

Karin S.: Two things. One, it's a business. There's this grand idea, mythology that it's a gentleman's business and things are done on a handshake. Even Dickens had to tour, right? Poe performed his work.

It's a business, and if you're not a business person and you don't behave in a businesslike manner, then you're really not going to have a good experience. You've got to respect that part of it.

The other side of that is you've got to read. A lot of authors or people who want to be published, they stop reading and part of the reason is they'll read a shitty book and they'll think why is this guy published and I'm not?

But your brain, if you think of it as a muscle, you've got to exercise that muscle. Even if you're reading this shitty book by this guy you're better than, you're realising as you read it, what's not working in that book. That's teaching you something about what you should be doing in your writing.

James Blatch: I think that's great advice, and I've started reading quite a lot of people in genre. I do read shitty books that are very successful, but I sometimes read them and think they're not really shit.

Karin Slaughter: Right.

James Blatch: I think they're shit because they're not quite written for me. They're actually very clever.

Dan Brown is a good example of that. When people read Dan Brown, they roll their eyes, but very brilliantly written books.

Karin Slaughter: Well, and since this is for people who want to be writers, I would say to them don't scoff off Dan Brown or Jim Patterson.

People like that make our careers possible because they keep the light on. A lot of people look down at the thriller genre, but we're the reason, because we deliver a book a year, we have a loyal fan base, we're the reason why publishing houses have money to take risks on other authors.

James Blatch: Brilliant. Thank you, Karin, so much for spending time with us.

Karin Slaughter: My pleasure.

James Blatch: You can see why so many fans flock around Karin Slaughter. She's a little bit enigmatic in the way that she talks, but a brilliant person to listen to.

Mark Dawson: I never met her before, but she's sharp as a tack, very funny, bit of a dirty sense of humour.

James Blatch: Southern gal.

Mark Dawson: Southern gal, yeah, great storyteller and it was lovely to talk to her. She was very generous. Everyone was generous when we deployed the Dyer to go and hook them up for interview.

Very generous with her time and just lovely to have her on. It was a real pleasure. Maybe next time we come back, we'll go on for a bit longer.

James Blatch: John Dyer was great at grabbing people for interview, did a great job for us this year. He didn't grab. He's making rude gestures there from behind the camera.

Mark Dawson: You were groping earlier.

James Blatch: I didn't touch him or anyone.

My favourite moment, I think, from the interviews from this episode was just the image of J.D. Barker going up to this cabin in North Carolina and being handed this chest and opening it with a creak to see all Bram Stoker's original notes about vampires.

As J.D. Barker pointed out, he was a little bit nuts, Bram Stoker. He actually believed in vampires, or maybe we're the nuts ones. Maybe they're around, but you can half expect Bram Stoker to literally be on his shoulders as we mentioned in the interview. That was a great image, and what a moment for a horror writer.

Mark Dawson: You can't really talk about that. It sounds like a fantastic story, so kudos to him. It's going to be a big book when it comes out.

James Blatch: Okay, in the next episode, we're going to talk to Lynda La Plante and the one after that to Lee Child himself.

I should tell you that's a brief-ish interview with Lee Child. He was a man in huge demand even at ThrillerFest. We did get a few minutes with him. It's not as long an interview but it's definitely worth listening to.

Mark Dawson: He smokes a lot of cigarettes.

James Blatch: He does.

Mark Dawson: He has a lot of cigarette breaks, and he takes a long time smoking them.

James Blatch: He does. He's as cool as a cat.

Mark Dawson: He's a very cool dude, yeah.

James Blatch: Okay, so that's it. Join us again from New York next week. Thank you so much. Have a good week writing and a great week selling your books.

Speaker 1: You've been listening to The Self-Publishing Formula podcast. Visit us at [selfpublishingformula.com](http://selfpublishingformula.com) for more information, show notes and links on today's topics. You can also sign up for our free video series on using Facebook ads to grow your mailing list. If you've enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. We'll see you next time.