

EPISODE 133: THE AUTHOR ACCELERATOR – WITH JENNIE NASH

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

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the Self Publishing Formula podcast with James and Mark on a Friday. I did notice a comment somewhere saying "Geeze, you guys talk about the weather a lot."

We do talk about the weather in England, don't we a lot?

Mark Dawson: We are English. That's kind of par for the course.

James Blatch: It's all we've got to talk about. We've had a long hot summer and it came to an end on Friday. No, yesterday.

Mark Dawson: We've had some rain here. It's not quite as hot today. But my lawn is pleased to have some rain.

James Blatch: We've had a properly hot summer. Flying into Heathrow over southern England, it's absolutely parched, everything's brown. Looks like southern Spain.

It's been 90 degrees to use old fashioned money. Almost every day, and we've been out in T-shirts. It's been glorious. But it's back to normal today. We are in a massive belt of rain at the moment, as the test match is suspended in London. And it's about 19 to use new money.

Mark Dawson: Yes. It's kind of normal weather for English summer. But I think it's supposed to be quite nice as we go through August again. So I'm hoping for more of the same.

James Blatch: Well I don't care.

Mark Dawson: Why's that?

James Blatch: Because I'm going on holiday on Wednesday.

Mark Dawson: Oh yes, that's right.

James Blatch: I've timed it perfectly. I'm going off just as it all gets bad. I should be in New York for the third time this year, then Florida, and then Texas to see my brother.

We're going to record three podcast episodes together. And just to trail ahead, this episode is about a program called Author Accelerator, which is very interesting, quite intriguing. Won't be for everyone but will be for some people. Might be for somebody very close to this podcast.

We're going to talk about author mindset with Adam Croft, about all important mental approach to writing.

And then we are going to have a really good episode, a special episode called the Indie Author Tool Kit. And this is going to be one of those episodes that we want to be a prominent one in the archive. New people who come and find us will go and dig this episode out, because it's going to be about the essential tools that you need to get your author career going. Or even if your author career is going, the essential tools you maybe don't realize that you need.

Let's start then with this episode, which is about a program called Author Accelerator. And it's being founded by a woman called Jennie Nash.

Jennie has a really good track record behind her of being a very good editor, a New York Times best selling editor, works in the traditional industry and she has become passionate about working closely with writers to get the best out of them and so that they understand what books are about.

Now there's a bit of a snobbery, we get this every now and again Mark. When someone writes an article saying, "Oh the terrible thing about self publishing is that terrible books get published." And we argue about that, and we say, "Well readers get to decide." That's the beauty of self publishing. They can decide .

If it's rubbish, they won't buy it. If it's good, they'll buy it.

I think Jennie's feeling is that writers can be much better than they are, but it doesn't necessarily come naturally. It's not innate. And I even know that more than anybody else. You don't sit there and somebody whispers into your ear. Some magic fairy tells you how cause and effect works in writing.

You have to go courses, you have to read books, you basically have to be self taught.

What Jennie's come up with is a hand holding, chapter-by-chapter service of an editor. You don't write your book and then hand it to the editor for the very first time.

Mark Dawson: That's true. And it's a bit of a generalization. But not everyone is like that. I have a fairy, he still whispers in my ear.

James Blatch: That's no way to talk about John Dyer.

Mark Dawson: I've never had any kind of training. I've not had any lessons. I haven't read any craft books. I just read a lot when I was younger. I think

that the main thing. And turns out I can write. I'm not special, it's just something that I'm quite good at.

James Blatch: You're a little bit special.

Mark Dawson: In some ways, yeah.

For some people, absolutely you can learn. I can improve my writing. I try all the time to improve. Every book I write is hopefully better than the last one. That's always what I'm aiming for.

And actually, for new writers who are just getting into it so as looking at someone not too far away. Yes, you James. You can certainly learn and improve, so this is interesting.

James Blatch: I've got some news to tell you about after the interview so stay tuned for that. It's a very interesting chat with Jennie.

Let's hear Jennie describe the process, what it is that's on offer and I'll point out now, before we go into the interview, there's a cost associated which will put some people off. It's not for everybody but it might be for some people. So let's hear from Jennie.

Jennie, welcome to the Self Publishing Formula podcast. Now I have to say when Lucy was proposing this interview, she said, "Jennie helps people who are struggling to write their books finish their book, James. So why don't you interview Jennie?"

I thought that was frankly a fairly barbed comment. But anyway, let's talk about this.

Let's talk about what you do. You get authors over the line, right?

Jennie Nash: I love that description of what I do. Yeah, my whole business is focused on helping writers write.

When you're finished writing, you're finished with me. I am a book coach. And that's a thing a lot of people have never heard of. I like to say that a book coach is like having a personal trainer for your writing life.

We help with project management, we help with the actual editorial, we help with the emotion of the thing, and the support of doing the work and we deploy that service while you write.

So while an editor would come in to a project when it's finished, to look at the whole, we're helping all the way through.

You mentioned that I help people who are stuck. That is a lot of times when people come to a book coach and find a book coach. It's a last gasp effort, or they have run into some roadblock or they have written something that's not getting the traction that they want in the marketplace and they're trying to figure out why.

Oftentimes I'm approached by agents who have projects with writers and they're trying to figure out why is this not selling, getting picked up by a publisher. I am kind of a book rescue figure. And that is in fact what I do.

James Blatch: The book rescuer, that's right. Fascinating. I'm really interested to talk to you about this for obvious reasons. Apart from that fact that it's a really interesting-

Jennie Nash: Are you stuck?

James Blatch: Well, let's talk about me in a little bit. I worry too much. I spend a lot of time talking about my writing on this podcast, it's really for everyone else who's listening. We will talk about me I promise, in a bit.

But let's talk about the process. I understand a developmental editor, who's interested in how the book's working or not working et cetera, and helping the writer with it. But I suppose after those conversations, they don't know or have anything to do with how often you're writing, and how often you're getting stuff done and whether you're moving towards the end. They just wait for you to then turn up with the next draft. Which in my case can be a long time between.

You're more hands on, right? You're not just looking at the story and saying these are the bits you need to be working on.

Jennie Nash: That's exactly right.

James Blatch: Explain to me how that works.

Jennie Nash: Typically the way that it works is that people work with me for a long period of time. So it might be six months, nine months, a year.

Many of my clients have been working with me for two or three years because they work with me on multiple books and they just work with me. I'm just a person that's part of their team.

If you're self publishing, you're obviously building a team of experts and everyone that you need to bring your product into the world. If you're seeking traditional publishing, more and more, you have to enter that game with a really polished, finished product.

It used to be that traditional publishers had the personnel and the bandwidth, and the money, and the capacity, to nurture a project and to nurture a whole career. And more and more that's not true. They are looking for finished, what I call camera ready work.

In both of those scenarios I'm part of the team that helps the writer get there.

Typically the way that it works is, we look at the whole project. We look at the writer's goals. We look at how fast they're trying to develop this particular piece of work.

If somebody comes to me at zero, which is the dream, we work on a whole project plan. Where you hammer out, what is this book? Who is it for? What's going to happen in it? What is the big picture? Why? All those fundamental things that you need to write a good book.

And then I would help that writer write forward. Typically we have about two deadlines a month is pretty common. It's a submission deadline and there are requirements that we come up with together for what that writer needs, depending on that writer's process and style. If somebody's writing forward really fast, they are going to just turn in pages to me, writing forward all the way through.

If they're the type of writer that likes to edit a little bit as they go, or stop and move forward a little bit as they go, they might turn in to me a fresh chapter, a raw chapter and then an edited chapter. So they're actually revising a chapter as they go.

In other words, you turn in to me chapter, one and two. And I edit them, and give you feedback on them and we look at that big picture goal, see where you are, where you're going. I turn that back to you with comments just like a developmental editor would.

And then you, in your writing time, work on those chapters. And you would turn in the next deadline, a revised chapter one. And let's say a new chapter three. So in that way, you're moving forward.

What I like to say is that somebody who works with a book coach ends up with a rough draft that's really more like a sixth or seventh draft, because they've gotten that feedback while they go.

The most heartbreaking thing in my business is seeing a writer who comes to me with a 300 page manuscript that has some fundamental flaw in chapter one or two. And they've spent two years, or three years, or five years, or 10 years writing this thing that you could look at in a second and see that there's a fundamental flaw.

They just didn't know it, didn't see it, didn't stop to think about it. Now you've got to fix it. So, that's why I said in a perfect world we start at zero.

This is a different scenario: You've started writing, you've got a whole plan, you've got a whole vision, and you get to say, chapter 15. And you were great up until chapter 15, and you know where it's going, but you just can't somehow get past chapter 15.

You just keep going back to chapter one. You keep revising and iterating on those chapters and something's not sitting right, and you're stuck for whatever reason and you can't move forward.

If somebody comes to me in that situation, it's actually the exact same process. We sit down, we evaluate. Okay, why are you stuck? What is that about? We analyze what that problem is. We try to figure it out. Almost 100% of the time, it's a problem back in chapter one or two. We go back and we fix that, and then move that. I think of it like a thread, we move that thread through to chapter 15, and usually that is enough to then get past that roadblock.

James Blatch: A couple of questions spring from that. One is that you say we a lot. Is this a team?

Jennie Nash: I do say we. It's interesting that I do that now. I have been a book coach on my own for about 10 years now. And I had a consulting practice, I still do, where I help writers one on one. And in my own

consulting practice I got to a place where I couldn't handle the demand that I had.

I was charging quite a lot of money and it was very frustrating for me. It was frustrating for the people who came to me. But you know, you can only help so many people. It's a very intensive hands on work.

So five years ago I started a company called Author Accelerator, which is a book coaching company. And I designed a company that uses my systems and strategies and philosophies to help writers at a more affordable level.

I have 32 book coaches working for me now. And they do this work with writers, and we're serving hundreds of writers now as that team. I still do hands on work myself, but I'm also the founder and chief creative officer of a company of book coaches.

James Blatch: What's your split between trad and indie?

Jennie Nash: That's a really good question. I would say it's probably 50/50. You know and what's interesting is we're 100% we're focused on the writing side. And we're one of the only companies that I know of in the entire publishing industry that is focused solely on the writing.

There's a lot of people that you can go to for help on producing your book once it's done. Obviously where you guys come from, marketing your book, getting your readers, connecting with your audience, making money at the business, all of the other pieces of publishing that a writer has to do, and an entrepreneurial writer needs to do today.

But we're 100% focused on first write a good book. That would be our mantra. First you have to write a good book. And you have to finish your book, right? You can't market a book that isn't finished.

So we're so focused on that that the reason I hesitated in answering on the split, between traditional and indie is that I sort of don't think about that. I don't care about that.

James Blatch: That's a great thing. You're agnostic about it and that's the way it should be. It's irrelevant.

It's a question I ask, because it just occurred to me to ask it, but it's a question that becomes increasingly irrelevant over time. And I think in 10 years time, we'll all be effectively indies. I think the big trades won't exist in the same way, that's my own view anyway. So that's good. That's a good thing that you're agnostic to that.

Let's go back to the process. This is fascinating area. And as somebody who's writing their first book and struggling, in all honesty, to get it finished and starting it again and doing quite a few of the things you just talked about and sort of constantly revising rather than moving forward. This particularly is of interest to me and I think a lot of people listening to the podcast who want to be writers like me rather than are at the moment. So I think this is a really interesting area.

Let's talk a bit about the development again. I know in your ideal world someone comes to you and says "I'm going to start writing a book. Can you help me?" And they haven't done anything yet.

But most people will come to you stuck, having got some stuff down. So you have to kind of reverse engineer some of the work I guess. Do you expect them to follow a particular process? Some people don't want to plot structure in advance. Other people do need to do that.

Do you require them to fit into some sort of vague outline of a process?

Jennie Nash: That's an excellent question and the answer is yes and no.

The yes piece is that if somebody is holding on very tightly to what they're doing already, whether that's their plot or their process, they're not going to be open to help of any kind, period. So when you say do I require some sort of adherence to something, I do because you have to be open to really some tough criticism and tough work.

It's usually tough and if somebody doesn't want that or if they're holding on, again, very tightly to whatever the thing is, I can't help them. Nobody can help them.

So on the one hand, yes, you have to be open to a certain process. On the other hand, the answer is no.

If you come to me and you're stuck, what I do, no matter who you are or how you're stuck ... And I have helped everyone from people like you who are first time writers trying to get it on the page the first time to multiple New York Times best selling writers. Everybody gets stuck.

I mean, that's just the reality of it. So I help extremely accomplished writers who get stuck. And whether it's you or them, whether they're stuck at chapter three or chapter 15 or chapter 27, the process of helping them is exactly the same.

We do have to enter into that process and what it is is stepping back and looking at the fundamental elements of the story. Story has fundamental elements to it.

You and I were just talking when we're recording this today about the, you would call it football, the World Cup. I would call it soccer. It's exactly the same as the mechanics of kicking a penalty shot, or shooting a free throw in basketball, or a golf swing.

If you're having trouble with one of those things in sports, you're going to go to a coach who's going to stand back, look at the mechanics of what you're doing, and say "Okay. There's something demonstrably wrong with the way you're positioning your hips." And they're going to see that and then they're going to help you fix that fundamental error.

That's largely what I'm doing. I'm not so concerned about plot or about a story grid or a certain kind of structure or way of writing. What I'm concerned about is all right, let's step back and look at those story fundamentals.

There are fundamental things to every narrative that make it work or not work and I think that part of the problem that I see is that nobody has ever been taught those. They're not things that we teach.

When you go to a writing workshop or conference or you read a book on writing or you go work with a famous author, oftentimes you're working on character development, how to write dialogue, how to write good scene, what I would call in many ways, that's the frosting. I mean, it's kind of a generous view of what the frosting is.

But the actual thing itself, you almost never see that taught, because it's not the fun stuff. It's not the fun stuff. When you sit and you dream about your book or you imagine your book you're usually seeing your character, you're seeing your scene, you're seeing this cool thing happen. You're trying to get all that right and this is a much deeper level.

No matter who it is or where they are in the process they come to me and I pull back and I do that thing that the athletic coach would do and look at those fundamentals and oftentimes there is something glaringly obviously wrong with them that we can fix and shore up and then figure out how to move forward.

Sometimes the thing that's wrong is what I call a fatal flaw and that's not with the character that's with the story itself. And a fatal flaw would be, this is just never going to work. There's a fundamental flaw in this that is never going to work.

It might be part of how that story has been conceived or a narrator point of view problem where the narrator can't be in the place they need to be at the crucial moment or things like that. So it's much deeper than a particular process, if that makes sense.

James Blatch: Yeah. I think it does.

An example might be that you need somebody to move away from the first-person to make the story work or something fundamental that affects the entire book.

I'm trying to think of an example of a fatal flaw. If somebody's written something in the first-person and you work out that they're never going to be in the right place to, perhaps is the answer to be third-person for that?

Jennie Nash: That might be something, but a fatal flaw ... I'm trying to think of a recent project that I looked at that had a fatal flaw that I could give you an example of. All right, so here's an example.

I worked with a writer, a multiple New York Times best selling writer, who was actually switching genres. A lot of times people come to me when they need support switching genres. She had a manuscript that was very bloated, very, very long, very convoluted, and it was her first, even though she was a very good writer, it was her first time in this particular genre.

In my mind it was a wreck. It was incomprehensible. She had so much going on, so many subplots, so many voices that had agency. So agency meaning a character who gets to speak, or have the narrator be coming

through their eyes. The first five chapters were five different speakers. They each had just all this stuff going on and all these subplots and layers. And it was impossible to read.

The thread of the main story was really great, and it was there. You could see it, you could feel it. And the narrative drive for it was there. But what we had to do was strip that down.

So it had nothing to do really with what happened in the story, or the plot, or the voice, or anything. It was just all too much. What we did was we pulled out some subplots and we surgically removed these subplots and it was a lot of work.

It was what I call heavy lifting, almost physical work. Because when you have a manuscript, it's a physical entity. There are a lot of words on a page. And they carry a lot of weight and they're locked together. And we had to unlock this thing, and extract this whole thing. And when we did that, it was just amazing.

All of a sudden this story was light. It happens to be a story with some humor to it. And it was actually, absolutely not funny before. And all of a sudden it was funny, it was light, it tripped along that narrative drive just pushed all the way through. It's fantastic.

So that would be a fatal flaw. It's usually something in how the writer has conceived of their story, if that makes sense.

James Blatch: Okay. Right from the beginning. I do understand that.

You mentioned the fact that you've got this team of people now working to make it affordable for people.

Tell us how much this service costs and a bit about the practicalities of how it works?

Jennie Nash: Author Accelerator is built on a core program offering that's a six month coaching package. The reason that we did it that way is that we used to have a package where you could dip in and out. You could come for a month of support and then go away and write. Or come for three months and go away and write.

We found that people didn't finish. And I did not want to offer a service that was not effective. So we changed our whole concept of what this is. And what it is, is you'll have to commit to six months.

What I always say is we hold your feet to the fire. Because what I have found is that accountability is so primary to the creative process. If you have all the time in the world and you have no accountability, no deadlines, no skin in the game, you're not going to finish. There's going to always be something in your life that comes up. Life is very busy, and very complicated. And to find time to write something, especially in this situation where you are.

Nobody's waiting for your book. Nobody's paying you to do this. Nobody really cares, to be perfectly honest, that you finish your book. And it's very easy for you to then, just not do it. Or to do the thing that's going to pay the bills.

It's a really strange thing to sit in a room by yourself and make up a story. If you think about it, normal people don't do that. And I'm sure you have friends who are normal people. And they're like "When are you going to finish your book?" And "What's happening with your book?" And "Are you really writing a book?" It's such a cliché to say I'm working on a novel.

It takes a really long time to write a novel. And it takes a lot of time to have something to show, and it's in that gap that we operate. So that accountability, the reason that it's six months is because that accountability is so key. And if you're paying money, you're going to meet your deadlines. That is just the cold hard fact that we have learned.

James Blatch: Skin in the game, as you were saying.

Jennie Nash: Skin in the game. I hate to say it, because it's kind of horrible. But they'll feel ashamed if they don't meet their deadline. They're embarrassed. They don't want to let their coach down. Someone is waiting for their work.

It's a six month program and it's \$450 a month for that six months. So it comes out to \$2,600. And that sounds like a lot of money, but if you think about what you spend going to a workshop, going to a conference, going to a writing class, buying books, buying video courses, you probably are already spending that money anyway.

This gives you that twice a month deadline, where someone's waiting for your work, and giving you feedback on your work. We commit to giving your feedback to you in 72 hours. So in publishing normally, if you're waiting for a reply from an editor, or an agent, or whomever-

James Blatch: Could be a long time, yeah.

Jennie Nash: Oh my gosh, it's forever.

James Blatch: You're often in a queue.

Jennie Nash: It's a horrible, horrible waiting process. So we commit to that 72 hour turn around time. And you're going to get detailed feedback on what's going on, and what that coach thinks you need to do.

And what I always say, is that we're a mirror. We hold a mirror up to what you're doing. And we might say, we see x happening, and you may then say, I see x too, but I like x and I'm going to keep x, and I'm going to do what I need to make x work. People are often afraid that-

James Blatch: It's not the script, it's a dialog with an expert.

Jennie Nash: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: People who are regular listeners to this podcast will know how much you're speaking to my position here. I'm pretty much at the point of saying, who do I make the check to?

I know for some people it's going to be very expensive. But for others, and I do include myself here. This is a service that's exactly what I need. So I told you I was going to talk about me in a little bit, so.

Jennie Nash: Well and it gets worse. I can tell you that it gets worse on the money front.

Let's say six months, you're very committed, you finish your draft. Now you have to revise it. So a lot of people come back for another six months to revise it.

And then we have a process where we help you if you want to pitch to traditional publishers, the whole agent pitch process. We have a track for that.

We're committed to helping you, as I said before, get all the way through to actually finishing the work.

James Blatch: So in six months, would you expect somebody ... I suppose it depends at what point they come in. You're expecting that to be first draft. But the way you describe the process, it's partly edited.

It's a developmentally edited first draft, right?

Jennie Nash: Yes, absolutely. And it's really amazing how much better that draft is with the guidance in the moment. And again it doesn't matter if

you're executing those edits while you go, or if you're saving them all for later.

The reason that I did this, the reason that I do this, the reason that I started this company, is that I've been in publishing for more than 30 years. My first job out of college was at Random House.

I worked for many years as a magazine writer at top New York magazines. I've been on that side. The much more publicity-oriented side of writing. I have published six books myself with big five publishers. I've had multiple agents for many, many years.

My own self, I have a speaking agent, I have taught at UCLA, University of California Los Angeles, a writing program, which is the largest adult education writing program in the country.

I started this company. I've been in this business a really, really, really long time. And I have experienced it from many different sides. And I believe that the very best way to learn how to write, and to write the best book that you can, is with one on one help. It's wildly inefficient. But it's the basis on which traditional publishing used to be built.

That golden age of publishing where a editor like Maxwell Perkins helping, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. That type of model was incredibly nurturing. And there's a gorgeous book that I would recommend to anybody. It's called Dear Genius. And it's the letters of an editor named Ursula Nordstrom. And she was a famous children's book editor. And I can't right now remember the publisher where she was. But she edited Maurice Sendak and Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Stewart ... Not Stewart Little.

James Blatch: But the author.

Jennie Nash: Why can't I think of the other name? Who wrote Charlotte's Web?

James Blatch: Yeah, I know. I've read both of them at some point in my life.

Jennie Nash: I'm like so embarrassed.

James Blatch: I always blank on interviews.

Jennie Nash: Ursula Nordstrom, these letters to her writers, they're so caring and nurturing. And it's about the writer's life and it's about their doubt, and it's about their process, and it's about their ideas, and it's about, you know their wife is sick, and their garden is dying. Like all the things that happen in a life. And she's helping with that, and nurturing with that. And you can read it, and you can feel it, and you think "Oh man, I want that."

I think that that model, although it was incredibly dismissive of a lot of writers. We live in a time right now where the world of writing is cracked wide open. Anybody can write and publish. And it's an amazing thing.

But what we lost is back in the day when those publishers had chose very few writers, those very few lucky writers, they got all of the attention, and all of the support, and all the nurturing. And I think that's the best way to learn how to write.

You can be sitting in a classroom, listening to a lecture. You can be sitting in a workshop, watching other people's work get ripped apart. In all the ways you can be in writing, the only way you really get better is for somebody to paying attention to your words and your story. It's not theoretical. It's your story.

I started this whole thing because I was frustrated that that didn't exist anymore. I had a taste of it, when I was edited. I had a three-book deal at Penguin, it was before it was Penguin Random House. And the most amazing editor, who cared about me, cared about my work, it was just on

the cusp of the seed change that we now see. It was a little bit that old school way. I had a taste of that.

I just see that it's not here anymore. And that's why I did this. Because I just think it's what writers need, and I have seen it work so many times that it's thrilling to be able to give that to writers.

James Blatch: Yeah. And it's funny isn't it? Nobody else works in the way that trad publishing now works. As you say, they're lazy because billions of people want to write. They just send their manuscripts time and time again.

So they can then take completed manuscripts and do some polishing on it. They don't have to work with the authors in the way that in the old days, where there were fewer people, I guess is what it is.

But wouldn't it be funny if they taught people to fly like that. So there's a jumbo jet, go off for six months and see how you get on. Then come back and show me your first draft of how you learned to fly.

I can't think of any other industry where you don't work side by side with somebody to train them in how to do it.

Jennie Nash: It's really true. We can all see what the result is. That traditional publishers don't take many risks anymore. It's either a celebrity writer, a writer who already has a massive platform, or a very, very, small percentage of the lucky few who get plucked out.

And even if you get plucked out, and you know the research and development at a traditional publisher as you've said, is a chaotic system. It's throwing spaghetti at the wall.

Oftentimes they purchase a book that they think might have promise. And they maybe throw a little marketing dollars at it. And by little I mean, they

give a \$5,000 advance to the author or a \$10,000 advance and a small marketing budget. And well, we'll see what happens.

Well nothing happens. What they're looking for are the books that are going to be big hits.

James Blatch: Like *The Girl on the Train*, *Da Vinci Code*. And every trad publisher ... And there's a new imprint started in London last year and I went to their new reception. And they almost exactly uttered those words, we're looking for the next *Girl on the Train*. Of course you are.

Jennie Nash: Right. That's exactly right. So the risk taking which used to be, let's look for a new writer. Let's look for a promising writer. Let's look for a wow, this is an interesting, quirky, different project. That's kind of gone as well.

A writer, where are they going to get that support to know what their vision is, and what they want to write and how they can achieve their vision from their book?

James Blatch: Yeah. So *E.B. White* by the way.

Jennie Nash: Gosh, how embarrassing.

James Blatch: I have to say it, because people will be shouting at the podcast there. Because they know the answer, or they haven't heard the answer. So *E.B. White*, *Charlotte's Web*.

Jennie Nash: These letters that Ursula Nordstrom writes, yeah it's to people and it's amazing.

James Blatch: There's nothing new under the sun, so you feel you're doing something, you're in this hole and you can't get on, and you're doubting yourself, and you think it's all rubbish, and it doesn't work. And then you

read letters from some great writers from the 1930s or '40s doing exactly the same. Of course.

So that's why the book Dear Genius would be a really good book for people to read. To realize that there's this form for this.

Jennie Nash: And to realize that the doubt ... I mean there's so many good books about creativity and doubt, and how to get past it, and what it is, and what to do with it. But it doesn't stop the fact that every writer feels it, and gets into it.

If you think about it, it's what we were talking about before. You raise your hand, and you say "I'm going to sit alone in a room for a few years and make this thing up in my head and spend all this time to get it on paper. And I'm not going to show anybody, and I'm not going to talk to anybody about it. And just kind of sort of pray that it's working and that there's going to be an audience for it. And then I'm going to try to get it to sell."

It's nuts. Who would do that? It's nuts.

I think that people who are called to write can't help it. I mean If you could help it you wouldn't do it. That's what I always say. If you could help it, you would choose some way else to spend your time. Because it doesn't make any sense. It is a crazy thing.

When I talk about laypeople, who are not in the writing business. If you talk to them about ... business men would say to me "How much money per hour do you think you made on the writing of that book?"

And that's the way a lot of the world thinks about time, and the use of time. And I would become this blubbering idiot because the numbers would be spinning in my head, and I would think, maybe like 10 cents an hour. And they think "Well why on earth would you do that?"

The reasons that we are called to this and the reasons that we do it. That's actually what I end up spending a lot of time talking to writers about. What I call the deep level why. And there's usually a reason A, that you're called to write, and B that you're called to this particular story.

One of the ways to get unstuck is to go back to that spark of the moment when this idea took hold in your head. Because there are so many ideas that are available today. And there's so much input. There's news headlines, there's other books you read, there's movies, there's people, there's moments out in the world. There's so much input into our brains.

And why this story? Why did this story stick?

I have read something about you and your story and your background and your family. And I see the jet behind you on the thing. And I know I'm turning attention to you, but it's just because it's easy, because we were talking.

There's something in your background, in your worldview, in your philosophy, in your idea about people, that is tied up in this story, that matters to you a lot. And I try to get people to break that down and to really think about why do you care about this story?

Especially if it's a high action thriller, or some sort of a very dramatic plot. It's easy to dismiss that question, and say well just because it's cool. There's like this cool thing and there's this cool thing that happens.

But that's not the answer that I'm looking for. The answer I'm looking for, is that story took hold of you. It didn't take hold of me. And there's a reason it took hold of you. And there's things that you know and there's things that I actually think you believe that you're trying to capture in this story.

Oftentimes when people get stuck, it's because they lose sight of that. So the whole thing about doubt, like can I do this? Am I good enough? Does

anybody care? Is this story any good? Those aren't actually the right questions.

The fundamental question is why do you care? What are you trying to say about the world through this book? And every book is trying to say something. Every single book is trying to say something.

The books that we read as children, the myths and the classic children's stories are very obvious. They're moral frameworks for how to live a human life. Adults read them to children to help teach them about people and the world and getting on in society and the things that they believe.

So we've got these moral frameworks in young people's literature that's so clear and it's also slightly clear in literature, like middle grade or young adult.

A lot of adults really like to read young adult literature because that why is really clear. It's oftentimes a protagonist searching for their identity, searching for how do you live in the world that is so actually fundamentally flawed and tragic? And how do you love flawed people? These are what these books are about. Even though it's a vampire thing.

James Blatch: Ready Player One's a good example of that, isn't it? It's a book that lots of adults liked.

Jennie Nash: Totally. And because it's grabbing us at that heart level that we don't get in day to day life. We do not get it. That's why we love our books.

You know that feeling, when you're deeply immersed in reading a book and you feel as if the writer knows you? Like you're looking over your shoulder.

James Blatch: Yeah, it's written to you.

Jennie Nash: Yeah, how do they see me? How do they know that's how I feel? That's why we love books.

So for you, I would stop and think, go back and think, what about this? What am I trying to say in this book? What am I trying to convey? What's my argument? If I'm on a soapbox, what am I up there talking about?

Because that's exactly what you're doing. And oftentimes you're stuck because you lose sight of that or you get fuzzy about that, or you start thinking about only the plot. How am I going to get my guy over there? How am I going to get this conflict to be amped up?

You start moving puppets around on a stage, whereas if you go back to that deep level why, it's usually embodied in your protagonist. Then you can have that protagonist know what they're about, why they're there, what they're trying to prove. And you can then see that thread in the story and figure out, okay he's trying to ... You know, I don't mean a message like, waving a flag and hitting the reader over the head. It's baked in to how they behave.

When I talked at the start of our interview about the fundamental elements of story, and that that's what I do with everyone if they come in stuck. That's what I'm talking about. We get down to that really fundamental, it's deeper than plot. It's why are you even doing this?

And every once in a while I do get a writer ... This actually just happened. I taught a class, and I had a writer whose answer to all of these questions was, "I actually don't care about the story. I decided I don't care. And I've already spent five years on it, and I hate it, and I was doing it for all these different reasons that I don't feel, that I don't like, that I don't believe. And I don't want to do it, and my decision is to walk away."

I think that that is a fantastic outcome. I really tried to support that writer in making that very brave decision. Because she was just throwing stuff at it. And there was no there, there. It's never going to work.

James Blatch: Wow. So sometimes that's the answer. Okay. Again where do I write my check to? No. We can talk. I want to talk a little bit more about price.

We're really eating up through the time, it's fantastic. It is an absorbing interview, listening to you talk about the process that so many of us think about so many hours of the day. To hear this sort of clarity that you're bringing.

Again going back to the price. For some, \$450 bucks a month is out of reach for a lot of people. And for others, they'll see it as an investment. And there'll be a few people in between.

We thought a little bit about doing the interview by the way, because Mark is very tuned in to some of the more predatory services on offer to authors. And he's very sensitive.

We've actually not covered a few companies and services because he feels that they are abusing it. But he looked at yours and I think this interview will completely convince him that this was the right thing to do. It's not necessarily the cheapest offer anyone's going to get help them with their writing.

And it includes the developmental editing as well. I think people have to factor that in. And in six months you can get a lot done. That's me summing up everything.

Jennie Nash: There are just two things I want to say in response to that. And I don't mean to just be selling my own thing. But I did just do a course on Creative Live, that's a six our course on story fundamentals that is \$129

and they usually have it for at least half price, because they often are running specials.

You can go to Creative Live, look up Jennie Nash. It's called Write Your Book. And that is everything, all of my teachings packaged in a six hour thing for a very small price. So I just say that to people who can't afford the other.

And then I just have to respond to the thing about the predatory services, because they make me want to cry. And they make me want to scream. I just urge people, when they're looking for help with their writing, to not fall into the trap of thinking that it's easy. If anybody is promising you super fast, if they're promising you success, a best seller, a this or that. If they're promising speed. Really if they're promising anything.

Don't believe it. Because if this were easy, we would all be best selling novelists. We would not have jobs. We would be making our money that way. It's not easy

I just really dislike those things as well. I see how hard the people work who embrace the fact that writing is hard. And embrace the inherent risk of it. That you could do all this work and not have something to show for it.

So I thank you for seeing that in the work that I do, because I stand in very firm opposition to those things. And look, I wake up every day and I think "Gee, I wish I'd come up with one of those slick systems that makes a ton of money off of writers." Because what I do is really hard to explain. It's really hard to sell. It's the most unsexy thing in the universe.

Like spend all this money and time doing this thing that might not work. That's a great sales offer. I just had to jump in and say those things. Now you have a question for me.

James Blatch: It's more a practical question. So the way that you talked about the process with the author, I understand obviously a lot of this is done by email.

Is there Skype? Are there actual live chats involved in this?

Jennie Nash: There is. The Author Accelerator and the Manuscript Accelerator program, our main program. You get a call, a 60 minute call a month.

So you get the two deadlines and back and forth on email with the comments that you're going to get. And then a 60 minute call with your coach.

The initial call is to set everything up. To set up the project, to understand the goals, to see where the writer comes in. And you work on the project plan according to your life. Because you might have a holiday, you might have a vacation, you might get sick, you might have some big work thing.

We work around that within that six month constraint. And this is all designed. The work that I do as a book coach, one on one, and I'm just going to say this so that, we're not beating around the bush about it. I charge \$2,500 a month to do that same work. As a very high priced, one on one coach, who gets excellent results. My clients land top agents. They get big book deals. They win indie awards. I have been doing this for a long time. I charge a lot of money.

What I do at the \$2,500 a month level, is much more intense. You get more access. I'm going to respond to your email instantly. For the most part, even on weekends and holidays. We're going to talk all the time. It's going to be a much more intensive process.

The Author Accelerator system is based on what I do and what I know to be successful, but we've put the constraints around it so that we can make it

affordable for people. But it's the same process and I hire all the coaches, I train them, they have to shadow a seasoned coach, they get oversight for several months and we have ongoing training as a group where we're always learning, always growing and always trying to serve writers better.

So it's not a marketplace where, oh just here's a bunch of people who could help you, you come choose. It's a process built on my philosophy and system.

James Blatch: Okay. And in terms of word count and production rate, this is something that's discussed at the beginning and expectations are set.

Do you have a kind of minimum, an idea of what you think authors should be doing?

Jennie Nash: Yes. We have a 20 page per deadline recommendation. So that would be 20 pages every other week. So that's 10 pages a week.

That comes from a lot of water under the bridge of working with writers. Maybe you can't actually write 10 pages a week. The whole thing about writing every day or ... Write the way you write.

Cheryl Strayed who wrote *Wild* famously says she doesn't write every day. She goes in spurts. She has ups and downs.

But if you've got that deadline and that accountability and you know I've got to get 20 pages in by x date, however you get it done, you get done.

I just think I've found in my work that anything less than that, people tend to be dragging their feet. You can't let too many weeks go by or days go by without producing something.

That's our recommendation. I have often worked with writers who were on a very strict deadline for a publisher. Once you get successful in publishing

then they want you to write faster. And that's true with self publishing as well.

If your audience is waiting for your book you've got to crank it out.

I have recently worked with several writers who have written extremely long manuscripts in a very short period of time and they've kicked it out based on those deadlines. So you can do that.

I have rarely seen somebody go a lot slower and do well. There's something that gets lost in the momentum.

James Blatch: Jennie we've been chatting for an hour. So my 60 minutes is up.

It's been absorbing. I think particularly for me because of where I am, but there's lots of people listening to this podcast are in a similar position and it's been helpful.

Regardless of whether people engage your or other professional services it's been incredibly useful to hear this talked about and the process talked about.

And ultimately I suppose to make it really affordable and cheap for people you might be able to find somebody else, for instance in our SPF community, a more experienced writer who's written a lot of books to help keep you accountable, who could create a sort of framework if they're not able to afford the sort of higher end services. So that accountability, which is a strangely missing thing in the world of writing, apart from I guess if you're, you know, you do have a trad publisher, but even then.

What was it Douglas Adams said? "I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they go by." They're not serious deadlines.

Jennie Nash: I do have a suggestion. If people can't afford this type of thing or it's not suited to them or what have you. Here's what I would suggest.

Find an accountability partner and don't have it be about what they think of your writing, because I think there's a really big danger in people who don't know how to analyze and teach narrative design giving comments on your narrative. I think it's a recipe for disaster and a lot of writing groups are based on that.

What I would do instead is have that person be accountable to you for those deadlines. And you're going to turn work in to them or say you've done it or whatever the mechanism is and you've got to have some sort of skin in the game where if you don't meet that deadline you have to buy them a drink or you have to ... whatever the thing is.

That piece is the most critical piece and I think people get mixed up in they have a mechanism for accountability but they mix it up with that feedback piece from somebody who's not qualified to give them feedback.

So I would say just to have the support accountability community. Get together with your writers' group. Talk about how hard it is. Talk about the doubt you feel. Talk about what you're doing in your story.

But don't actually spend the time on the pages. Spend the time on the process and on what it's like to be a writer and have that accountability. I think that's the best thing somebody can do who doesn't want to invest at this point, is get support for the work of it not the actual thing.

James Blatch: A little knowledge is a dangerous thing as they say.

Jennie Nash: It is.

James Blatch: Jennie, thank you so much indeed for joining us.

Jennie Nash: Thank you for having me.

James Blatch: We were just talking about, you're down near the ocean in LA but I think it's probably hotter in the UK today than it is LA. It's absolutely sweltering. But it's been a really absorbing interview for me and I hope for the listeners as well. So I want to say thank you very much that you've taken the time to talk to us.

Jennie Nash: Thank you for having me. It's been fun.

James Blatch: So there she is. First of all Jennie spoke lots of common sense about what writers need to get the job done. Keeping each other honest.

She's slightly circumspect about writers helping each other with structure and development because she thinks editing is a very particular job and it's like a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Taking advice from other writers isn't necessarily going to be good for you if they're not strong editors.

But having a buddy who sets deadlines for you is a really good thing and of course that appealed to me more than anything else, listening to Jennie, was having a process where you weren't going to basically put off writing because you're not sure structure wise all these sort of little demons in your head that stop you moving on with the book.

You would be in this process where you would be forced to work out those problems and get professional advice and get deadlines set and start producing work.

Guess what I did after this interview?

Mark Dawson: What did you do?

James Blatch: Well, obviously I contacted Jennie and I said "I am up for this. I am up for this process." And she's two and a half thousand dollars a month to work with Jennie one on one. She's expensive.

But as she explained the Author Accelerator process where she uses her team of editors, obviously freelance editors I guess across, mainly, America, that's a service that's \$450 a month as she explained.

I have dug into my own pocket and I've signed up for this. In fact, I said to her right at the beginning, because we have this podcast with lots of listeners and we're the most important podcast in publishing I think. I just thought that was there a danger that Jennie would say to me "Do you know, the publicity for me is great. I'm going to do you for free." So to speak. I'm going to let you do it for free.

Of course I didn't want that. I think she says this in the interview, you've got to have something in the game. What is that expression?

Mark Dawson: Skin. Skin in the game.

James Blatch: Skin in the game. So I did say to her right from the beginning "I'm paying for this service."

Now what Jennie's done actually is, because she knows a bit about my book, having listened to the podcast and she's quite intrigued by it. So she said that she wants to be a part of it at the beginning and then hand me off to her editors. I'll tell you where I am actually.

Jennie sent me the initial application for the process. And it is an application. So they test your motivation for writing.

Jennie's really keen on understanding why you have to tell this story and she thinks until you understand that it's going to be difficult for you to actually write it.

They also get you to do some writing. Write a couple of chapters. They need to know that you can write a scene for instance and that they're working with the right person.

So I got through that and she then sent me quite a lot more to do and gave me some feedback and notes on the stuff I'd done, which I've done again. I'm finding this bit difficult now because she's challenged a lot of the things.

I've been working with this story for so long now and suddenly she saying "Well, that's why that doesn't work. There's no cause and effect. This stuff sits there and it stops the book cold." So I'm having to kill a lot of babies and I've got my first call on Monday.

I don't know. When I told you the price of it, and I know you are very cautious about lots of people listen to this podcast and there is a lot of ways to throw money at people in self publishing and publishing, and it's very, very important that people spend their money wisely and get value for money. And this is expensive.

\$450 a month. It's like two and a half odd thousand dollars to do the six month program. Now I can afford it and I think it's an investment in the book and even if this book is not commercially successful for me it's a process I want to go through to learn how to write and move on to the next one and maybe devise a new series that will be more potentially successful. But it's not for everyone. I understand that.

Mark Dawson: That's one of things I am quite keen to set out is that lots of people listening are bootstrapping their books and that means that their money might be a bit tight for them in the end.

I don't want people to feel this is a magic bullet, because it won't be. And it's not necessary. But as I said, I've never done this. It's something I didn't feel I ever needed to do.

On the other hand, I can see the benefits of having someone, certainly for the accountability part, if you've got a deadline and there's a call, you will get that stuff done. Some people will struggle to do that.

Writing is the kind of thing you've lots of reasons you can put off the writing because you don't think it's good enough or you don't have time or whatever. Most of those are excuses.

So to have someone on the other end of a phone line basically holding your feet to the fire, I think, there's a value to that. There are other ways to do it.

You can get accountability buddies. We've talked about in our courses before, to pair people up so that they can hold each other accountable as they're going through the process.

So yes this is quite expensive. I will be interested to see how effective it is, what you think about it after six months time. We'll have another chat about it then and give an honest review. To use the phrase, we have no skin in the game. I have no skin in the game and if it doesn't work we will probably say that. We will say that.

James Blatch: Absolutely.

Mark Dawson: It's worth looking into. I think it's an interesting idea. It is expensive but it could be value for the money. So let's see what comes out over time.

James Blatch: It's a comprehensive process and service and I think it's coincidentally good for the podcast that I have signed up for it on a

personal level and I'm enthusiastic about it, because people are not going to be left in any doubt after the six months what I think about it. I'll probably blog along the way as well. As long as Jennie's happy for me to blog some of the systems and processes that you go through as part of it, but it's been good.

Mark Dawson: If only we had a blog. Oh, wait a minute.

James Blatch: Yes. Let's talk about our blog. It's time to blog.

Mark Dawson: We can yes. We are a bit of a sideways job. We are going to be blogging a bit more often, so we have appointed an editor, a kind of head of content, so we will be blogging more often on the SPF website.

We've got some focus to deliver on there. Other bits and bobs that will be a few changes coming down the line, over the next six months or so, that we're quite excited about.

James Blatch: We should say welcome to Tom shouldn't we. Tom Ashford is our new member of the SPF team. We had a lot of applications for this position.

Mark Dawson: Over 100. Which I reviewed myself.

James Blatch: And really annoyingly, really, really good. I mean, I read through loads of them and they were fantastic and frankly we could've chosen-

Mark Dawson: I could have picked 10.

James Blatch: Yeah, we could have picked 10 people.

Mark Dawson: I had three folders, yes, no, and maybe and there were 10 in the yes folder. I would have been very happy to have picked any one of them.

James Blatch: If you applied thank you very much indeed. And if you didn't get it, it's very likely not because you weren't good enough, but in the end you have to make a decision and we chose one person, so Tom's joined us. Welcome to team SPF, Tom.

Looking forward to that blog. I mean, the reason we're doing it, and it's worth mentioning this now, and I've just been editing the Pinterest for Authors course, which goes into Ads For Authors this week, and it's a reminder in that course because Pip Reed, for her nonfiction world is very keen on blogs and you hear things up and down about blogs but it's a very proven way of attracting traffic to go somewhere.

Mark Dawson: In nonfiction. I don't personally think it works very well for fiction, so I don't blog very much. I do a little bit, but not too much on my website.

For nonfiction I think there is a value to it and obviously there's a number of reasons why I think this is interesting. At a base level, it's good for SEO. So we will be even easier to find SPF.

People are searching on Google looking for self publishing, we'll start to rank more highly in those searches.

And also because it's another way to deliver content. We've got lots of good stuff that we'd like to pass on to the community and it's a good way to do that. And some people prefer reading than listening.

I put out a post in the community a week or so ago asking whether people read the transcript we put together for the podcast. And that costs us about \$5,000 a year to do that, so it isn't cheap.

And if it's not being used we would stop doing it, but to my surprise it was about 50/50. So of the people who responded to the poll, 50% said that they read it. So we'll keep doing it.

That's something that there's obviously a value to that. Not just for people who might not be able to listen because they're hard of hearing perhaps, but just some people prefer to read and they can read quicker than they can listen. So we'll keep doing that.

And the same thing goes, really, for blogging. This is another way for us to deliver valuable content. We've got loads of ideas for things that we're going to be covering on the blog and we're just in the process of building the template right now and I would imagine we will have our first articles in the next couple of weeks. Definitely worth keeping an eye on that.

James Blatch: Yes. And some guest blogs from me on Author Accelerator. So just to remind you, you can go to authoraccelerator.com to check out Jennie Nash's service and if you're intrigued by that and you think it's going to help you.

Next week we are going to announce the next book lab selection and will also welcome our newest patreon listeners. We'll do that next week, we were supposed to do that today, but I forgot to. I need to do it at the top of the podcast.

We'll do that at the beginning of Adam Croft's podcast next week and then we will talk about Author Mindset with Adam Croft, a man who knows how to get it done. And he has got it done hasn't he, over recent years.

Mark Dawson: He's done all right.

James Blatch: He's done all right. There's always a little bit of simpering competition between you and Crofty I think.

Mark Dawson: There's no competition.

James Blatch: Okay. And on that dismissive note, let's say goodbye. I hope the rain on my shed hasn't been too off putting. It is tipping it down here in the UK, but we will be back next week to talk about mindset. Have a good week writing and a great week selling your books. Bye-bye.

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