

## **EPISODE 132: THRILLERFEST 2018: NEW YORK STORIES PART 3**

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 live back in New York City. I don't know why I say live. We're here. We're real people actually in New York City, I guess, Mark, world famous home of traditional publishing.

Mark Dawson: One of the homes; London and New York. You could certainly say one of those two.

James Blatch: But in the States, people talk about New York as an adjective. Then I went to New York and got published.

Mark Dawson: They do that in London. In the UK, they say I went to London. So depends where you are. But yes.

James Blatch: I went to Bloomsbury, which actually is a company as well. It's confusing. Okay, but anyway, traditionally synonymous with traditional publishing here in New York.

Things are changing and they've changed rapidly, even in the time we've been doing this podcast and I think that was evident nowhere more than at ThrillerFest this week and will probably be the same for you at RWA in Denver next week and we heard from Jon Land in episode one of this little

series from New York, that a few years ago, they were wondering whether they should allow indies at all or have a separate category for them and so on. There's a few legacy things.

We noticed an award last night for first ebook, which I was a bit confused about because I think virtually every of the guest publishers is an ebook as well as a paperback and what qualifies one or the other? But anyway, I think those things will increasingly go.

As Jon Land himself said to us, this is a blurred line area now.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, that was a bit of an anacronism, I think, which will probably shake out as we go and again, I say this enough, I said it a lot this week that my view is that it's not really about how you get your books, your stories, whether it's dead trees or burst of electrons. It doesn't really make any difference. It's all about the story.

So I think it won't be that long before we have just Best Story. That would make more sense to me. Anyway, it's still shaking out. There's a long way to go yet.

James Blatch: We have a lot of interviews to get through in this episode. It's going to be a good one. So you and I are gonna talk to a minimum.

We're going to start with Lexi Blake. Lexi is a romance writer. She writes romantic suspense. She's a prolific writer. She's both indie and trad, fantastic person to talk to. She's doing a lot right and doing extremely well. So let's first of all hear from Lexi Blake.

Lexi, we just listened to you on a panel and said, "We've got to have a chat with you," because you talk such strong sensible language about indie publishing in particular.

**First of all, give us the SP on who you are.**

Lexi Blake: I am Lexi Blake. I write romantic suspense and some urban fantasy. I started publishing about 2010. I like to say I published in every possible way you can publish a book, with the exception of I've never done vanity. I've done it myself where I've got a hardback in my car. But any other way, I've done it, eBooks, small press, traditional. So I've kind of learned the business.

James Blatch: Inside out. Stephen King started off by selling books out of the boot of his car.

Lexi Blake: John Grisham did.

James Blatch: You sat on a panel just now where you discussed indie and trad alongside each other and there was, as usual, a lot of massive consensus. I'm not really sure quite what to take away from it.

But one of the interesting areas is where we're going to be in the future in this in traditional publishing.

### **Do you see traditional publishing as being cleverly adapting at the moment or the Titanic ignoring the iceberg?**

Lexi Blake: Is my traditional publisher watching?

I actually don't think that they're adapting particularly well. I think what's going to happen in the future is what we're going to see is traditional publishers handle both people starting out and really big people.

And I think that what we'll see are those mid-listers who come out of traditional publishing, when they learn the business, to start making money indie-wise. I talked a little bit about the fact that traditional and indie publishing, it ends up being the same, the same people.

In some ways, you've got almost the same kind of shot at the big money, the big sales. You can do it either way. But it ends up being the same. The same 10% of people are gonna make a living off it and it's harder for the rest.

But I do think it's easier to be an indie mid-list author, to make that kind of middle ground money that you can live on and you can be a working author. I think that's actually easier to make it indie.

Now to make the big money where you've got your own private jet, you practically have to be traditional.

James Blatch: Let's move onto the private jet in a minute. But let's talk about sort of your writing.

### **You are a prolific writer. Did you say you started in 2010?**

Lexi Blake: I started writing when I was a kid. I wrote 10 or 11 books before I actually published. A couple of them will never be seen. But I also got really serious about it late in life. So I say I've got to make up time. But yeah, I've written and published about 60 books since 2010.

James Blatch: I think we counted 61 when we looked.

Lexi Blake: Yeah and I don't write short books.

James Blatch: Right. But then, romance readers are famously voracious in their appetite for books.

Lexi Blake: They are.

James Blatch: And that's also a very important thing for people to understand about being able to turn a profit in indie publishing, particularly.

**You need product, right?**

Lexi Blake: Yes. It's much more of a grind. But for me, I actually like it.

I don't know what I'd do if I was just writing a book a year. I like the challenge of keeping going. But you have to be very disciplined to do that.

James Blatch: You are obviously very disciplined.

**How and where do you write?**

Lexi Blake: I've got an office in my house. My husband is home at this point in my career. My husband's home. So he takes care of a lot of that and I write 3,000 words every day.

James Blatch: Okay, you have a 3,000 word count.

Lexi Blake: 3,000 words every single day and then until I get closer to the end and then I kind of power through.

James Blatch: And your books must be overlapping. So you must be editing one and writing the next.

Lexi Blake: I do. I write in the morning and I edit in the afternoon.

**James Blatch: What about your marketing?**

Lexi Blake: I am a terrible marketer. I like to handle the organic marketing myself, dealing with fans. I do a lot of stuff where I'll get on Facebook live and interact and do stuff like that, answer questions.

The traditional marketing, I actually do have groups. I've got a social media manager who makes my ads and kind of follows them and she knows. So I kind of took it that way.

**James Blatch: So just to clarify. You're hybrid?**

Lexi Blake: Yes.

James Blatch: What's the percentage split of your 61 books?

Lexi Blake: I've got eight books with Berkeley. So I'm heavily invested in the indie.

James Blatch: Yeah, so primarily indie.

Lexi Blake: Yes.

James Blatch: So that's amazing because you do well, right?

Lexi Blake: I do. I think I've had nine books on the Times.

James Blatch: Fantastic and you're making a good living.

Lexi Blake: Yes.

James Blatch: Good. So I just wanted to establish that because you say, "I'm terrible at marketing." So I mean, what?

**Do you books simply look after themselves or ...?**

Lexi Blake: I think what I am good at is I'm good at making people buy the next book.

James Blatch: Okay. Loyal readers.

Lexi Blake: Yeah, I think if I can get you hooked with the first book and I do some things to get people hooked with the first book. I write very serial books. They're complete.

But I come from comic books. So I like to start the next book at the end of the first book and give you a tease of the next one and then have that click right there for you to buy the next one.

James Blatch: Okay, so not quite a cliffhanger, which can be a cynical commercial ploy.

Lexi Blake: No, not a cliffhanger. A preview of what comes next.

James Blatch: Yeah. Marvel do that, right? At the end of their films? So it seems to work for them.

Lexi Blake: Absolutely.

James Blatch: And in terms of organizing the covers and the blurb and all that stuff that you do when you're an indie publisher, when do you do that?

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

Lexi Blake: I work with a photographer to shoot my covers. So we initially sit down and come up with the concept of what we want to do. Then she's out in LA and she casts for it and then we've got a really, really great cover artist.

We really want the books to look slick. We don't want it to look any different from a New York publisher. So we're willing to put the money and time into building that brand for a series.

James Blatch: That's going some because most people, the vast majority, even in traditional, will use stock photography. But for you, it's important to have that originality.

Lexi Blake: It is. I've seen a lot and I've had some covers. Not all of them are done. I've basically done my new stuff like that.

But I've got some stock too. It's always kind of weird, though, to see your book cover on another when you get that.

**James Blatch: There are always one or two very popular stock photographs you start to see around.**

Lexi Blake: Absolutely and what I like too is when we shoot, we can then build the marketing campaign, build the ad campaigns off that photo shoot. So we're using the same models and it's all branded and it all looks cohesive.

James Blatch: And you own the photographs. You commissioned them and yeah, so that's a really good advantage.

**What advertising are you doing?**

Lexi Blake: I do a lot of Facebook ads. I'm just now learning about AMS ads and Amazon ads. I don't do a ton of it though. I primarily sell off of word of mouth.

James Blatch: You have a mailing list?

Lexi Blake: I do.

James Blatch: So how big's your mailing list?

Lexi Blake: It's not big. It's 15,000.

James Blatch: Okay.

Lexi Blake: But I've got a 40% open rate. So that's good.

James Blatch: It's a strong 15,000.

Lexi Blake: Yeah, yeah, I actually culled my list down, which I was told I was not supposed to do. But when the European-

James Blatch: GDPR.

Lexi Blake: GDPR came in.

James Blatch: We love GDPR. It was our favorite moment in recent years, wasn't it? I want to do that one again.

Lexi Blake: Yeah, yeah.

James Blatch: Yeah, so we all did that.

Lexi Blake: But I also love, what I found is if you can get people to follow you on Amazon or follow you on BookBub, that's a very, very helpful thing to do.

James Blatch: Yeah, so you use BookBub.

### **Do you paid BookBub ads?**

Lexi Blake: I do. I will do the paid BookBub, the pre-order because BookBub will actually send out, if you qualify, they'll send out a newsletter for everyone who follows you on BookBub and my BookBub list is actually bigger than my mailing list. They'll send out a, "This came out today," for you. But I do a pre-order one too that I pay for.

James Blatch: Okay, yeah, and you find that works well for you.

Lexi Blake: It's very helpful.

**James Blatch: Again, BookBub's the place where the readers with voracious appetites hang out.**

Lexi Blake: Yes.

James Blatch: Because they want to the volume of books and you're obviously supplying that.

Okay, so your writing style, obviously, is important to you in terms of being able to take somebody on, one after the other.

But what do you do to nurture the audience beyond knowing that you'll hope they'll want to read the next book?

**Do you have a relationship with your readers?**

Lexi Blake: I do. I actually have a readers group that's very, very active. This particular one is one Facebook. What I really like about it is it started out, they just talked about my books.

But it's grown into a little community and now, I don't even have to answer half the time because somebody will come in and say, "Oh no. That's coming out this time."

I think having that open kind of dialogue where people can come and ask you questions, like, "What was your thought process on this?" We have a thing called the Spoiler Zone that I post and like, "Discuss your conspiracy theory about what's happening in the next book," and I really love watching them just kind of, "Where is she going with this?"

**James Blatch: And do you ever read something someone's written and thought, "God, that's better than the idea I had?"**

Lexi Blake: I often find that they guess really, really well. I think I've been so clever. But so I'm often looking at that going, "But that doesn't happen until book five. Aw."

**James Blatch: So on that subject, do you plot?**

Lexi Blake: Yeah, I plot the big things. I like to know where I'm going. I like to have the touchstone points, the beginning, something in the middle and something at the end.

But then I like to let it flow because I usually find something out in the middle of the book and that's kind of what makes it exciting for me. But I'm a very linear writer. I'm going to write from the beginning to the end. I'm not gonna skip stuff.

James Blatch: You must be doing more than a book a month. Are you?

Lexi Blake: Oh gosh, no. No, I typically write a book about every eight weeks.

James Blatch: Okay.

Lexi Blake: Every eight weeks or so, which you gotta remember is I'm coming out hard and fast right now because I bought back a bunch of books that I wrote from 2010 to 2014, from my small press publisher.

I'm actually re-editing, putting them in my new world and putting them back out. So that's why I have a book, I think, every two weeks for a little while.

James Blatch: Wow, which is going some.

### **How many series do you have within your 61 books?**

Lexi Blake: I think I have six series. I have a series called Texas Sirens, a series called Nights in Bliss. My big series is Masters and Mercenaries. I have a series I write with someone called Perfect Gentleman and then I've got two series with Berkeley, including Courting Justice

James Blatch: That's quite a lot to keep track of and make sure you're actually writing to the right series.

### **There are tonal differences between the series as well or are they all the same sort of tone?**

Lexi Blake: They do definitely have different tones. One of them is a legal romance and that's really heavy on the murder mystery.

The one I'm really known for is a spy series and it's a big world. I like to say I use the paranormal world building techniques in a contemporary world because that's what you want is you want to build a fandom, not just a readership, but a fandom. I want them buying T-shirts and be excited about the places you write about.

James Blatch: Now in terms of new authors, a lot of people listening to this podcast are like me, writing a first book and working out how to do it. I mean, I sit alongside Mark Dawson, who's quite an intimidating person to sit next to and yourself in sort of the success.

### **What's your advice to people starting out? What should we be focusing on now?**

Lexi Blake: You should be focusing on the books and this might be ... I often say you've gotta find the person who's trying to do almost exactly what you're doing because the journey's different for everyone.

In romance, it's very important to have a big back list. For romance readers, they really want to get in and know that they're going to be able to sink into five to 10 books. I don't think that's necessarily the same.

You need to know your genre and know what readers do and what readers want.

I think in thrillers, they want the big concept. So I think that you want to find that concept and you want to make it exciting and you want that hook that brings them in.

James Blatch: Yeah, so really focus on their writing, on the book, which is the good advice I'm getting.

Lexi Blake: It is and everybody's going to tell you that and we all want that magic button that we can push. And don't give up on a book that doesn't seem to be selling because you never know what you could do that could make it popular all of a sudden.

James Blatch: Repackage.

Lexi Blake: Yes, absolutely.

James Blatch: So there's no substitute to putting your bum on a seat and putting your hands on a keyboard.

Lexi Blake: Pretty much.

James Blatch: Yeah, I feared you were going to say that because I was really hoping there was a magic button somewhere.

Lexi Blake: I know. It would be great.

James Blatch: No, we're getting on with that.

### **Are you optimistic for writing at the moment?**

Lexi Blake: Absolutely, this is the best time in the world to be a writer. You've got all these options.

If we were talking 20 years ago, you have one option. You would be able to go and you would put your proposal in and they're going to say yes or no.

We get to say yes to ourselves now. We get to say yes to what we put out. Now the question is now we've got the readers to yes to us too. But at least we've got the shot at that in a different way than we had before.

James Blatch: And do you know what? I think your genre, or romance in particular has benefited the most from that because there's always been a slight snobbery in the traditional industry about the real throwaway romance reads.

There are a few dedicated ones, Mills & Boon in the UK for instance and others who wanted to be on the Booker. They wanted to be the publisher with the Booker list and actually, people want to read what they want to read, right? That's what's happened now, which is amazing.

Lexi Blake: They do and I think it's also a great time to write books that don't fit neatly into a hole because I can find an audience for those books now too. You just have to be patient. I think that's the keyword. There are two words I like to use: patience and discipline. It's what you need to survive and a thick skin.

James Blatch: Although romance is the unifying factor, I guess, but actually your genres are quite distinctly different.

### **Why is that? Do you enjoy writing in the different areas?**

Lexi Blake: I do.

### **James Blatch: Or is it commercial decision?**

Lexi Blake: No, oh no. That's not a commercial decision at all. If I was making it, I would just write Masters and Mercenaries.

I have to change it up. I write so much that I need to cleanse my pallet because I love coming up with really great twists and you can't do that every single day. So I find when I switch genres, I take a little mental break and I'm ready to come back to the other series when I'm done.

James Blatch: That sounds like a healthy way of making sure you're staying fresh.

Lexi Blake: That's right.

James Blatch: And looking after your mind muscle.

### **Tell me about the editing process for you then. Is it different, I guess, for the traditional and the indie?**

Lexi Blake: Sort of. But I have processes that I always do. I have an editor, weirdly enough, my best friend for 20 years.

We basically started out before I was publishing at all and she would edit my books. She's a teacher, taught English. She still edits. She edits all of my indie stuff. But she reads as I go along.

She keeps a bible so that we know where we're going and we know that somebody's eye color is this and, no, it's been five years, not three. I do that a lot. We'll do that.

Then, if it's traditional, it'll go to the traditional publisher to my editor, Kate Seaver, at Berkeley. At some point in time, I'm going to read it out loud, every single book.

### **James Blatch: Physically read it out loud.**

Lexi Blake: I physically read it out loud. You find things. You can catch stilted dialogue in a way that you can't when you read it. You can sit there and things that your eye will go across when you have to read it, I think you find it.

I think that's really strengthened the books, especially as we go into audio because that book is going to go into audio someday and I want to make sure that dialogue sounds realistic.

Then we actually have a couple of beta readers who I pay. I have them for very different, specific reasons because I want to know what's coming to me in the reviews. I don't want to be shocked. Then we have a proofreader and we're good. It's a long editing process.

James Blatch: Yeah, but it sounds very structured and you have a couple of beta readers, you say. You don't have a big team because I think Mark sends his book out to hundreds.

Lexi Blake: I do not. You know what? I was told, I had this really great mentor. I met Steve Barry when I was ...

I was mentored by a thriller writer and his thing was he told me I needed to take advice from people who are invested in my book, not from readers, not during that editing process. It needs to be somebody who works with

me. So yeah, it's my two editors, like I said, a couple of beta readers I had for eight years and it works out really well.

James Blatch: And then it gets launched to your audience, to the readers.

### **Do you have a channel for feedback from them or is it simply the reviews?**

Lexi Blake: Yeah and no, I try not to read them. I don't. You can make that mistake. It depends on if you're the kind of person who can just read a review and look at it logically, I'll go cry somewhere and one bad review can bring a person like me way down. So I'm better at it now.

But I basically have my husband and my assistant read it. If it's coming back consistently, one thing, then I know I've got a problem. But if it's, "This is the worst book ever," which we all get. You know you've made it when you've been told you're the worst.

James Blatch: Well, do you know what, Lexi? You've had so much success. You've been in bestseller lists. You're making a really good living from your books and yet, it still hurts?

Lexi Blake: Oh, absolutely.

James Blatch: I mean, that's a human response.

Lexi Blake: Yeah, you bleed on the page and that's you. That's your heart and soul there.

James Blatch: Yeah, you do put it out there when you're a writer and any creative industry and I used to work in TV news and you would get criticism. People would say, "That bloke doesn't know what he's talking about," and stuff and the only thing you think about that day was that. Doesn't matter what anyone else has said to you.

Lexi Blake: It doesn't matter that other people think it's the greatest thing in the world. I learned to try to get that out of my head.

James Blatch: Well, we find your success tremendously inspiring and exciting. You can take that from us and you obviously got a very loyal fan base based on the amount of effort that goes into turning out a really good book each time.

Congratulations on your career. It's been really good to catch up. Are you enjoying ThrillerFest?

Lexi Blake: Absolutely. I love ThrillerFest.

James Blatch: You come every year?

Lexi Blake: I try to get out every couple of years.

James Blatch: Okay.

Lexi Blake: I like getting the different perspectives because it's very different from the romance conventions I go to.

James Blatch: Yeah, sure and are there many other romance writers here who are writing with thriller aspects to it?

Lexi Blake: There are a couple. There are a couple.

James Blatch: But it's not a huge part of the ...

Lexi Blake: No, no, it's not. I think we'd be actually better if we got together and combined.

**James Blatch: And conversely, if you go to RWA or something like that, do you find there are any romance writers with thriller aspects there?**

Lexi Blake: Oh yeah. We've got a lot. That's actually, I think, a growing part of romance is what we would call romantic suspense is really a romantic thriller because I think we're finding people like the international aspect, the chasing after something aspect instead of just woman in danger, which romantic suspense has been for a very long time.

So as we see, more women writing in heroines in a proactive ... She's the heroine. We see more of the thriller aspect come in, rather than just the mystery of who's stalking her.

James Blatch: Yeah, I mean, there's romance in almost every thriller you ever read actually, isn't there?

Lexi Blake: Yeah.

James Blatch: I mean, the James Bond romance was fairly one dimensional. But it was there.

Lexi Blake: But see, that's where Masters and Mercenaries came from. I grew up loving James Bond and I wanted James Bond to fall in love and get married and be happy forever.

James Blatch: He did get married once. But his bride was shot.

Lexi Blake: No, see, that was terrible. That does not happen in this one. No. We're going to let her live.

James Blatch: Even I was a little bit upset by that. It was a good opening to the film. Okay, Lexi, thank you so much, indeed, for joining us. It's been brilliant talking to you.

Lexi Blake: Thank you.

James Blatch: Well there's Lexi and I think it's a particular trait with the romance genre the volume of books is staggering, isn't it?

Mark Dawson: It's driven by the appetite of the readers. If you were choosing a genre and you wanted to maximize your chance of selling a lot of books, romance would be very near the top. It's also very competitive.

It's not easy to get into that genre. But if you can get fans, they will read a book a day, sometimes maybe more than that. So they're really chewing through books at a ferocious rate.

Someone like Lexi with a big catalog like that, if you hook someone early on, in theory, you've got 60 potential sales that you can make. So when you think about it that way, it's not hard to see why there are so many of these mega authors who I'll meet next week in Denver, many of them who are selling millions and millions and millions of books and making a serious amount of money.

James Blatch: I love talking to Lexi about how close she is with her readers as well. That, again, is a really great thing in the indie romance area in particular is how driven these authors are by their relationship with their readers.

Mark Dawson: Not just romance.

It's a standard trait, I would say, in successful indie authors is being excited by the fact that you don't need anybody else to stand in between you on the one hand and your readers on the other.

That's my big equation here is taking cult traffic, if you want to be kind of internet markety about it, people who have never heard of you before and at the end of the process turn them into friends, super fans and

ambassadors. That's definitely something that I see as a common thread through the more successful authors.

James Blatch: You don't need New York between you and the people.

Mark Dawson: There you go. What more can I add?

James Blatch: That sounded authentic. I'm not sure if they speak like that on the Upper West Side where we are now.

Mark Dawson: Our New York hosts, they're shaking their heads in disgust at the moment.

James Blatch: They've gone down the stairs in shame.

Let's hear from Alan Jacobson, who's someone who's done very well over the years. He's had TV series. It's had a film made in the Czech Republic. He is a great promoter. He's a great promoter himself and there's nothing to be ashamed of that.

In fact, when you're an indie author, it's an essential part of your toolkit. You don't necessarily have to be a gregarious character. You don't have to be an extrovert. But you do need to think about your books as a business in order to become a little bit objective about it.

If you look at the quotes on Alan's sleeve notes, he's got Nelson DeMille and James Patterson and I think Lee Child, possibly, as well and he's got a lot of the big authors all praising his work and he's gone out and got those and they're very important as JD Barker said in episode one of this when James Patterson wrote a little quote on his book, what a difference it made to selling it.

Let's hear from Alan, who writes FBI stories. It's an interesting interview, particularly about that crossover with Hollywood.

**Alan, why don't you start off by giving me the starting price of who Alan is.**

Alan Jacobson: Alan Jacobson is the award-winning, USA Today best selling author of a dozen novels incorporating the FBI profiler Karen Vail series and the OPSIG Team Black series of novels.

**James Blatch: Do you have a background in law enforcement?**

Alan Jacobson: There's a saying in writing, "Write what you know," and I believe there's a caveat to that because if you write what you know, you're going to have a very limited number of books and stories that you can tell, maybe one or two books and then you're going to be writing the same thing over and over again.

My theory is if you don't know something, you educate yourself. You learn it and then you can write what you know in a much more expansive way.

I lucked out back in January of 1994. I met an FBI agent who was on the short list for promotion to the behavioral analysis unit, the profiling unit. We were in a class on blood spatter pattern analysis.

James Blatch: That sounds like a great class to be in.

Alan Jacobson: It is awesome. I learned so much.

My background is that I got a degree in English and then when to chiropractic school, which is a whole other story how I got that.

But I never thought that there was a future for me with an English degree because at the time, the guidance I was given is that if you didn't want to teach, there's really nothing that you can do with an English degree. Now

looking back, that was odd advice. But it was what it was and I had a life experience relative to chiropractic.

I had horrible classic migraine headaches where I would go virtually blind as a prodrome to the headache. Then when the headache hit, all I could do sleep. So, it impacted me as a young teen.

I went to a chiropractor and within three weeks, never had another migraine headache in my life. So, it made a big impact on me and I decided I wanted to help people the same way I was helped.

I got my English degree and then packed it up in New York and moved to California and went to chiropractic school and practiced for about eight and a half, nine years, injured my wrist, and went back to writing. That's really a capsule summary.

When I was on the way out of the practice, I took a phone call from the head of the California Department of Justice asking for reference on one of my employees. So, I gave them the reference and I said, "I've got a question for you. I'm writing this novel and it's got a character who's a criminologist."

I started telling him about the character and he stops me. He goes, "Your character's not a criminologist. He's a criminalist." I'd never heard that term.

Remember, this is '94, well before CSI and all the other crime drama shows. So, it helped me very much knowing that my character was a criminalist.

I said, "Can I call you if I have more questions as I get deeper into the writing?" He said, "Absolutely." So, I did.

A few months later, I called him up. I said, "Hey. Can I come see the crime lab behind the scenes?" He said, "No." Defense attorneys could claim that you compromised evidence.

But he said, "Instead, let me have you come to this class as an auditing on blood spatter pattern analysis." When I got into that class, I realized I was told that there was a four-year waiting list for this class.

James Blatch: He skipped you through.

Alan Jacobson: Well, he skipped me through as I was auditing. I wasn't taking it. It was fine. But I felt suddenly very privileged to be in this class with FBI agents, some homicide detectives, and sheriff's deputies.

That's where I met FBI agent, Mark Safarik. He was the one who, a couple of months after that class, was promoted to the profiling unit. He invited me out many times, but we spent time at the academy, which at that time, the profile unit was in the basement of the academy, just like at the opening of Silence of the Lambs. That was actually filmed on location there. In later years, they moved it offsite to a town about 15 minutes south of Monaco.

**James Blatch: So, your books, that is one of the things about writing effectively true crime stories is the authenticity has to be there, right?**

Alan Jacobson: Yes. I insist on it. The research for every one of my books, and I've written, like I said, a dozen, takes about three months before I start writing. So, on outlining and researching at the same time.

Then as I start writing, I'm continuing to do research because your character says something or you go someplace else with a story and you realize, "Oh. I don't know about this. I need to know more about X, Y, Z."

Then you recontact your contacts or find new ones if it's on a different topic. The research continues all the way to the end product.

**James Blatch: In terms of publishing, how are you published?**

Alan Jacobson: Open Road.

James Blatch: So, traditional publishing houses and you have an agent?

Alan Jacobson: I do.

### **James Blatch: How did you get all that going in the first place?**

Alan Jacobson: My first agent, I got through the Maui Writers Conference, which is now defunct, unfortunately. But I believe they started it, I can't say for sure, something that was enormously beneficial to me and that was face to face meetings with the agents and editors.

I came from a business background after having been in practice for nine years. So, I understood that publishing as a business just like I was when I was practicing. You could be the best chiropractor in the world, but if you don't have any patients, you're not going to keep your doors open, and the same thing.

You could be the best writer, but if you don't have any readers, it's just not going to count for a whole lot.

I went to this Maui Writers Conference. I purchased what they called 15 minute consultations face to face and you submitted a manuscript resume, which was a one page summary of the book and a three sentence pitch. Then all the agents got it and they checked of interested, not interested, or very interested.

Then they gave that packet back to you when you registered, when you arrived at the conference, and checked in. I researched all the agents before I went. I knew who handled the type of books that I wrote.

I decided not just to meet with the agents who were interested or very interested. But in some cases, I wanted to meet with the ones who were not

interested, and there were a few of them. I think about three or four that said no and eight or nine that said yes.

I met with all of them, including the ones that said no, and I got some very interesting ... Two of the three said, "Honestly, I didn't have a chance to read it because I was just too busy. So, I just checked no." I thought, "Okay. That's interesting."

James Blatch: Okay. Honesty.

Alan Jacobson: I did a pitch on the spot and the other one said it just wasn't his thing. I said, "Okay, I can accept that. That's fine." But at least i would know whether it was something that was flawed in the novel or even the summary.

Then I bought an additional session with an agent because it was the keynote speaker of the conference. I was really moved by what she had to say and she wasn't one of the ones that I had purchased the initial ones. I got her last appointment on the last day of the conference and she ultimately became my agent.

She read it, she pulled out a red pen from her purse, and started marking it up, and just got so excited. She slammed the pen down and she said, "Wow. I want to see the whole manuscript. Overnight it to me."

Within a week, I had a contract for representation. So, that's how I got my agent.

How I got my first publishing contract with Simon & Schuster was a little circuitous. Right before the Maui Writers Conference, I signed a deal with a small publishing house out of Canada to publish my first novel, False Accusations, the one that the Department of Justice, helped me with.

It was probably not a good decision knowing that I was going to this conference, but I really didn't know what to expect from the conference. I didn't know if anything would come of it, and I had an offer to publish. So, I went ahead with it.

Turns out that they were going bankrupt just when my book was due to launch. I was able to get, I don't remember how many copies, hundreds of copies before it closed down. The printer, it was a third party printer. So, I found out who the printer was, I called them directly, I got the books shipped to me.

I carried the boxes into the stores, the bookstores where I had signings set up, and sold it on consignment, which felt a little odd at the time. This was '97. But it sold really well.

The bookstores said, "How can we get more copies?" Well, they couldn't at that time, but I had an agent then and she turned around and sold it to Pocket Books from Simon & Schuster.

**James Blatch: You got the rights back from the defunct publisher.**

Alan Jacobson: Yeah. That was a whole other story. I had to hire an attorney to get the rights back.

James Blatch: Can be a problem.

Alan Jacobson: Yeah, because they were bankrupt. So, there was nobody representing.

James Blatch: Yeah. So, she then sold it into Simon & Schuster.

Alan Jacobson: Simon & Schuster. Two book deal.

**James Blatch: You've had a TV development? Most people say, "There's an option, I'm going to have a meeting," and blah, blah, blah. But you've actually seen the final product.**

Alan Jacobson: Well, yes and no. So, let me qualify that.

We had a TV movie made in the Czech Republic by one of their very well-known screenwriters, and I'm going to butcher the name, but Jiří Hubač, and I'm sure I got that wrong.

But he is a god in the Czech Republic and he wrote the screenplay. It came out and it did very well. So, they contacted us a few years later and wanted a re-up for another series of showings. So, that was very cool.

They sent us a DVD and it was very fun watching the scenes. I couldn't understand because it wasn't subtitled in English. But I knew, obviously, all the scenes.

Fast forward to two years ago, my wife and I were in the Czech Republic. We took a tour guide to another area of Prague, outside Prague. We got on the topic of writing and what I did and I told her about it. I said, "Oh. In fact, we had a movie produced in the Czech Republic."

She said, "Oh, really? What's the name of it?" I said, "False Accusations." I said, "In fact, you may know the screenwriter. I was told he was well-known in the Czech Republic."

I mentioned his name and she almost drove off the road. He was even bigger than I had known. So, that was very exciting.

Relative to the United States, about six years ago, my agent got an offer for both a feature film and a two hour TV movie for the first book in the Karen Vail series, which was The 7th Victim.

She's the FBI profiler that I ended up writing about. My agent said, "Which one do you want to take? Feature film or TV movie?" I went, "How do I make that decision?"

He said, "Well, let me help you. A TV show, a TV movie will be out within six months. 99.9% percent chance. A feature film, five years from now, we could be sitting here saying, 'Why haven't they gone before the cameras? what's going on?' If a new executive comes in and takes over the helm, he'll more than likely say, 'Okay. I only want the properties we acquire while I'm in charge.'"

So, he says, "You could end up with nothing and then we won't get the rights back and we're in trouble."

So, I said, "All right. Let's take the TV movie if you can get me a production credit." So, he said, "Oh. That's impossible, but I'll see what I can do." Well, TNT loved the Karen Vail series so much, they agreed to that. So, I was co-producing.

### **James Blatch: What did that actually involve beyond being on IMDB?**

Alan Jacobson: Meeting with the executive producer and producer, discussing the vision, discussing where it would be filmed because we had discounts, tax credits in North Carolina, which in the winter, can look very much like Virginia. Then casting, less of an input.

James Blatch: That's more of a specialist thing, I guess.

Alan Jacobson: Yeah, and it's more studio, who they have deals with. Even the producers don't have really much any say. You can have say, but they're not going to listen to you.

So, everything was moving along beautifully. They commissioned a screenplay from a well-known screenwriter and she did a fabulous job. I

was blown away because I'd seen a screenplay from a different writer for a feature film because we had optioned it previously along with one of my OPSIG Team Black novels. That one was disappointing. It didn't follow the source material, the novel very closely. This one did.

It's very, very difficult to get a 400 page novel into a two hour screenplay and she did just a masterful job.

Everything was moving along quite nicely. Unfortunately, the TNT Mystery Movie Night was going to be 12 bestselling novels adapted to screen. They filmed the first six.

Scott Turow's was the first. It was the sequel to Presumed Innocent. I think Lisa Gardener had one in there. Anyway, the ratings were horrible and the sponsors pulled out. There went our four million dollar budget, and we were canceled. We were project number seven.

James Blatch: You were the Apollo 19 of the-

Alan Jacobson: We were exactly.

James Blatch: Canceled for budget funding reasons.

Alan Jacobson: Exactly. The astronauts that were going to fly Apollo 19 and 18 and 20. Yeah. That's a good analogy.

**James Blatch: What happens with the rights now? Do they sit there with TNT?**

Alan Jacobson: We were very, very, very fortunate to get the rights back.

James Blatch: You got them back.

Alan Jacobson: Yeah. They gave them back.

James Blatch: So, you could potentially sell them again because what you really want is a series. Viewers eat up CSI week in, week out. So, it's a genre that works.

Alan Jacobson: Because they optioned the entire Vail series, the plan was to do either four two-hour movies and see how it goes if they wanted to do a series or just do the two-hour movie and then move right into a TV series from there where each book would be a season. So, it was a great, great plan, but man plans and God laughs, right?

James Blatch: Yeah. Exactly.

**Now, my last areas to ask you about is about coming to conferences, why you do it, and is it worth it for a writer?**

Alan Jacobson: All conferences are a little different. ThrillerFest, there are a lot of aspiring writers, a lot of authors, published authors, some fans. Bouchercon, I think, tends to be more fan oriented in terms of the audience.

So, you get a little different approach depending upon the type of conference you go to. ThrillerFest, I've been to every one. This is my 13th. It's really evolved and matured.

It is the premier conference for thriller writers and readers. Those who choose to come and learn, if you're an aspiring writer, you get to learn from the masters, the ones who've been doing it a really long time and who have honed their skill in any profession.

You do something for one year, you may think you're really good at it. But the fact is 10 years from then, you're going to look back and go, "Man. I'm so much better now." 20 years from then, you're going to go, "Wow. I am really at the top of my game."

I've been doing this 20 years. I really feel like I'm at the top of my game. But you still learn from others, colleagues that you talk with and how they do things and how they approach things.

Then you've got the marketing aspect and the publishing aspect, can all commiserate and talk about issues we've had. It's a great collegial environment.

**James Blatch: The whole world's exploding at the moment. You're not tempted to go off in that direction? A new series, maybe?**

Alan Jacobson: I would never say never. It's really interesting. I know some friends who have done it and done extraordinarily well, but it's true in anything. You have authors that go the traditional route and do extraordinarily well and others that just flame out. So, you never quite know.

The indie route is a little more difficult obviously because you're the captain of the ship and you have to steer it. You have to do the publicity, the marketing. Everything that happens relative to that book is on your desk.

So, it's not that as a traditionally published author, you're not involved. Obviously, authors today versus when I first started 20 years ago, it's very different. We are very much involved in every aspect of it.

But as an indie author, you can have a bad day. It's on your plate. It's all your responsibility.

James Blatch: Alan, thank you for joining us. I want to wish you and Karen future success and Karen keeps locking up the bad guys and serves you well.

Alan Jacobson: Thank you.

James Blatch: We'll look out for her as well and we'll keep an eye on the TV channels because who knows? Now you have the rights back.

Alan Jacobson: Great. Thank you. I'm still working on it.

James Blatch: There's Alan Jacobson. I don't know if you noticed in the interview if you're watching on YouTube, he was wearing a Polo shirt that had the Karen Weir ... Karen Weir? Is that is character's name? I can't remember.

Mark Dawson: Karen Vail.

James Blatch: Karen Vail stories on his Polo shirt. But there's somebody who knows this is his business and nobody else is going to go out for him when you're an indie. I think he was interesting.

I didn't know who he was and I don't think he knew who I was. But it was, he saw us with our cameras set up interviewing people and came up to me and the first thing he said to me was, "Can I be on your show?" I think he's proud, actually, but that's irrelevant for him promoting himself. He's promoting himself.

Mark Dawson: I would not. I'm not wired that way. I'm not that comfortable going up to people I don't know. I'm not good at small talk, usually. John, on the other hand, has been fantastic at small talk.

James Blatch: He'll go up to anyone and talk to them.

Mark Dawson: He will. He's a slut, basically. Let's be honest.

James Blatch: He's no shame.

Mark Dawson: He's no shame at all. But yeah. Alan was very abrupt. Not abrupt. He was very forthright and knows what he wanted and realized potentially, there's a good chance to get his name out there and went for it. So, kudos. I have no problem with at all.

James Blatch: Now, our next interview is a man called David Morrell. David wrote his first novel in 1972. It was adapted into a film with Sylvester Stallone 10 years later in 1982. You may remember it. It was called Rambo.

His story behind the first book is really interesting. I wasn't sure, I didn't know a lot about David Morrell, knew who he was. But the interview really revealed to me this is a deep thinker about writing. In fact, ironically, because Rambo's portrayed as this rather shallow bloodfest.

Mark Dawson: Only in the film.

The book is excellent. The book is much better than the film.

James Blatch: But even in the film, he talks about the violence and we work for an organization that spent a lot of time thinking about violence in films. His name and his book, his films came up in our historical records when we were discussing things and I mentioned that to him.

He's a very, really interesting guy to talk to and I can tell you now, as a result of this brief chat, we've arranged to have David Morrell on for a full 40 minute interview in the autumn because he's the guy who will talk to you directly about why you're writing as being one of the most important things you need to answer to be a successful writer.

But that's what we got onto the last 30 seconds of this interview. A great guy to talk to. So, let's hear from David Morrell.

**David, how lovely of you to come and talk to us on the SPF podcast.**

David Morrell: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

James Blatch: We're very excited. I assume Rambo was, First Blood, I think was the novel, was your first book. Am I right in saying that you wrote it in the '70s.

David Morrell: Yes. First Blood was, in fact ... It's fun to say First Blood was my first novel, right? But you can say the debut novel, but it was my first.

I started it, seems so long ago, in 1968. What people in the UK wouldn't know perhaps, and some people in the United States don't remember, is that 1968 was the year of riots in the United States because of the assassinations and Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and the Vietnam War. There weren't 10 riots or 50 riots or a hundred riots. There were several hundred riots and some cities in the United States never recovered, such as inner Detroit. The buildings were never reclaimed

I got to thinking that it was as if the Vietnam War had come home. Then you have those moments as an author where you say what if someone, a decorated soldier from Vietnam came back disaffected by the war, hating himself for what he'd learned about himself in the war, and was wandering the country to try to come to terms with what had happened to him, grew his beard, grew long hair, about what was then called hippies.

Police at that time did not like people with long hair and beards. So, they would naturally go after him. It was just a fact of life in those days.

So, here we have the greatest gunfighter in the West who's trying to hang up his guns and they won't let him.

I saw First Blood as a Western, and in effect, the Vietnam War is fought in America. That was the idea of writing the book. I started it in 1968 because of the riots. I was in graduate school at the time, so it took me a while. But took me three years. In the summer '71, I finally finished.

James Blatch: It's difficult to think now because it's been so copied and the style has been ... the themes that you talk about have been done in very many quite well-known pieces.

### **It's difficult to imagine quite how original that was in 1968.**

David Morrell: There were a lot of original parts of it. One was that outside the pulp universe of cheap paperbacks, there had not been a novel that had that much action in it. It is basically one long chase.

That's why the movies liked it so much because they could take it ... The film adaptation, *First Blood*, is about 96 minutes and 55 minutes of it are action. Very unusual.

So, that was a new way of thinking about the amount of action in a book. The other was that, as I said, I was in graduate school and I was studying Hemingway. I don't write like Hemingway, but Hemingway had a theory about writing about things as if they'd never been written about before.

I was looking at the way he wrote action in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms* and the gunfights in *To Have and Have Not*, a gangster novel. I thought it's like he invented it for the first time.

So, when I was writing the action scenes in *First Blood*, I was trying to find language that hadn't been used before, and my academic background, naturally, that's the way I would think. So, there were two elements there that hadn't been done before.

### **James Blatch: Film adaptation, early '80s, probably 10 years old from the publication years?**

David Morrell: It was 10 years later. You've got a good memory. The film occurred in 1982 and there's a whole adventure there too.

I sold the film rights to Columbia Pictures before the novel was published 10 years earlier. At that time, Richard Brooks was going to write and direct it.

Year later, Columbia, I don't know what happened. Columbia sold it to Warner Bros. and there was talk of Martin Ritt, the director, he'd done a Southern picture called Souther and the novel, First Blood, is set sort of in the cell of the United States.

There was talk about Paul Newman being in it, but playing the police chief with maybe Robert Blake playing Rambo. Then that morphed into Sydney Pollack, one of my favorite directors, with Steve McQueen as Rambo because of the motorcycle.

Sydney told me that they were ready to shoot when they realized that Steve McQueen was about 45 years old and there were in 1975 by this time, no 45 year old Vietnam veterans.

So, there were, all told, about four studios and 26 scripts before finally, the people who made the film, Carolco Pictures with Andrew Vajna and Mario Kassar as producers before they got the idea and they hired Sylvester, who had been in Rocky, Sylvester Stallone, but had never been in a hit movie of that proportion. He'd been in a lot of successful movies, but not anything big like Rocky. But they thought we'll try it and he'll do well in the role.

James Blatch: So, Rocky predated old lucky predated Rambo.

David Morrell: Yes.

James Blatch: Okay.

David Morrell: That's right.

James Blatch: I wondered if it was his breakout, but he was really ... Rocky today is a-

David Morrell: Sylvester had done F.I.S.T. and he'd done, the titles aren't coming to me at the moment. But he'd done some other films that were successful. Nighthawks.

But you know how these things happen. Sylvester later said that he thought that First Blood was his most important film because it established him in something other than Rocky.

James Blatch: It was a controversial film. I don't know what it was like in the States, but in the UK, funny enough you might not know, John and I used to work together as film examiners in the UK giving certificates.

David Morrell: Oh, really? Film examiners?

James Blatch: Not long after Rambo. You look at the historical case notes and Rambo was film that comes up. It was very controversial in its day.

Newspapers in the UK took against it for its level of violence.

**What's interesting to me, if you alluded to that as being a deliberate decision at the beginning that there would be nonstop action to give it a particular time, that wasn't an accident of the film.**

David Morrell: Well, let's back up, though. This business about the film examiner, I know the film has a reputation for them, but it isn't in the film. We have the fight where he escapes from the jail, which basically, it's a fight in a jail.

Then he comes out and he gets on the motorcycle and he races away. We have the car chase. Ted Kotcheff did a hell of a job directing it.

But if you look at it carefully, a man falls out of a helicopter and some nameless deputies are in a car crash and that's the extent of the violence. But there's a lot of property damage.

In this country, in those days, Siskel and Ebert were two very popular American film critics. Siskel & Ebert At the Movies and they had the thumbs up and the thumbs down reviews. I remember them being shocked by the film because of the property damage.

In this country, we have the Chamber of Commerce, which is about local businesses and all. It was like they were the critics for the Chamber of Commerce because property was damaged. But there really aren't many people hurt. So, I never understood this thing about the violence. It is an action picture.

You might add that over the years, as CGI has added more and more to movies, making them so unrealistic and more literally like cartoons, that the stunts which are not CGI, the stunts in First Blood with real people doing real things and sometimes Sylvester Stallone doing his own stunts, and he was injured many times in the movie, making of it, that the movie feels realistic now. There's nothing in there that a human being could not physically do as opposed to what we see now in movies.

### **James Blatch: What impact did the film have on your writing career?**

David Morrell: Well, it was my first novel. The hardest thing for a novelist is to come out of the chute, so to speak, at the beginning and get attention.

First Blood, which was published in '72 as the crisis in the country, in the United States about the Vietnam War, and it was pretty clear that that was not gonna end well. It took her a while, but it was pretty clear this was not what the people who started had hoped for.

So, the novel came out at the right time, and then in terms of getting attention. And for our first novel, it was reviewed everywhere. I could go on with titles that might not be recognizable in the UK, but it was reviewed everywhere. It was unusual for a first novel.

Basically, it established me. I was so lucky and I was young. I think I was 29 and I was so young and so lucky, although I'd worked like crazy to do the book, three years. That set me up so that later at novels, people would say, "Oh, he's the guy that did First Blood." First novel really did literally establish my career.

James Blatch: I'm not going to ask exactly how old you are today, but-

David Morrell: I will tell you. I'm 75.

**James Blatch: And you handed us a little card with your latest novel as you arrived. So tell us about that.**

David Morrell: The key to being a novelist is to have, for me at least, a long career and to look ahead and grow. I had, in various decades, written different kinds of books.

In the '70s, as with First Blood, I was writing what might be called outdoor action. In the '80s I wrote a series of very influential espionage novels, The Brotherhood of the Rose, The Fraternity of the Stone and The League of Night and Fog.

In fact, I don't know if anybody in the UK watches the Super Bowl, but it is a big deal here and The Brotherhood of the Rose was adapted into the only mini-series to air after a Super Bowl. It did really well.

It was an attempt to merge the best of the UK spy novel, as typified by John le Carré, with authentic spy details and the American spy novel, which had lousy spy details but had lots of action, so to try to marry those. That's what

they did. In various decades, always with suspense and action, but different kinds of genres.

In this decade, I became absolutely fascinated with the Victorian era in England. I'm Canadian. I have an American citizenship, but I was raised in Canada, so I've been in the commonwealth, so I'm sort of UK.

James Blatch: You're subjects, along with us. We're of the queen.

David Morrell: My father was a British airman who was killed on D-Day. I thought, I've always wanted to do this. I spent several years reading nothing but books about Victorian literature with the help of a Victorian historian.

I love the rhyme, of Judas Flanders and another UK scholar named Grevel Lindop, who was from the University of Manchester. I wrote three books about Thomas De Quincey, who was the author of Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and who invented the word subconscious, the concept subconscious and who Freud may have lifted from.

De Quincey was fascinated by mass murder, so I thought this is cool. I've got myself an opium addict who's interested in mass murder and invented the word subconscious.

I wrote three novels about him and about his daughter, who was a real-life person named Emily De Quincey, who sort of was his Watson. It sounds funny for this Canadian-American talking to the UK about these books, but I believe I have the tales in these books that people raised in the UK have no idea of. I was looking for those items in the Victorian mode that would be new, such as how much did a middle class or upper class woman's clothes weigh in 1854.

James Blatch: A lot.

David Morrell: 37 pounds. The reason for that is, and again, this is the kind of books they are, in 1851 in Hyde Park the Crystal Palace Exhibit occurred, which is the first world's fair.

The trend for women's dresses to have hoops, which were made either of whale's teeth or of metal hoops, they had to be covered. That took 12 yards of ruffled satin and then it took lead weights in the dresses so they wouldn't pop up. By the time you're done with all the stuff it was 37 pounds, as measured by a historian.

That's the kind of things that I just delighted in having. Now, Dickens never mentioned this stuff, because he took it for granted.

My goal was to write historic Victorian thrillers that were absolutely authentic and would have the kinds of real life details that nobody at the time was talking about in fiction, but that I could put in.

Like graves. How did they dig graves? Well, they did the graves because there wasn't enough room, so the coffins were put vertically, so you'd bring the coffin to the graveyard and then everybody would be told to get out. Then, what they do is they dig down and they jump up and down on the coffins below and crunch everything down and then they'd put the coffin in. A year later, they'd be back crushing that one down.

James Blatch: This is amazing.

David Morrell: This is cool.

James Blatch: You're selling the book brilliantly. A long way from Rambo though.

David Morrell: It is. And just to be clear, the books are called *Murder Is A Fine Art* and *Inspector Of The Dead and Ruler Of The Night*. This is what happens when you come to America and start hard-selling.

Anyway, you were saying about how it went? Well, as I said, what I'm about is trying to grow. Trying to move forward. Trying to learn. I was a professor. I have a PhD in American literature.

My goal is to keep learning and to try to take that learning and to put it in books. I'd written other historical novels, but for these three Victorian books, I cannot tell you the heaven I was in. I sometimes thought I was on the drugs that De Quincey was on. I thought I was there.

I had this 1851 map that had been released during the Crystal Palace for tourists and I could get around on that sucker as if I was there. It was just wonderful. It's a journey, right? Here we have Rambo and First Blood and all the way over here-

James Blatch: It's a process of development. I can see that's important to you, to keep developing. Do you think you write for the same reasons? Because the way you described First Blood as almost a political novel, you were thinking a lot about the realities of the Vietnam War.

David Morrell: Yes.

James Blatch: Do you think you're, I don't want to dwell on this at all, but you mentioned your father died on D-Day. We thank him for his service. We lived on the edge of that at the time.

**Do you think that impact on your family was the reason, perhaps, you were questioning war?**

David Morrell: I had a terrible upbringing. My mother struggled and I was put in an orphanage and all of that. If we have the time, he was a Naval airman and his job was to fly over where the shells were landing and report where they were landing to tell the ships how to adjust their trajectory, how far we have come. He was shot down doing this.

In fact, much later in life I became a pilot and I never understood the drive until I thought maybe I'm being reincarnated or something.

The trick with First Blood was to write a political novel that didn't feel like a political novel. We have the police chief, and none of this is in the movie, we have a police chief who is old enough to be Rambo's father, who fought in Korea, an American war. They don't call it a war. And who was in basically conventional military maneuvers.

Now we have Rambo, young enough to be his son, who fought in Vietnam, a whole different war, a guerrilla war. If we think of the police chief as being right-wing and conservative, then we think of Rambo as coming back disaffected by the war. Furious about the war. In the movie, he's a victim, but in the novel he's angry.

To have these two sides going, and in the novel I alternated viewpoints. So we had the policeman looking at Rambo and then Rambo looking at the policeman and back and forth, so you never knew who to cheer for.

Depending on your political point-of-view, you'd say well, he's right or he's right. But then you'd say, "Well, I sort of get this idea over here." It went back and forth until the climax, you didn't know who to cheer for. I didn't explain any of that.

The men who trained Rambo, Colonel Sam Troutman, is Uncle Sam. It's an allegory. He's the system. The whole idea in the novel was this system that created Rambo destroys him. But you can read it as a straight adventure novel and not see any of that, but if you're in the know, then you know what I'm saying.

I don't think I mentioned Vietnam but maybe three times in the whole book. Maybe that's why the book has never been out of print. There's an active

addition in the UK that's still being released. 46 years and it's never been out of print. It's cool.

James Blatch: I bet it still reads fresh. That's a brilliant way of writing, because the people who decide that they're going to ram it down your throat and explain-

David Morrell: It doesn't work.

James Blatch: Of course it doesn't work. To have a novel that you take-

David Morrell: It works subliminally. It's that De Quincey thing again.

James Blatch: We're really running out of time. It's been brilliant talking to you, David.

David Morrell: I just love talking about this stuff. This same thing, in my Victorian books, in *Murder As A Fine Art*, etc., these are all latent political books about the one percent who owned England at the time and how they controlled so that you had the ... the books are about people in the lower class who work themselves up higher in order to commit mayhem against the people they've always hated, but they can't do it until they get high enough to have the power to do it. I've not yet had any reviewer who understands that this is a really, it's almost a revolutionary series of novels.

James Blatch: Fantastic. You've written it too subtly. I'm joking, of course. It's exactly what you should be doing.

I think the best thing that we can take, as somebody, I'm writing my first, and Mark, who's the co-presenter, is a very established and well-regarded novel writer, thriller writer.

David Morrell: Terrific.

James Blatch: But what we both take is you're in your '70s and you want to improve and you want to develop yourself and you want to get better.

David Morrell: Keep going. I swim 35 minutes a day. Half a mile, laps, laps, laps. I'm still going. Someone once said that if you took my books in chronological order they would be the autobiography of my soul and that they would show, as I moved along, what I was interested in and rethink the ideas that mattered to me.

James Blatch: That's great. That's what writing should be. We should be seeing the author develop as well I think.

David Morrell: That's my hope and that's what I tried to do.

When I start a novel, I always write a letter to myself and the question is, why is this work worth a year of your life? So there has to be something in it that when I come out the other side, I'm different. I wrote one novel, so I can learn how to fly.

Sometimes it's the research and other times it's the history of honestly I thought I was there. I thought I was in it. It's like when Jack Finney or Richard Mathis in novel where I was, where I've been sucked back into that time, it was hypnotic. I really did. Anyway, we won't go there.

James Blatch: We'll see you at the ball tonight.

David Morrell: Alright, thank you so much.

James Blatch: Thank you David. That was David Morrell. The Rambo films, I suppose, his argument was the reputation they have isn't deserved, because actually the violence was ... it always is more sparing ...

Mark Dawson: The first one is a very good film. It's been colored by the slightly ridiculous films that followed. I remember when we were working

together, we saw Rambo 4, I think it was, where he basically takes out a battalion of-

James Blatch: It was brilliant.

Mark Dawson: It's an interesting film. But the first one I really like. It's just very low-key, low-budget. It's more of a character study of PTSD. Wouldn't have been called that in those days.

The book is a character study of Rambo. He's quite desperate, the things that happen. The ending is completely different. I really enjoyed the book. He's a lovely, gregarious guy.

His Facebook page is actually worth following. He refers to himself as Rambo's father. He knows Rambo is his meal ticket. He's been writing and writing and writing, but I don't think he ever achieved the huge levels of success again, which is fine because not many people will ever get to that kind of level anyways.

James Blatch: He's enjoying his writing now about Victorian England and Thomas De Quincey.

Mark Dawson: Exactly. He's got a really varied background. He taught English as a professor, I think, as well, at one point. Really great writer with a lot that we can all learn from.

James Blatch: I was trying to work out, because he started writing Rambo in 1968 he said, that if he wasn't the first, he was one of the very first people who started to change the political narrative of Vietnam. It went from being a war you were supposed to be supporting your forces, as we do.

We do pay tribute to our armed forces, but actually it was a war that was deeply controversial for class reasons, for race reasons in the US as well. He was one of those authors who started to write that story about these guys

coming back and the fractured nature of the society around the war. Of course, it spawned a whole plethora of films and books.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, and things like Platoon.

James Blatch: Apocalypse Now.

Mark Dawson: Full Metal Jacket. You could go on and on about that. But he would be one of the first to really look into the personal effects of a conflict like that. If you haven't read, if you think Rambo is a bulked-up Sylvester Stallone gurning for the camera. I like Sylvester Stallone, but anyway, it isn't like that.

If you haven't read the book, I would recommend you take a look at it. It's a really excellent book. We had the e-book, though. I read it on e-book and it's been terribly formatted. Really badly published.

James Blatch: Well, that was the one thing, and I should mention this, Karin Slaughter said something in her interview when we talked about indie, she said, "Well, you need to get your book edited." And the implication being that she thought a lot of indies don't use editors.

David Morrell was very, oh, independent publishing's dying after we spoke to him. I can understand your mind in traditional publishing is working brilliantly well for you or has worked well for you. You always feel things are going to change dramatically. It might not necessarily benefit you, so there might be, even if it's subconscious, a feeling of slight threat from it.

But we kind of brush that off a little bit, don't we? Because they don't have to think about it or know the details of it.

Mark Dawson: No. In both cases, I think. I don't really remember what Karin said, but with David's, that's not right. We can certainly say it isn't declining at all, in fact it's quite the opposite. That's fine. David is of the older

generation and as you say, may not have any reason to investigate indie in any kind of depth.

James Blatch: He's 75 and he's writing books. He could make more money, I think, if he sold them independently. He's got a good name.

Mark Dawson: It's not on his radar. That's fair enough. No problem with that at all.

James Blatch: Okay, our final interview is with a guy called Jim Grant. He's actually British, born in Coventry. Now lives in the United States. He writes under the pen name Lee Child. He has a character called Jack Reacher, I believe.

Mark Dawson: Never heard of him.

James Blatch: You've never heard of him. Jack Reacher, whose name comes from the fact that.

Mark Dawson: Lee Child is very, very tall. As you look at the video, you'll see. Much taller than James and obviously I'm shorter than James. There's a picture of the three of us where I come down to about his nipples.

He got the name for Reacher from going to stores with his wife and he said he was always asked by little old ladies if he could help them get cans down from the top shelf or whatever it was. Maybe it was something else. But anyway, his wife said, "You'd make a great reacher."

And that was the moment where he realized that Reacher was a pretty good name. And it is. Obviously, it's not just the name of the character that's made that so successful.

He writes fantastic books. Everybody told me before he came here that he was funny and cool. And he's funnier and a lot cooler than I thought. He is

just a really smart guy and the kind of guy you'd love to sit down and have a beer with.

James Blatch: Okay, well let's hear from Lee Child.

### **My first question is why do you write?**

Lee Child: Why? Because, the quick answer to that is to make a living. We've got to work.

The broader answer is, I love entertaining people. I just love the idea that something I can do will give people pleasure for however long it lasts. I used to work in television and I loved that idea. I just don't particularly care about the medium. I like books, but it's entertainment for me. As long as somebody's enjoying what I'm doing, then I'm happy.

James Blatch: That's the motivation. That's the kick you get out of it is knowing that that happens?

### **Do you get good feedback from your readers? You're so well-known now, do you get regular contact from readers?**

Lee Child: Yeah. I started out when people still wrote letters and I would get fan mail occasionally. Then email came along and it exploded.

So now we get, I don't know, 10 or 20,000 a week. The feedback is never quite in time, because books, there's a delay. You write a book and then there's a certain amount of delay before it comes out and then a delay again before people have read it. So by the time you get specific feedback you're already possibly one or two books further on.

It's hard to incorporate feedback, but I love to get it simply to see ... it really emphasizes one very central truth I think, which is that the reader creates the book just as much as the writer does. Therefore, if you've got a million

readers, essentially you've got a million different books and they're all reacting slightly differently.

In a way, I'm really happy to get the feedback, but there's not much you can do with it, because it's just one voice amongst many.

**James Blatch: That's the thing about art. Art is completed by the viewer.**

Lee Child: It definitely is, especially in the case of books. It's extremely pointed, that you make these strange black marks on white paper and then months or even years later somebody uses those to reconstruct the scene in their own head.

At that point, it's their mental energy that's being spent, not mine. It's their calories that are being burned, not mine. So definitely, yeah, they are creating the story.

James Blatch: You are a superstar in the thriller genre now. It's difficult to have a conversation about thriller writers without somebody referencing you now.

**Does writing books feel different to you than writing it before you were so well-known?**

Lee Child: It does, in a way, because as I said, I was looking to make a living and so it was a kind of financial contract at the very beginning.

Now it's an emotional contract between me and the reader. They want to have another Reacher book next year and I would hate to let them down. So I do it as well as I can and hope they like it.

James Blatch: But that's not the sole reason you do it for.

**Do you still enjoy the writing process or is there an added pressure that doesn't make it quite as enjoyable for you?**

Lee Child: There's an added pressure definitely, because of so many people's expectations, but you can dodge that really and write for yourself. That's really the only way to do it.

The actual writing process, yeah, I love it. It's a joy just to sit down and mechanically, there's a great sentence, you feel proud of it. I love the process.

The rest of it, the promotion and the traveling and all of that kind of thing, in itself that's horrible because it's such a bore now, traveling. But when you get to meet the readers, that's great, so it's worth it.

**James Blatch: You've spoken about your process in the past, I think you still do this thing where you start from the day of your redundancy from your job.**

Lee Child: Yeah, first of September I start every year, partly because you've got to have some structure in your year. If you put it off until you felt like it, you would probably never do it.

James Blatch: My final question is, there's a growing number of independent authors now.

**Do you have a view on the indie movement and the changes that are taking place in publishing?**

Lee Child: I was very excited about the self-publishing thing. It's a bit over ten years now that it's been around. I thought it was a tremendous coup really, a really democratizing stroke.

Really unique in artistic history if you think about it. Suddenly something was available to everybody, where before it had been highly selective. So it was quite inspiring.

But I'm kind of disappointed afterward because not much has happened. We haven't seen anybody really exploit the new freedoms. We haven't seen anybody change it up into a new form.

Technically speaking, online discovery is incredibly hard, so the people are writing books without any real prospect of getting them in front of the public, except, yeah sure, they're available online.

But how do you promote them? How do you bring them to people's attention? After 10 years, we really haven't solved that problem yet.

James Blatch: It's really interesting to hear. I really appreciate the fact that you've taken some time to chat with us on the podcast and thank you so much.

He was one of our first interviews actually. John and I came to register for the festival. It was quiet. There weren't very many people there. I think we were about the first to register.

And as we were just walking out of the hotel, this tall guy walked out towards the smoking area outside and we thought-

Mark Dawson: With Heather Graham.

James Blatch: With Heather Graham. Not that Heather Graham, no. We thought that's Lee Child and we stalked him and got photographed with him and set up the podcast interview, which he immediately said yes to.

The only slight downside is that as we were talking to him I could see that he was backing away because he had a panel to go to at that time.

Mark Dawson: He had a one-on-one. He was interviewing Meg Cabot, I think it was. He was basically the MC for that, so he had a definite deadline.

James Blatch: But we had a chat with him and got to hear a bit. I tried to ask him original-ish questions that I could think of that I think we, as authors, aspiring authors would like to hear from.

One of the more interesting ones for me is what's it like writing when you're a superstar? Do things change? He answered that very well. He was honest about writing for money as well in the early days.

And then his answer on independent publishing, which might cause a little bit of controversy here and there. He started off, he's living as a shop steward for Granada TV in the UK. He saw indie publishing as a revolution, as a movement, a democratizing movement is how he described it.

**He said he's been a bit disappointed with what's happened since. What's your take on that?**

Mark Dawson: What he's been disappointed with is that it hasn't innovated. I think he's expecting something more technologically interesting, which arguably hasn't happened.

George R.R. Martin was here for the fest and there are some fantastic enhanced versions of the Game of Thrones books on the Apple store. That's the exception rather than the rule.

So I think he may have been expecting that. But it is democratizing. Perhaps he doesn't know just how democratizing it is.

I was worried that he might be more dismissive of indie publishing, because I've heard that that might be his view before. I don't think that is his view.

I think he realizes that it's a big opening for people to get their stories out. Perhaps he grapples with the platforms themselves, the Amazon, maybe he thinks they haven't pushed the boundaries far enough yet.

But this is coming, things are changing all the time. Kindle in motion is anything that he's getting into. He'll be finding out about that soon.

James Blatch: Well, the bottom line here is that he's a supporter of writers. That's what he's doing. He doesn't need to be at ThrillerFest, right?

Mark Dawson: No, no.

James Blatch: But he's there and he's sharing and he's active. He was at a board meeting when we first arrived. He wants people to be successful as writers and I suppose ultimately he and we don't really care how books get out there.

Mark Dawson: No, and also I think, it's pretty obvious that he likes being around writers. Writers tend to be like that. When I started writing traditionally in '99, 2000, I felt that way too. That was a thing I loved about it, most always is to be able to hang out with writers. I met Zadie Smith before she was famous at a drinks party before she was published.

It is exciting to be invited into what, at least seemed to be to me almost like a secret forbidden world. That's changed a bit and he doesn't need to do that, like you say. But writers have the same kinds of concerns and worries, whether you're selling a zillion books like he is or if you're selling a couple million like me or people selling handfuls. We're all similar, we all have the same kinds of issues and foibles just the same as everybody else.

James Blatch: It's been really a treat for us to rub shoulders with some of the greats in writing. This week in ThrillerFest in New York. Next week, Romance Writers of America.

Mark, so you'll be doing the same kind of thing there with a different genre. We're back in the States in September, so if you didn't get a chance to come to New York and get a beer off us, which we'll share some pictures for the YouTube version of ... Somebody arrived at late time drunk.

Mark Dawson: Yes, we all did. I know.

James Blatch: And they got pins. But you can join us, we'll have another drink session down in St. Petersburg or St. Pete Beach in September.

But we have to say goodbye to Manhattan. This is the Upper West Side, which sounds very cool and it is very cool. We've got to say thank you again to Cameron and his girlfriend Melanie, who've hosted us today. Gave us a lovely brunch. Allowed us to watch the World Cup and then, rather rudely, we've taken over their house as a podcast TV set or video set, whatever you want to call it.

John, get in here. Get in on this show and say goodbye. Because John's been there. He's the third member of the team. You stepped on the cable.

Mark Dawson: Say goodbye John.

John: You shouldn't do that.

James Blatch: Oh, you've stepped on the cable again. He's the third member of the team. He's the reason we've got a lot of those superstars come and talk to us. So, thank you John. You had a good week?

John: It's been above average.

James Blatch: Good.

John: Let me get out of shot.

James Blatch: With that we're going to say goodbye. We'll be back to normal in the UK next weekend. Thank you very much. I hope you've enjoyed these episodes in New York and have a great next seven days writing and a great next seven days marketing and selling your books. Bye-bye.

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 videos 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.