

## **EPISODE 131: THRILLERFEST PART 2**

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

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the Self Publishing Formula Podcast. It's a Friday so it must be Mark and James day. We need to come up with some kind of 'here's Johnny' type thing we say.

Mark Dawson: Well, we're working on that. Now to give any spoilers away, but there may be some changes in the not too distant future.

James Blatch: There may be some changes. The show that you know and love is going to get even better.

Mark Dawson: Topless. Topless presenting. For you anyway, I'm not ... No one needs to see. Move on. Bad idea.

James Blatch: Let us talk about writing and process and being a successful writer and becoming Mark Dawson. That's perhaps what we should rebrand the ... Why didn't we come up with that?

Mark Dawson: I quite like that.

James Blatch: Yeah. Becoming Mark Dawson. We're not gonna call it that. We've called it something else to give that a little hint as well. Okay, this is the second of our episodes.

As you may notice, we are on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The park is behind us that way, and what you can see over there, what I love about this view, and I'll do a kind of sweeping shot with the camera afterwards to show you, is that all the water towers on top of the apartment buildings.

There's some amazing apartment buildings and some brownstones. I think we're in brownstone here, but I love this view. It's very 'West Side Story'. The fire escapes and the water towers. Are you a 'West Side Story' fan?

Mark Dawson: Not really. Not really my thing, but I can understand the 'West Side Story' idea.

James Blatch: Romeo and Juliet.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, well certainly. This is the balcony so John Dyer was actually down there, and later we'll be recreating that famous scene.

James Blatch: Where for art thou Dower? Dyer. Dower?

Mark Dawson: Dyer.

James Blatch: He's behind the camera smirking at us. We have three great interviews. I hope you enjoyed last week.

Karin Slaughter, J. D. Barker, and Peter James we had on last week, and this week we have Lynda La Plante is going to be on this week's episode.

It's an absolutely compelling interview. You're going to love it. So please do stay listening for that one. It's gonna come up at the end, but before then, we had a couple of interviews to go ahead with that.

The first one is a guy called Mike Lewis.

Mike is a former military, United States Air Force pilot. He actually flew AC-130 gunships, which are the Hercules gunship version in the Gulf War, got fired at a few times, is now a Delta Airlines pilot, flies the A330 on long haul, and is writing aviation historical thrillers.

He's my new best friend in life, and I got on like a household fire with him and his wife. It was absolutely lovely of them to come to our drinks and to chat them off.

I immediately knew that I wanted to talk to Mike on a podcast, not because of that, and we do very little talking about airplanes, believe me, in this interview.

What I wanted to talk to Mike about was the value of coming to a writer's conference. Mark, you're at Romance Writers of America next week in Denver. We're gonna go to Novelists Incorporated. Novelists Incorporated in Florida.

This is Thriller Fest here in New York, and I know a lot of people listening, they're just be starting out writing, they may have a few books, they may be in profit, and they may be making good money, and all of them will be thinking, is it really worth going to these conferences?

I'm gonna talk to you and ask you about that after this, but first of all, let's hear from Mike Lewis 'cause I wanted to hear why he's there and what he gets out of coming to these conferences.

We're up on a mezzanine level in the giant Grand Hyatt Hotel. This is a big hotel this, Mike. Isn't it?

Mike Lewis: Yes, it is.

James Blatch: We've just watched Mark in a couple of sessions including a panel, and I wanted to have a chat with you because we were talking last night.

### **First of all, you are a former military pilot?**

Mike Lewis: Yes.

James Blatch: You're currently a Delta Airlines pilot, and you're writing historical aviation thrillers. So basically you're my older brother.

Mike Lewis: Yes I am.

James Blatch: I'm looking to you for advice and help, but the other thing, the other reason I wanted to talk to you is because I know people that listen to this podcast will think, well this sounds wonderful being in New York at writer's conference. It's a lot of money to get here.

### **What am I gonna get out of it? Is it worth coming to these events? You've been to a few of them, and you were saying to me last night, you really do think it's worth it.**

Mike Lewis: Absolutely. My first conference was a Florida Writer's Conference that I went to in the state of Florida where I live, and just the information that you pick up on the craft of writing is extremely valuable.

Plus, you're going to meet a lot of people that are in same situation you are, and you can share ideas and experiences and help each other out in that way.

After a few years, my wife gave me permission to come to Thriller Fest which as a thriller writer is the ultimate. You're dealing and talking with the top professionals in the field. The A-list authors, and you get the

opportunity to actually walk up and say hello and meet these people and ask them questions.

If you want to be an author, you just can't be going to a conference and interacting with these individuals, learning the craft, meeting the people.

Find out how they did it 'cause the truth is, every single author out there is exactly where we've been at one time, or you might be at one time. Everybody starts at ground zero.

James Blatch: Yeah, and that is absolutely true. So even though you've got big, famous household names, there was a time when they were like me without a book published and you in the early stages. You're on your third book, I think.

Mike Lewis: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Yeah, and a good example of that is that John Dyer and I spotted Lee Child yesterday walking past us, and we very creepily dropped down a couple escalators and followed him. Waited for him to finish his cigarette, and pounced on him.

He was the nicest possible guy, and he was pleased to speak to a couple other Englishmen the day after we got thrown out of the World Cup.

Mike Lewis: Yeah, and that's absolutely wonderful thing about Thriller Fest is all the thriller authors here are just extremely friendly. They're more than willing to talk to anybody. So just walk up and say hello.

What you don't want to do is introduce yourself, and then say, "Can you get me an agent?" That's not gonna work, but it's kind of like the Hollywood experience.

I have friends in Hollywood. I'm sure you know some people out there as well. It really is about building relationships, and that's how you're gonna, I think, advance your career.

You don't wanna, like I said, just creep on somebody and try to mooch just strictly information and try to get your book sold through them. I think if you build those friendships, and you build those relationships, that's where eventually those things will take place on their own without you trying to force it.

James Blatch: So networking.

Mike Lewis: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Which does fill some people with dread, the idea of having to push yourself forward and talk to somebody. You're the easiest guy in the world to talk to.

**I guess that's the trick, is just be interested in other people.**

Mike Lewis: Well it is, and I tell you, it's funny that you say that. I'll share an experience.

When I wrote my first book, we submitted it for an award, and it won a finalist in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards. And we were invited to New York City, the Harbor Club to go to the ceremony, and people that know me know that I am rather gregarious. I don't have a problem talking, and my family will tell you, and my wife's back there laughing right now, I was terrified.

James Blatch: You were nervous?

Mike Lewis: I was. Yes. I tell ya. I was a combat pilot. I would have much rather been back in combat because when you write a book, you know

you're writing one. You're putting your soul out on that page, and you are really exposing yourself. So it's a totally different environment that you find yourself in, and you just have to kind of get comfortable with it and accept it.

But networking, you're right. Absolutely. You just can't beat it at a writer's conference.

James Blatch: And it is much easier than it sounds 'cause once you're here, you'll hear somebody speak on a panel, think that's really interesting, you'll walk up to them afterwards, and they'll be delighted that you've come to talk to them.

Mike Lewis: Absolutely.

James Blatch: Nobody's giving you cold shoulder, even if they're a household name.

### **What would you hope to achieve from something like ThrillerFest, personally?**

Mike Lewis: Well, again it's building those relationships. The first ThrillerFest that I came to, I found authors that wrote books like I did, and in fact, one of them sat right next to me in a panel that we were watching. And I looked over, and I said, "Hey, aren't you James Hannibal?" And he said, "Yeah."

So we started talking. We were both Air Force pilots. We were both airline pilots. We both wrote the same kind of books, and we just started chatting back and forth. We exchanged email addresses, and he actually had a great idea that he shared with me about the chair that he writes in. He has a gravity chair, and it's just a little system he had set up because he had back problems.

**James Blatch: What's a gravity chair?**

Mike Lewis: It's just a chair that helps support your back. Just a side note. I use that now, and that helps me when I write.

James Blatch: So small things can make a big difference.

Mike Lewis: Little things like that, but that's how you build those relationships. We weren't talking those kind of book things, per se. We were just talking and building a friendship, and when I published my second book, he gave me the blurb for the front cover.

**James Blatch: What about more tangible things like, I think you went to PitchFest yesterday?**

Mike Lewis: Pitch Fest is a great experience, and it's very unique for Thriller Fest in the fact that, from what I'm told in the industry, they have a greater success ratio than any other Pitch program out there in the country at a writer's conference.

You have about a two hour, two and a half hour opportunity to pitch to as many agents as you can get to, and pitching also is one of those things that seems quite terrifying at first. So you really just have to force yourself to relax, and it makes it that much easier.

James Blatch: Let's talk a little bit about your books. We've hinted at the fact that you have an aviation background. You were an Air Force pilot, and we chatted last night. You've flown in combat.

Mike Lewis: Yes.

James Blatch: Been shot at a few times.

Mike Lewis: A few.



James Blatch: But you're here with us, which is great. And then, now you fly with Delta.

### **Are we allowed to say that sometimes you do some writing at work?**

Mike Lewis: Well, no I can't say that. I don't do any writing at work. I'm flying the airplane.

James Blatch: There you go. As you should be, and all Delta passengers will be relieved to hear that, but you do end up down the line somewhere. Places like, I think you're going to Sao Paulo in your next job.

You are now the third airline pilot I think we've had on the podcast, and they all say they get that time in the hotel. There's no distraction from the family, and that does lend itself to a writing experience.

Mike Lewis: It does. It's great.

James Blatch: I need to become an airline pilot, John, if I'm gonna finish my book.

### **And you've got your third book?**

Mike Lewis: My third book was released about two months ago, 'Retribution', and it's actually a prequel for the series, Jason Conrad thriller series. We have 'Retribution', 'Surly Bonds', and then 'Veil of Deception'.

James Blatch: 'Surly Bonds' is such a great title for an aviation book.

Mike Lewis: Yes. I love that.

James Blatch: Well that's a good one. Well look, Mike, I wanted to talk to you specifically to hear your take on why you're here, and for podcast

listeners to think about potentially the value of being in a place like this, despite the expense and what you can get out of it. I think you've illustrated that really well.

Mike Lewis: Thank you.

James Blatch: It's been a real great pleasure chatting to you. I hope we can stay friends because I need that inspiration.

Mike Lewis: Absolutely. We will stay in contact, and I'll tell ya, it's been great. I wanna encourage everybody out there in SPF land, if you have the opportunity to meet you and Mark and John, you guys are just absolutely fantastic and a heck of a lot of fun.

James Blatch: That's very kind of you. Thank you.

Mike Lewis, what a really lovely guy, and he took off, literally, down to his home in Florida yesterday. And he's now flying, I think, to Sao Paulo for his job, and we worked out that airline flying was a good job for me to have actually because then you get a lot of layovers for an hour where you can write your book.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, so he said he was going to Brazil three times this week and would have a day and a night there each time, I think it was. A lot of time, even when the plane is in the air, he can concentrate on other things as well. All these planes are so technologically advanced these days.

James Blatch: He doesn't. He flies the airplane at all times.

Mark Dawson: He does actually. He was great. We love talking to him, and one of the things that he said, thinking of what he said earlier, was the reason he comes to conference like this is he likes to network and likes to meet people.

And I don't know if it's an American thing, but Americans are very friendly, generally. Most of the Americans that we've met here, students obviously that have taken their course, are open, accommodating, friendly.

Mike is very much like that, and it was lovely. He introduced us to a few people that we hadn't met. Just a very easy to talk to, very interesting, and clearly approaching this new career in a very professional, very focused fashion. Military background coming through there, I think, but really good guy. We liked him a lot.

James Blatch: I think that's a really good point about Mark because some people don't like the idea of networking. In fact, some people I think like the idea of a writing career because they don't have to meet people very often.

But it's surprisingly easy, particularly in this environment in the United States. I do think people in the US want to talk to you all the time. We're British, and it's not quite the same with us. I think in a writing environment, it is probably not too dissimilar in the UK, but certainly these conferences you will find it very easy to walk up to people, start talking to them, and as Mike said, you start picking up friends who are gonna be there in helping you and you helping them for the rest of your careers.

And actually, it's not just the other writers at your level. You can walk up to Lee Child, and you can walk up to-

Mark Dawson: Peter James.

James Blatch: Peter James.

Mark Dawson: Lynda La Plante, Karin Slaughter. Any of the big authors.

James Blatch: And George R. R. Martin.

Mark Dawson: Well not quite.

James Blatch: He was slightly more difficult to get.

Mark Dawson: We did try. We did try, but I think with him, if you get too close you're tackled to the ground by burly security guys. That's not true. He was just very, very, very busy.

We did try to get him on. John had a good attempt, and I think was intercepted by his publishers.

James Blatch: Was he rugby tackled by his publishers?

Mark Dawson: No, she was just very polite and gave him her email address. So we will reach out, and we'll see whether we can get him on.

James Blatch: He's a bit fed up with people asking him when his next book's coming out.

Mark Dawson: Yes, we absolutely did not do that. That wouldn't be a question that we'd put to him, but it'd be great to get him on as well.

But yeah, generally speaking, it was very easy to meet these mega authors who've sold millions and millions and millions of copies of their books. And my perspective, getting on the podcast, but I saw them talking to fans, fellow writers, all the way through the three or four days of the conference.

James Blatch: And talking of the conference, we've got a brief shout now with guy called Jon Land who's a writer. He's actually picked up the mantle of writing 'Murder, She Wrote'.

He is the new author of the Jessica Fletcher stories, and he's got a very, very interesting little giveaway. Something exciting which might be

happening in TV land to do with 'Murder, She Wrote' in the middle of this interview. So listen out for that.

Jon is also one of the very early organizers of Thriller Fest, and he shared the panel that Mark was on. He's one of life's great enthusiasts for writing, and it's a great chat. So here's Jon Land.

Mark Dawson: Welcome to the SPF Podcast.

Jon Land: Thank you very much for having me.

**Mark Dawson: Why don't you start off by telling us about your writing, and then we're gonna talk a bit more about Indie and trad.**

Jon Land: I'm a thriller writer. My primary series is about a female Texas ranger. A kind of woman, a female gun fighter, and one of a kind. A woman Jack Reacher. I also write the 'Murder, She Wrote' series.

Mark Dawson: You're Jessica?

Jon Land: I'm Jessica.

Mark Dawson: Okay.

Jon Land: Now my hair's a little different. I haven't had it done yet today.

Mark Dawson: It's not that different.

Jon Land: My broach. I don't have my broach, and I'm a little dark today.

**Mark Dawson: How did you end up writing Jessica Fletcher's story?**

Jon Land: It's one of those one man's fortune is residue of design. My agent represented the author who wrote all 46 books in the series, but he got older. Then he got sick, and then he died.

So I replaced Donald Bain, and I say fortune residue of design sounds like a mean thing to say because the guy died. He got sick first, but the fact is that because we had the same agent, it was a natural progression to slide me right in.

### **Mark Dawson: You were already writing procedurals?**

Jon Land: Great question because I'd never written a mystery. I've never written a first person mystery. I'm a thriller writer. So this was something, it was the kind of thing where you're offered an opportunity, the answer is yes. What was the question?

Mark Dawson: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Jon Land: So I had never read a book in the series. I barely remembered the television series, although I knew I loved it enough.

It's kind of like what they say about actors. If they tell you you're going to get the role if you can ride a horse, you say, "Yes," and then you learn to ride the horse.

James Blatch: But didn't Joey Tribbiani say, "Yes," to the question, "Are you circumcised?"

Jon Land: Yeah.

James Blatch: Do you remember that storyline? He got a shower scene, and they said, "Joey, you can't lie about that." He said, "But when you're an actor, you say yes to everything."

Jon Land: Yes, and then you know what? Go get circumcised if that's what it takes to get the role.

James Blatch: Yeah, exactly.

Jon Land: Whatever it takes. This is a business based on opportunity. And there aren't a lot of opportunities to take over name brands like Murder, She Wrote.

James Blatch: That's amazing.

Jon Land: And that's the amazing thing about Murder, She Wrote. Everyone in the world knows it. I haven't spoken to one person who said, "What's Murder, She Wrote?"

Now, they don't all know the books, but they all know the TV series, and the TV series is still very popular.

James Blatch: I think it runs every day in the UK.

Jon Land: Except, right now. For some reason, they're running Christmas in July right now.

James Blatch: Okay.

Jon Land: So, no Murder, She Wrote. But, about a million people a week watch the reruns. Just midnight to four, eleven to five, depending on the day. It's amazing.

**James Blatch: Do you feel nervous? 'Cause you're filling well-known boots.**

Jon Land: You know, that's a very good question. And, I'm nervous when I read the one-star Amazon reviews that have accused me of changing Jessica. But, I decided to bring her into the current time.

I decided to make her more Angela Lansbury. Donald Bain, who did such a great job with the books, had never watched the television series. So, he didn't understand that Jessica is feisty. Jessica is in your face and Jessica is relentless.

She isn't a Victorian prude. She's a tough woman, a tough widow, who will stop at nothing to help people who are close to her and to see justice done. And that's my Jessica.

My Jessica is almost more of a thriller hero, 'cause now her life is threatened in every book. There are big plots ... mechanizations happening behind the scenes. But ultimately, it's Jessica who figures out what's going on.

**James Blatch: Are they going to use any of your book storylines in the TV series? Or, is it going to be a reboot?**

Jon Land: Well, you know, Angela Lansbury wants to play Jessica one last time.

James Blatch: Okay. How old is she? She must be-

Jon Land: She's 91.

James Blatch: Wow.

Jon Land: But she looks great. She's in great shape. And, interestingly enough, a little spoiler alert, here we're going to break some news, I had a meeting this week while I was in New York, New York, because the 50th book of the series is coming up. And I had given them the next scenarios,



and we're talking about making the 50th book of the series a book called Murder in Time, in which, for the first time, in either the book, or the TV series, we go back and meet young Jessica Fletcher as a high school teacher. Just breaking out, selling her first book, and solving her first real-life murder.

And then, in the present, the current Jessica Fletcher will be investigating a murder connected to the original.

James Blatch: Wow.

Jon Land: So, Murder in Time. And why do I say this?

James Blatch: You're writing this?

Jon Land: I'm writing this. This will likely be the 50th book of the series. What a perfect role for Angela Lansbury, because she only has to be on screen half the time. And then we see the younger Jessica-

James Blatch: Who could take over for the future.

Jon Land: Well, now you're reading my mind. Because, the value of the book series would be exponentially raised if the TV series became original again.

And then I would be able to write the traditional mysteries featuring the older Jessica, but I could also, then, segue into the younger mysteries, featuring the other ... featuring the younger ... I could do both!

It's a great opportunity, so it would be my dream if Angela Lansbury wanted to play one ... she gets word that there's a new writer, and read it, and goes, "I want to do this one." Would that be a dream come true?

Here's something I only learned this week. You watch those reruns, and their guest stars were amazing. They were the biggest stars of the era. The biggest TV stars.

I watched one a couple of weeks ago, Chuck Connor's the Rifelman! The Rifleman was on it! And every week, there were big TV stars. They all wanted to work with Angela Lansbury. Imagine the lines around the corner to get in line to work with Angela.

And even more important, the average Hallmark made-for-TV movie draws two million people. So even if CBS didn't want to do it, it would be the biggest thing Hallmark Movie Channel ever did.

You could have eight, 10, 12 million people in the first showing, and then, not to mention all the reruns. It would be a huge hit, and we could do it relatively inexpensively, because there's no action. There's no set pieces. It's a lot of interiors, just like the TV show.

**James Blatch: And, it's sort of written with Angela being 91 in mind. You're not going to have her on the back of a car.**

Jon Land: I would definitely write this one. Well, I'll write the book as the book. But the book would be very adaptable to a 91-year-old Angela Lansbury, because, if Angela Lansbury wants to do it, we're going to figure out a way to make it happen.

James Blatch: Yeah, absolutely. How cool would that be? It would be amazing. Now, let's talk about Indie versus Trad., 'cause that was the panel-

Jon Land: Yes!

James Blatch: That you very enthusiastically chaired this morning. It was great.

Jon Land: I did. I did.

**James Blatch: Are you enthusiastic about Indie?**

Jon Land: Not personally. I think it's wonderful because opportunities are there, and for authors who are really good at social media and self-promotion ... I'm a great self-promoter, but I am a writer.

The magic bullet of how to increase your followers exponentially, newsletters, email lists, it's just not something that's in my wheelhouse to excel at. I would be mediocre at it, James. And I don't want to be mediocre at something.

**James Blatch: That's what I meant: are you enthusiastic about the movement itself, and the difference it's making to publishing?**

Jon Land: I'm enthusiastic that there are more opportunities for writers to realize their dreams. And, here's something I've never said before.

The more writers there are, the more readers there are, because we are a culture that consumes media. We consume television. We consume video. We consume everything.

The more books there are, the more people will read books. The more ways books are delivered, the more people ... So, the Indie market movement helps me by helping other writers.

But, I am excited because 10 years ago, when we started this conference ... 13 years ago ... if you weren't published traditionally, you were self-published and that was it.

The phrase Indie Author had not been coined yet. And you'd see all these people, and you'd look out at them at a writer's conference, with all their notebooks and you knew they had basically no chance. That the odds

against them succeeding were so astronomical as to be not even worth considering.

Now, everyone who comes to this conference can become a published author. And they're not coming to the conference, necessarily, to find out if they can do it. They're coming to the conference to find out how they can do it.

What is the best model for them? And that's what that panel this morning explored. What is the best model to pursue-

**James Blatch: And you had a couple of Indie authors who make seven figures a year selling their own work.**

Jon Land: And USA Today, New York Times Best-Selling Authors. So, they're hugely successful.

Now some of them are hybrids, like Lexi Blake, was already a best-selling author. Sylvia Day, same thing. They built their brands, and then they expanded their brands. But, the woman who wrote Fifty Shades of Grey, there was no background to that. She just wrote it.

James Blatch: And The Martian, I think is another good example, isn't it, of that?

Jon Land: And The Martian, Andy Weir.

**James Blatch: Your job is to keep ThrillerFest relevant as things change, and you seem to have done that, because you're gearing yourselves up to a place where people can learn how as well.**

Jon Land: That is a great point, and I think it comes with challenges, because every year we have more authors who are members, and every year we have to figure out how to get them all on panels. And that's why

you see six people on a panel and we need moderators who can wrangle and know how to keep things moving.

But it's a great point, because I can't tell you how many discussions we've had, over the early years, about, do we recognize Indie? This is going to be eight or nine years ago, we probably spent a whole board meeting arguing over should Indie authors be included in ITW.

I had proposed something that was radical at the time, a separate membership for Indie authors.

Now, the line is becoming ... it isn't one or the other. There are these models. And just what you said, the fact that so many Indie authors are actually more successful, more in control of their careers, than traditionally-published authors.

Remember, a traditionally-published author sells 10,000 copies, that's a lot of books. They're getting a royalty that's relatively small. They won't earn back even their advance on 10,000.

But an Indie author who makes 10,000, if they're on Amazon, even if they're selling at \$4.99, so they're getting 70%, or say they're getting two-thirds, well, they're getting ... let's say they get \$3.00, which is conservative, a book. If they can just sell a modest amount of 10,000, they're at 30,000 books ... \$30,000.00, with probably no commissions to agents, or anything like that. That's a lot of money for an author to make.

James Blatch: Well, that's nine-to-five quitting money, isn't it, which is the dream, I think, for some people who just want to be able to write for a living.

Jon Land: Yes.

James Blatch: It is possible. That's opening up. Jon, look, we're pressed for time, on this, because we're trying to keep these to 10 minutes.

Jon Land: I love it!

James Blatch: I get the feeling we could probably talk for two hours.

Jon Land: We could do a double. We could do part one and part two!

James Blatch: We need a full podcast interview at some point. Thank you so much.

Jon Land: This was great! Thank you.

James Blatch: It's been a real treat being at Thrillerfest.

Jon Land: Thank you for having me.

James Blatch: You do a great show, and yeah. We look forward to speaking to you again.

Jon Land: We look forward to seeing you back at Thrillerfest next year.

James Blatch: We're gonna be here.

Jon Land: All right. And we'll be same place, same time.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jon Land: Great.

James Blatch: Thanks, Jon.

There we go. Jon Land. Now, I did describe him as one of life's great enthusiasts, and that he is, right?

Mark Dawson: He's a force of nature. A very, very ebullient, extremely friendly, just sort of a lovely guy. And I found him really easy to get along with.

He was a great host, great presenter for the panel that I did ... one of the panels that I did. Just a really nice guy.

James Blatch: Great. Well, I hope the winds not too distracting for you, or the aircraft, but we are in a live environment. We're out of our respective homes, where we are for most of the year, and it's nice for us to be able to stand here and talk to you from New York.

Hope you're appreciating the fact that we like being in the outdoors, occasionally. Now, we have one final interview in this episode, and it is an absolute corker.

This is Lynda La Plante. Lynda was forging ahead as a screenwriter and a play writer for TV at a time when it was difficult for women to be seen as anything else than, basically dolly birds in 1970's sitcoms and dramas, and she spells all that out in this interview in brilliant fashion.

She started as an actress, because that was what was available to her, and she's ended up as one of, frankly, writing royalty in the United Kingdom.

Mark Dawson: She certainly is. I saw her on a couple of panels. She's hilarious. And, as we record this, I haven't actually seen the interview yet, so I'm looking forward to looking and listening to that when we are ready to go live.

James Blatch: Well, let's hear from Lynda La Plante.

Lynda. Thank you for sitting by while we set up five thousand bits of equipment.

Lynda La Plante: My pleasure.

James Blatch: Modern way of doing things. Real pleasure to speak to you. You're here at Thrillerfest, and I think you're about to do a panel, or a talk?

Lynda La Plante: Yes.

**James Blatch: What are you going to talk about? Do you have a particular message for aspiring authors?**

Lynda La Plante: The message, really, is, if you want to write, you write. So many people say, "Oh, I've got a great story, but I can't write it." It's something that occurs an awful lot.

You'd be surprised how many people have a great story, but don't feel that they can write it. But, you have to have a lot of time, a lot of patience, a lot of concentration, and my advice is always, if you can tell the story, you can write it.

It's like a joke. Jokes have beginning, middle and end. Some people are brilliant at telling a joke. Others will flat line it, and it's the same for writers and writing novels. Halfway through the book you think, "Oh, dear. Dropped it, now it's no good."

I would just make everybody really encouraged that, if you want to write, write. But, write about something that you know. That doesn't mean that you narrow the world you're writing in. To the contrary, you want to find out something, go to source.

Actually talk to people, and then back it comes. And when you're talking to someone about, say forensic, they will give you more material than you



could dream of. And, I've found, in my life, and in my writing world, I always go to source.

**James Blatch: Do you find people enjoy talking to you about their work?**

Lynda La Plante: Yes.

James Blatch: I guess somebody whose head is down in forensic pathology most days of the week, and suddenly there's a novelist talking to them ... you find there's a corroborative relationship.

Lynda La Plante: You don't go as a novelist. You go as an interested person. So, you have to do a little bit of background work. You just don't go in there, "What's forensic science about?" "What's a fingerprint?" It's advanced to such an extent.

I don't write anything without ... if it has forensic, police procedure, medical procedure, pathology, I'll give it to those who know the business.

And if they say, "This is wrong," ... so, when I'm watching a TV show, or a film, and, for example, they're talking about toxicology report ... and they will say, "Oh, we're just getting the toxicology report." And I think, well, that is impossible, because I know that would take three to four weeks.

To actually have an expert in toxicology say, "You know the length of time this ... cause we've got a backlog of cases." Which means, as a writer, you have to fill that gap, and fill it with material that is of interest. Rather than go, "Three weeks later, the toxicology report came in," what are they doing when they're waiting? And that's the way I work.

I very rarely write anything that is not authenticated. Prime Suspect is a very, very interesting example of a writer bringing something to a company. And it's a female, high-ranking detective, because that's what they were looking

for ... a murder ... very rare, because we're going back to 1993, there were not many female detectives.

I was fortunate to work alongside a brilliant one, who guided me and used to be very, very critical and wanted me to get it right. When I say she used to be very critical, she would sometimes look at pages and say, "Rubbish! Rubbish! Absolute rubbish. Just go direct. Why don't you ask a direct question?"

And, anyway, the first draft is finished and it goes in to the company. They hate it. Everybody hated it. And they said, "She doesn't feel any emotion. I mean, we see her handling a dead girl, and she's not crying." And I go, "She's a policewoman. Why would she cry? That's her job."

It showed the discrimination that was happening then. I only got that from the source, because she told me. This high-ranking detective said, "It was a nightmare". The discrimination ...

At times she would work in a station where there was no ladies' toilet. And when the police officers, play acting, thinking very witty, would put black fingerprint ink all around the toilet seat so you got up and you'd have a black rim around your bum.

You take it in, and you write it out. And that's how I work.

James Blatch: So, it was really interesting that one of your motivations, and this was mid-90s, early 90s, for the first Prime Suspect, was to raise the profile, give some credibility to females working in policing.

### **This was 20 years ahead the times, wasn't it?**

Lynda La Plante: The reality is also Widows would even earlier, 1983, and there were four leading roles for four unknown women. You would not be allowed to do that now. If I went to a television network and said, I've got an

idea for a series to star four women, and their husband die and then they pull a bank raid that their husbands were going to do.

They go, "Yes well, who's going to star in it? What have they done?" So even onto Prime Suspect, when they said, "Who do you see as the detective?" I said Helen Mirren. "Oh yeah, but she hasn't done any TV, had she?" And you go, "She is a superb actress, what are you talking about?"

And so because my world had been the theater and I had been a TV actress, I knew who could do it and who couldn't. But the sad thing is now, today is the repetition. You see the same face in every other show, until you're so bored with them, you switch off.

**James Blatch: They have a fairly narrow field of view now.**

Lynda La Plante: Yeah. And you knew credits. "What credits, what have they done?" "They've come out of a soap, they were in a soap for eight years and now their free." And you go, "Well I don't want them." It's very different now.

**James Blatch: Where did you learn your craft? When did you develop the writing you talked in the beginning, the storytelling?**

Lynda La Plante: I think I've always been a storyteller, since I was a child, but had no concept of ever being a writer. And as a working actress, and I would say I was not necessarily a frightfully well known actress, I was in many ways a successful actress because I earned a very big income and was always in work.

When you work for the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theater and you do fringe plays and you do repertory, you become very, very confident in your knowledge of plays and playwriting.

But as a writer, I'd never even considered it. Until I was in such an appallingly bad TV show, and happened to say, "Can anybody have a go at this?" And I was told, "Yeah, send in your ideas."

Now the luck, and a lot of it does depend on luck, and I was lucky, because the first three ideas that I submitted for this TV show were turned down. I'd also actually written leading roles for myself, "I'll star in this."

And so they were all turned down, but one was called The Widows, and somebody had scrawled in pencil, "This is brilliant." It could have been a cleaner, who knows?

So I took another look at it, and cut it down a bit. It was a page and a half, which is again, when I'm working with students, I said, "Learn how to do a treatment"

James Blatch: So, that was the treatment you submitted.

Lynda La Plante: Yeah, a page and a half. No more.

James Blatch: Very succinct.

Lynda La Plante: Because if you think that every network is getting thousands in, and it breaks my heart when I know writers who sent in a full manuscript and never hear a word.

Speaker 3: Never gonna be read.

Lynda La Plante: Maybe five years later, they can look at something, you go, "I think that was mine." Great thieves are in this industry.

Anyway, I rewrote it. Now luck, I sent it to a company called Houston Films, who was run by a genius woman called Verity Lambert, who did a lot of television drama. And I'd actually worked for her as an actress.

She called me up and said, "I'd like to see you." Funny thing was, I felt I wouldn't put my acting name, I'll put my married name. So I put Lynda La Plante. Widows by Lynda La Plante.

And when I walked in, her secretary said, "Oh God, it's not you is it?" And I said, "Yes, it is." And they said, "we all thought you were a transvestite trucker." And I said, "No it's me."

So when I got in to see Verity, she couldn't believe it. And she said, "Right, have you written anything?"

I said, "Well not really." She said look, "Problem is, six hour, big, lot of writing. Six episodes. I'll tell you what I'll do. Let's see you write the first hour, and if it's any good, we'll commission it. If it isn't, would you allow it to go to another writer?"

So truthfully, I wasn't even sure what the word commission meant, and I said, "Yes, yes, I'll do that. Yes, I don't mind." And it wasn't until I got home that I realized it was a commission for episode one of Widows. And I had no idea what to do.

And you think, "How come I've been an actress for all those years, with all these scripts, interior, exterior, exit here." And I'm sitting there thinking, "I don't know what to do." And I thought, "Well maybe what I should do is go to source, find the women, find who they are, where are they?" and that's when I began. and it took quite a while for me to visit women in prisons.

### **James Blatch: You actually went looking for windows or wives or windows of criminals?**

Lynda La Plante: Wives of hard criminals. I met criminals, I met the police, and on every level was given so much help, because as you write, as I said earlier, two people talk, yeah they loved to, loved to.

It's a very strange thing that as an actress, I played hookers, I played prostitutes, in fact quite a lot because I come from Liverpool, short, red hair, "Oh she's got to be a hooker."

And so in every show possible you can think of, I played a prostitute. "Hello love, you coming my way?" So I've done a lot of that, and suddenly I wanted to talk to them.

You can't just very easily go up to a street girl and say, "Excuse me, I'm writing a script." But I did, and I was told to F off mostly, until I said, "I'll pay you for your time." The money was the incentive.

James Blatch: It's probably easier money than the other money they were taking.

Lynda La Plante: They were funny too.

James Blatch: I bet.

Lynda La Plante: 'Cause they said, "How much you payin' her?"

"She doesn't earn that in an hour, love. She's been lyin'. Pullin' our leg."

But what I got was a difference. "You want to know why I'm a hooker? Here you go. That's why; I'm an addict." Or weekend prostitute. Come down from Sheffield to London. "I've got my patch; I need the money for my kids."

And there was still the shell of how I'd acted, but there was a depth and a darkness. I thought, "This is where I've got to go."

It took me weeks and weeks in finding the lead woman, the criminals main wife. The big mama.

**James Blatch: You had to find the physical person, in the end, to inspire the story.**

Lynda La Plante: She worked in a market and one of the other market people said, "Her husband's in for murder." She's very tough, very tough.

So I'd go up to her and say, "Would you talk to me? I'm writing a TV series." And she was even more forthright in telling me to F-off than the prostitutes. It took weeks.

Out of the blue one day, she came, she said, "You wanna come for tea?" Nothing ever prepared me for her beautifully furnished, council flat. Antiques, thick carpet. But what really was amazing was, she was immaculate in a beautiful suit.

When I walked in, playing was Kathleen Ferrier's Life Without Death. And I went, "Oh!" And she said, "What love, what love? Huh? What's the matter? Don't add up, the boxes? Is that right, love? Don't know me do you?"

And I said, "No, I don't." And she said, "Well, it's all game isn't it?" And then I could see. She was forming in my head, all the time.

All this work went on and then I was working with and then I submitted it. Then my tutor and my mentor, Verity Lambert. I miss her every day of my life.

**James Blatch: Verity Lambert, she was a huge figure in British television.**

Lynda La Plante: You have people give you note now that make a blaze of rage up here. Verity Lambert's note were so simple. "Whose your lead? Who is she?" I said, well, "Dolly Rawlins." "How come she's not on 'til page 25?"

That is a superb note.

James Blatch: And you're thinking, why isn't she?

Lynda La Plante: Why wasn't she? Let me have a look. Let me re-work. See, that's what it was all about.

James Blatch: Less is more.

Lynda La Plante: And she was studious.

James Blatch: Thank you so much. Linda, do you know, it's been absolutely thrilling listening to you talk. We could sit here for another hour.

Lynda La Plante: Aw, thank you very much.

James Blatch: Great interview. Thank you so much.

John Dyer and I could easily have spoken to Linda La Plant for a couple of days. I'm not exaggerating.

Mark Dawson: There's a very nice picture of you that we put in the Facebook group with John basically cuddling her.

James Blatch: He wasn't gonna let her go.

Mark Dawson: No. It was a double arm wrap. And when John's got both arms around you, you know you're being cuddled.

James Blatch: You're not going anywhere.

Mark Dawson: That was nice. She was very friendly, really funny. The interplay between her and Karin Slaughter on the panel I saw was hilarious.



They were both very, very funny. I think that was where the red electric thing was described.

James Blatch: Right.

Mark Dawson: But anyways, absolutely hilarious and I felt only joy listening to them.

James Blatch: Yeah. It was really only Linda La Plante's publicist behind us winding things up. 'Cause I think Linda would've been happy to have talked on.

Mark Dawson: She's just downstairs, actually.

James Blatch: Now, what do you think about Linda's method? Because she talked about meeting prostitutes, about meeting the wives of hard criminals to properly get inside their head to write about them. You kept talking about go back to source for authenticity.

Mark Dawson: That's one way of doing it. I don't go to quite that extent. If I have meet or speak to assassins because, obviously, they wouldn't want to be interviewed by an author.

No, I don't do that. I do most of mine on the internet.

People like Lynda, Martina Coal is another example in the UK, they do really get to grips with their subject matters and do a lot of research. There's plenty of other authors who really got into detail. The end result, the object that you're always trying to go for, and I'm just the same, is authenticity.

Authors who get authenticity right will find that, readers can get really immersed in their books. And one of the emails and the comments I get from readers and in reviews that I love most of all, is when people say that I must've been to quarries in Mexico -

Or anywhere like that. These are not places that I have been to but because the internet is amazing, and Google's often been there before me, I can give people a fairly good impression that I must've been there too. It's horses to courses. That's how I do it. But I think that the way that Lynda does it is amazing.

James Blatch: We do live in an age of unparalleled access to other people's lives through platforms such as YouTube. Of course, Lynda didn't have that in her day when she was walking the streets looking for people in the very shallows of society.

But even YouTube will throw up revealing interviews from people from those different walks of life which does make it does make it a little bit easier, well a lot easier, for us today.

You look like our man in Havana. You strike the part very well. Very green, type A character. Perhaps not quite as casually dressed.

Mark Dawson: No. He'd probably have chinos, I should imagine.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: Something like that.

James Blatch: Safari suit.

Mark Dawson: Yes, yes.

James Blatch: I'd watch it more, raising one eyebrow.

Mark Dawson: If only. I can dream. Maybe next year.

James Blatch: That's it for this second of three parts from New York. We're gonna call them New York Stories, either Thrillerfest or New York Stories. In typically our fashion, we haven't decided before we've gone to air and recorded it. You'll see on the banner, probably from Thrillerfest.

So that is part two. In next week's episode, we have Lee Child, one of bywords for thriller writing. Today, we were absolutely delighted to get him on. He's like Mark Dawson but in the traditional sense.

Lexi Blake, who is a romance write, romance-suspense, is why she was at Thrillerfest, and she's a great person to talk to. She's prolific. 61 books we counted she's got out.

We're also gonna talk to Alan Jacobson who is somebody you can listen to what Alan talks about and learn about how to promote yourself, which doesn't necessarily come naturally to everyone, particularly British people. He was fairly shameless and it's a useful interview.

So that's next week. Join us for that. In the meantime, have a great week writing and a great week seeling your books.

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