

EPISODE 140: KEEPING IT CLEAN – WITH ANNE-MARIE MEYER

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 with Mark and James.

You'll be delighted and relieved to know if you've watched this on YouTube for the last couple of weeks I have taken off my beautiful Cambridge United shirt just to wear a rubbish old T-shirt. I feel slightly disloyal, but that Cambridge United shirt is now being proudly worn in Atlanta, and Chattanooga, I think. Is it Chattanooga where Amy lives? Or have I made that up?

Mark Dawson: I think so, yeah.

James Blatch: As far as I can remember. Spreading the wise words, and at some point I shall wear an Atlanta MLS shirt here.

But enough of sport, because I can hear most people yawning at this stage. They want to know about books, and we're talking not just a genre here in this particular episode, but sub-genres, and some of the marketing considerations that you need to take into account when you're working in ... I was going to say niche areas, it is a niche area, but some niches are bigger than others, and this is quite a big one, so clean and wholesome, or ...

Mark Dawson: Wasn't that a song by The Smiths?

James Blatch: Very probably.

Mark Dawson: Amazed James didn't get that joke.

James Blatch: No, I'm not a Smiths guy. Do a Pink Floyd joke, I'll get it.

Mark Dawson: Some girls are bigger than others.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: There you go.

James Blatch: So we are talking clean and wholesome, sweet romance. The sort of books that you'll probably read when you're on the train to London. He meets her, they kiss.

From the interview with Anne-Marie Meyer, she says, I think the kiss is an important thing, and it comes towards the end of the book, and it's kind of the denouement of the book.

So it's that, it's about the relationship, and it is what it says it is, and this is what you're going to get out of this interview, is how this genre works, and how this can apply to other genres.

So it's very interesting, Amy has done absolutely fantastic over recent years, and in fact not that long at all, and considering, as she reveals in this interview, she has five children, I think under 12, which is a house full of children, right?

Mark Dawson: Oh my goodness. That's terrifying.

James Blatch: She has a really good situation at work, she's obviously done very well and applies herself efficiently to her work, so let's hear from Amy. Let's hear from the sweet romance princess, and then talk more about it when we get back.

James Blatch: Amy Meyer. We've just been discussing off air that you're Anne-Marie Meyer in your pen name, which is your non-deplume. So if people want to look up your books.

Welcome to the podcast, it's really exciting to have you on here, I think you're somewhere in Minnesota, did I read Minnesota?

Anne-Marie: Yes, I'm about 20 minutes south of the Twin Cities.

James Blatch: We were there earlier this year, great place to be, and we went to Prince's house, which is of course in Minneapolis.

Anne-Marie: I've never been there, but I know we're really big Prince people, because that's where we came from.

James Blatch: It's really worth a visit, absolutely a fascinating visit if you want to look into the mind of an unusual individual, and which writer doesn't want to look into the mind of an unusual individual?

Anne-Marie: This is very true.

James Blatch: Okay, look, Amy, we're going to talk about sweet romance, what a lovely subject the talk about, nice fluffy kittens, sweet romance, and you're going to educate me about the genre, the tropes, the things to get right, things that can go wrong when you're in this area.

Commercially, it's a big area. It's competitive, but it's a big area, and your readers are generally voracious readers, so that's a good thing, right, for selling books.

But before we do any of that, I want to know a bit more about Amy.

Tell me your background and how you got to where you are today.

Anne-Marie: A long time ago when I was a teenager, I'd written on a gold sheet that I wanted to write and publish a novel, so I am a mom of five kids, and they range from 11 to one, so I'm a very busy, busy mom.

James Blatch: That is busy.

Anne-Marie: And they're four boys, I have four boys and then my one year-old is a girl, so anyone who is mom of boys knows what I'm talking about.

James Blatch: Can I be rude and just say did you keep going until you got a girl?

Anne-Marie: I would say if my third or fourth had been a girl, I probably would have stopped, but I'm happy with my girl. My husband wants more, but I'm like, "Let's raise the ones we have right now, because ..." Then there's some days where he's like, "We're done, why do we have this many?"

James Blatch: Five's not enough for your husband, okay. Right, well five under 12 is busy. Okay, so you're busy.

Anne-Marie: I can write as much as I do because my husband does work from home. We own a business that he runs out of our basement, so that is huge help.

He goes to work for four hours then comes upstairs, and then we swap, I go write for four hours, and so that's been really helpful. I would not be able to be as prolific as I am having a husband that works all the time.

James Blatch: We're going to talk about quantity of writing, I know that's something that's important to you. So you had this childhood ambition, a bit like the young Mark Dawson, who also wanted to write stories when he was a school boy in shorts.

You developed it at some point, then, you started writing?

Anne-Marie: Right before I had my third child, I said, "Okay, I'm going to start this goal, I'm going to start this book." And of course, I decided to write the most complicated book you could think of, where I was going to throw all of the genres that I loved into this one book.

It was a time traveling, and it was set in the future, dystopian, crazy book, but I kind of figured, I worked on it for about four years, and that was kind of my schooling into how to write.

I had a friend who read it and she was like, "I don't really understand why they did this." And then I was like, "Okay, well stop reading, I'm going to go back and rewrite it."

I rewrote that one, and after I'd finished, I was like, "Wow, my main character is really flat." So I rewrote it again.

I wrote about 150,000 words before I decided to do a YA Cinderella retelling, but told in the modern times, and she has super powers. So I wrote that book, and I joined a lot of Facebook groups, beta reading groups. I'm the type of person that I want as much information as possible, and I will go out and I will find it, and I have no problem asking people questions, and so I will contact them.

I got onto a Facebook group, and I had put on there, "Hey guys, this person, this kid, read my book, and she said this about it." And I was reached out to by Victorine Lieske, she's a New York Times bestseller, she's also another sweet romance author, and she was like, "I am a self-published author."

And what I love about our group, because we also have a podcast that we call the Writing Gals, we share information and we share numbers, and I think numbers in the indie world is so important, because we're like, "Is anybody making money at this? Is it just me, am I the only one that's not? And if you are, how are you making money?"

We all want to say, "Oh, we just do it for the craft." But we want to make money, come on. I want to make money.

James Blatch: Yeah, we can be honest about it, you've got five kids to feed.

Anne-Marie: I know, right? And to put through college, and pay for braces.

And so she was like, "Hey, if you ever want to go indie ..." Because I was like, "No, I want an agent, I want an agent." She's like, "Well, if you want to go indie, let me know, and I'll send your book to my newsletter, and I will help you through this."

So I set a date for myself, if I don't get an agent interested, and I had some, some requested full, some requested partials, and if I didn't get to that date and I still hadn't gotten anybody, then I was going to self-publish.

I ended up self-publishing that book. It sort of did okay, and then it just kind of failed, it went down, and it just didn't hit the market that it needed to, and then at that time a group of my friends were like, "We're going to write a sweet, adult, billionaire romance story." And I was like, "Can I join your group? Can I do that too?"

But Victorine is a huge person in studying the market, and I had been watching a lot of Chris Fox videos, and Mark Dawson videos, and trying to figure out how do you find a group of people who will pay for your books, and how do you write a book so they know what they're getting?

I love my fairytale retelling, but it is a very complicated book, and you can't just look at the cover and title, and know, "Okay, if I read this book, this is what I'm going to get."

I've done tons of studying, and all of this how to write a good blurb, how to write a good title, how to have your cover photo on point, for the market expectation, and I think that's been the best for me.

I released my first billionaire book on the end of August last year, and I'm on point to be a six figure author at the end of October, because we do the 60 day Amazon lag, so if you count from November first of last year to October 31st, obviously which hasn't happened yet, but I am on point to be a six figure author, and it's all because I have worked hard to study the market in sweet romance, and to hit that genre right so that a reader who comes to me know, "I know exactly what I'm going to get."

James Blatch: Congratulations, that's a fantastic story, we're really pleased for you, and occasionally you find somebody who says, "Oh, I'm never going to write to market, it's so tawdry."

And they can go and listen to another podcast, because this is all about people like you, Amy, who know their market, who know that they want to do this for a living, they want to be paid for their writing, and you did it, and you did it actually quite quickly.

I sympathize with you about the four year book you write that teaches you how to write. I'm in that at the moment, and definitely learning that process, and then maybe the books, hopefully, in the future might not be the genre I'm on now, same as you.

But, it's a process. Maybe slightly painful process you go through at the beginning. But you obviously has that ability to take on the information, the stuff you'd learned about how to write a book and how not to write it, combined with your commercial acumen. So well done, that's great.

Anne-Marie: Thank you. I love it.

James Blatch: And you can cut your husband down, he can do another hour in the shed, or wherever he works, in the office, five hours.

How many books have you done then, since you turned to sweet romance?

Anne-Marie: Okay, let me think. I have a whole billionaire series, it's five of them, and then I switched to a fake marriage trope, and I currently have four of those.

And then recently I decided to switch over to do some YA contemporary romance, and I have two of those, and I'm releasing one next week, and then a novella, so however many that is. How many's that?

James Blatch: That's knocking on 15, or something, isn't it? Did I count that right?

Anne-Marie: Yeah, and then I have a collection, my billionaire's put into a box set, so that one actually makes me pretty decent money on a regular basis, my box set. So I think I have 12 is what it is.

James Blatch: Okay, so prolific. We'll talk about that, and we'll talk about process in a moment, and story ideas, and so on.

I think you better describe to me, I mean I have an idea, sweet romance is the other end of the spectrum from kind of erotic romance, so it's going to be cuddly, not sexually explicit, for want of a better expression, but there's other aspects to this trope that I won't be aware of.

When you mentioned fake marriage, I genuinely haven't heard of that. Mark's a bit more in tune with some of the genres than I am, but I haven't heard of that before.

Anne-Marie: If you ever get K-lytics, which an awesome program to get, they break down clean and wholesome, it's actually a brand new, only two years old category in Amazon.

What happened was, when the 50 Shades of Grey stories came out, all these authors were like, "Okay, wow, that's making money, I'm going to jump on that bandwagon."

And so there became a vacuum in Amazon, because sweet romance is basically kisses, and that's it. Or if anything happens, the door shuts, it's PG 13 or less. And so there became a vacuum, and a lot of people started turning to Amish and mail order bride romances, Christian romances type things, and Amazon noticed this, and so they started a clean and wholesome category.

Now the only part that's hard about clean and wholesome categories, there's only one category, that's it. There's no sub-categories on there. So

you could be clean and wholesome Regency, you could be clean and wholesome mail order bride, clean and wholesome contemporary, but there's no other categories underneath it.

We're hoping Amazon realizes that this has now become a hot genre, and a group of people are looking for it, that they'll break it down into more sub-categories.

But when Amazon realized that, all the authors went over there to write underneath the 50 Shades of Grey. If you watch K-lytics, it's like here's 50 Shades of Grey, since then it's been trending down, but clean and wholesome has actually started, because they just started two years ago, it's continuing to trend up.

I think it's because you can hit a wider range of people who are willing to read sweet romance, and will cross over to more erotica ... Or, excuse me, that will read erotica, but will cross over to sweet romance, but not the other way around. Those people who only want to read sweet romance won't go and read erotica.

So, that's kind of what sweet romance is. There is also clean. So clean is also no swearing, or very little swearing, violence, no grotesque violence in your book. So it's pretty much what you would give your 13 years old daughter to read, that is what I write.

James Blatch: So sweet romance could have some profanity, and some allusions to violence, perhaps not obviously graphic descriptions, but it could have some of that in it, it's just the sex is not there?

Anne-Marie: Right, right, and it has to be closed doors, or they're starting to kiss, and then the camera pans away.

James Blatch: The light goes off, yeah.

In the old days they used to show a train going into a tunnel, didn't they, as the next scene to cut to?

Anne-Marie: Yeah, it's actually really hard to figure out.

The biggest plight I have among a lot of people, and this is one of the reasons why I really had a hard time reading before I knew all of this about Amazon categories, is nobody knows where to find romance books that don't have it.

There's all these times you're reading a book, and I believe there are readers for everybody, so don't think I'm trying to bash spicy romance at all. If you have a market and people will read it, then write in it. That's not something I write, and not something I'm comfortable writing, or reading, and I could never find books that I knew I could read from cover to cover and there wasn't going to be anything that I'd have to be like, "And, I'm going to shut the book and put it away, because that's not what I want to read."

James Blatch: I was going to ask about that, this is not just a very commercially orientated decision, there's a bit of you in this decision as well.

This is a genre that you are personally comfortable with and you like the idea of these books being available to read, as well as write?

Anne-Marie: It's something I would read, and that's always been my major thing, is I want to write something I would read, and I'm comfortable with reading.

I think it's such an underserved market, because a lot of people just don't know how to find you. And I recently did a poll when I was like, "Okay, I'm going to kind of shift genres a little, or age groups, and I'm going to write YA instead of some adult." And I wanted to know from my newsletter, would you read YA?

Basically I found out I have anywhere from 16 year-old readers, to over 90 year-old readers. And it was mostly the 70 and older that were like, "Well, I have a really hard time associating myself with them in that age." But

literally everybody else was like, "Of course, I love what you write, I will read anything you write," or, "I love YA, I have no problem with that."

So, I think that kind of taught me that I have a much bigger age range of people to please.

And I just found out, my sister told me, my 11 year-old niece just read one of my billionaire books and loved it, so I think you just have a bigger market of people that you can reach once you reach them. It's hard to find them because I think a lot of times you go to Amazon, they're going to be like, "Well, that's going to have steamy stuff in it, and I can't read that. How do I find sweet romance amongst all this other romance?"

James Blatch: I think there probably is a general expectation when you see a romantic book cover that there's probably going to be some sex in there, I don't know if that's just me, but I would assume ...

This is something we talked about off air that we were going to talk about in the interview, and it does interest me, and it's commercially very important.

How you signal to your market through, I guess the marketing aspects of the book, what it is?

Anne-Marie: I think the biggest one is your cover, and who you have on your cover.

Spicy romances normally have the shirtless guy, or they have the couple in compromising positions, laying down on each other, their facial expressions, too, if it's not so much just smiles, but kind of ... I don't know, I don't really want to make that face on YouTube.

James Blatch: Simmering.

Anne-Marie: Right, right, so it's hinting at what's going to be happening. And that's actually a great marketing tool for people who write spicy

romance, but then the people who are out there looking for it know, "I know what I'm going to get."

A problem is, though, if you put something that's more compromising on your cover but you're sweet romance, you will find reviewers who get upset. They're like, "Well, it wasn't like what I normally read," or, "I was really wanting the sex," or, "I want this."

People will review negatively if your book is not where it's supposed to be in terms of the cover.

So all of my covers, the men, my billionaires especially, are all in suits, and the girls are all dressed, and then if they're together they're clothed. Unless it's a beach scene, you could get away with having a beach scene that's sweet as well.

There's the cover aspect of it, but there's also the title and subtitles that you can put in, because a lot of people will search clean romances, or sweet romances. My series title is just A Clean Billionaire Romance. So that way people can find it and know, Oh, the title is A Clean Billionaire Romance. I think there's a banner on my cover that says A Clean Billionaire Romance.

So they know, okay, this is what I'm going to get. Cover and title are huge.

And then in your blurb as well because I know Amazon pulls words from your blurb. At the end, a lot of people will say, this is a clean romance, or this is a sweet romance. I don't really ever do that. I've never put it in my blurb. I think my cover and having it in my title is enough for me.

James Blatch: That's interesting, because just trying to work out when this is going to go out. I think probably at the point this is going out, the next week is our next book lab with Gretchen SP, who's a paranormal romance writer. She has done exactly what you've suggested. It says on the cover of her book, A Paranormal Romance Book, part of her series.

Then in the blurb, again, what you were talking about, Bryan Cohen who rewrote her blurb put some language in there that didn't say they had sex in this book but made it clear through the blurb, through a good description of the narrative that that stuff's in there because that's important.

As you say, it's important to signal the contents of the book so as not to get those negative reviews from people who didn't get the good stuff, or were shocked and had to close the book as you say.

Anne-Marie: Exactly.

James Blatch: Commercially important in every possible way.

Anne-Marie: I think that spicy romances, they do showcase it. As long as none of your blurb talks about it. I'm thinking of back to when I was searching YA books, the ones that had sex in it, talked about it in the blurb.

A lot of YA is told first person, the blurb is done through first person. They bring it up, which is helpful for us to who are writing sweet ones? Because if it doesn't say it, then most the time people assume you don't.

My goal is always been, I want my cover to be on point. I want my titles to be on point. And I want to establish myself as an author that I don't have like somebody who's like, "Oh, yeah, I've read an Anne-Marie book. I know she's clean. I don't have to be told it's clean. I already know it."

My goal has always been beyond point. If you have to explain things to a reader, you're going to lose them. If you have everything else lined up, I've never really had anybody complain on mine that it wasn't a spicy romance.

James Blatch: Yeah, so there's no misleading elements to your cover and so on.

In terms of the series you do, you have already alluded to the fact you drift between some of these sub genres in Sweet Romance, and I'm getting the feeling, quite a lot.

Anne-Marie: One of our big things that we talk about on our Writing Gals, podcast and just something we believe, is showcasing tropes. A lot of people are like, well, trope is a cliché. Why would I do a cliché?

Well, no, trope isn't a cliché. It's like, if you were to think about the last movie you watched, right? Think about the one you watched. And I was to say, "Tell me about that movie." You would pick out the tropes from that movie to explain to me about it.

Because then I can think back to all the ones that I've seen and go, "Oh, it was the best friends to lovers one? Yes, I love that. I'm going to go buy that book or watch that movie or buy that book, because I know that's something I enjoy and as a trope that I love."

So, we find tropes to write in. If you notice, I did a whole series just on billionaires because billionaires is a hot trope. It's a hot trope in spicy romances and is a hot trope in sweet romances.

Honestly, if you go to Clean and Wholesome, ever since we started our podcast, there's a lot more people writing billionaire romances that are sweet. It's just a huge trope, because people know I love the story about a guy who has a ton of money, he can spend the ton of money. And most the time it has to be a guy. If you vary from that trope, people aren't too happy with you. So, it's always the rich guy with the poor girl sort of story.

But if you write that people know, oh, I like billionaire romances. I'll get that. Once I wrote those five, I was like, "Well, I don't want to be only known as a billionaire romance writer. So, I'm going to switch and change up my trope. And every book inside of that series is now going to be based on a fake marriage or a fake engagement where they're on their way to getting married."

It's actually helpful because it tells me what to write.

I'm like, "Okay, I have five books. So, I'm going to write one is marrying a cowboy, the other one's marrying an athlete." So, I try to start picking on marrying a billionaire and marrying a prince was the last one I put out. I'm working on marrying a spy right now.

There's two tropes because spies and billionaire's a trope, cowboys a trope, and an athlete is a trope. I try to showcase my trope in my title, so that you know, okay, I love those two tropes and they sound exciting, so I'm going to read them.

I don't want any guesswork at all for my readers. I want it to be like, look at it, look at the cover, there's a girl in a wedding dress. I love that I'm going to read it.

James Blatch: Just explain more, fake marriages.

Anne-Marie: It's really hard to write in modern day times. Because back in mail order bride or regency, they got married ... It's a marriage of convenience. It benefits you, it benefits me, but there's no feelings there.

James Blatch: How is that a romance trope?

Anne-Marie: Because they fall in love.

James Blatch: Got you.

Anne-Marie: Because they're forced.

James Blatch: Okay.

Anne-Marie: Fake marriages are amazing because the adherence is awesome, because they have to be together because they're going to fake that they're married.

Right now, my *Marrying A Spy*, she has a dad who's gotten into some trouble with the law. And so the spy is like, "We're going to fake a marriage so we can snuff out your dad to get him here sort of thing." Then it's through that fake marriage that they fall in love.

James Blatch: Or you can have them maybe a bit spicy and narky with each other and eventually work out that they don't hate each other after all. I can see that happening.

Anne-Marie: My favorite trope is, and I'm used to lovers. That's one of my favorite tropes because I just love it when you can get them going back and forth and it's like there's subtext in there talking and they're just arguing.

James Blatch: What was the Bruce Willis ... Or is just during my age. It's probably long before your time. Anyway, I'll think of it. But there was a fantastic Bruce Willis comedy drama with the actress who was in tears. Anyway, I'm rambling like an old man.

Anne-Marie: But see, right there, you're an example of a trope. I just tell the trope to you, and you pulled back on what you remember and what you love.

So, if I was to say, "Hey, if you love that, go check out *Finding Love With A Billionaire*, because it's an enemy, it's a lovers trope." You'd be more up to because you know exactly what you're getting into.

But on the other hand, it can be bad because if you pretend that the trope's there or if it's not a strong trope, people will get upset.

If you say, they're faking their relationship, but then the relationship is fake. So, this is what I did, and ended Chapter Two, then I get people ... I had a reviewer who said, "I really was hoping that the fake relationship would go through the whole story, and it didn't." So, you've got to be careful when you're playing. When you do a trope, do it all the way through.

James Blatch: It's quite restrictive in plot and writing terms. You say you're cautious about turning things on their head, but a lot of writers want to do that.

Do you ever feel a little bit suffocated?

Anne-Marie: Well, and I think anybody, any book, even the book you're writing right now, maybe not necessarily romance trope, but there is a trope in your book. What you could do is take your book that you've written and figure out well, what trope's am I using?

Because it's all the story line, all of the stories you've been told your life have been percolating in your brain. So, when you go to write something, you're going to write something that you like.

There's still even in a fantasy or sci-fi, there are tropes that you're writing that are familiar. What I think people should do, and what I've done is I extract those tropes, I keep the story as a whole, but I extract the trope so that when I showcase it, they know, okay, this is the trope that runs through the entire story. So, they know right away what they're getting.

James Blatch: Okay, good. That's really a good explanation for me of the genre and sub genres and tropes, and the writing to market, which is a central part of your commercial endeavor as a writer is to keep an eye on that market and make sure that you keep within it.

That's really good advice. In fact, we do speak to people who struggle, and they very often self-identify very early on. I can't really place my books into an easy genre.

That's a pretty tough moment for a writer who may have had this passion in this rather bizarre area of life all their life to realize they need to put that aside to write something to market.

Anne-Marie: Right. And that's been studying, especially as indie authors, because you could write and title a book whatever you want, and if you

have the backing of traditional publishers behind you to push that marketing.

My goal is always been, I want to write, but I want to spend as little on ads as possible. I want something that can be picked up by Amazon and that Amazon is pushing for me, and that's my goal. So, that's what went to market. It sounds constraining. But it's really not.

When I sit down to write, I'll get an idea, "Okay, I need to write this." Then I'll go to the tropes and I'll say, "Okay, well, I can put that trope in and that's great. And I can put that trope ..."

You're really just building the conflict of your story. And then from there you breathe life into your characters, into their dialogue and into situations and you make them super embarrassing. You get to do all that fun stuff.

But it takes a lot of that guesswork out of your story, which I love. Because sometimes I start writing and I'm like, there's not enough conflict. But if I start out with some tropes, and then no, okay, well, this is the reason why they don't want to fall in love, or this is the reason she's a jilted bride, that's another trope. That's why she's not going to just glom on to the main male character, that's super helpful for me.

James Blatch: That's great. I can see that working straight too. I'm thinking about my own writing with the main genre of thriller within that. It is sometimes quite difficult.

I'm working with editors at the moment to find those moments of conflict. You've given a couple of examples of enemies to lovers, et cetera. There you go. It's given to you. So, you've got to have that conflict.

Anne-Marie: Because you know what's pulling them apart, as well as what can bring them together as well. Which like fake marriage, you got your adhesion, you really don't know you're to do very much beyond that.

James Blatch: It's Green Card, isn't it? Again, my brain's working of the guy who wants the green card and the marriage of convenience and of course inevitably say yes. It's nothing new under the sun. Every story has been told.

Anne-Marie: Yeah.

James Blatch: Good. I want to talk to you about writing process as well, because you are prolific, Amy there's no question about that. In a 12 month span you produced all these series and books.

How'd you go about your writing?

Anne-Marie: I didn't start out as fast as I am. But when you continue writing in the same genre, you learn the beats that are required.

So, you'll start writing and you're like, okay, and now this is the moment where something needs to pull them apart. And then you keep going and this is where I'm going to have my almost kiss.

Then for sweet romance authors, the epitome of everything is the kiss. Which is nice because there's always that sexual tension that I think gets diminished when you have a spicy book. Because once that happens, then you're like, okay, well, where do you go from here?

So, it didn't happen as fast as it does now, because I just write similar stories and the same beats happen. That's pretty much the more you write, the easier it becomes, and the faster you'll become.

James Blatch: Do you plot these out in advance, or are you a pantsier?

Anne-Marie: I'm a pantsier, but I plot my tropes out in advance. And that's the pretty much the best thing I can do.

I do write down things like: this character has this color hair, and this color eyes, so it just stays consistent.

Sometimes I'll write down big bullet points, but I'm a discovery writer. So, I write and then I'll be like, well then whatever I just put down for my plot is just out the window now. I'm not going to do that anymore.

I sometimes find it I'm too constrained if I try to outline. I just sit down and just let the story happen. I have a sense of when I'm like, okay, I'm getting bored writing this. So, obviously, I need to add something in it. Because if I'm bored writing then someone is going to be bored reading it.

James Blatch: How long are your writing sessions?

Anne-Marie: I sit down and I go for 5000 words a day. That takes me about two and a half hours. I joined a lot of writing sprints, I'm a very competitive person. So, I joined writing sprints groups on Facebook because I like to write really faster than a lot of people there so it keeps me motivated to keep going.

I did have someone who told me this, that they write down 500, 10 times on a piece of paper, and every time they hit that 500 words, then they cross it out. It's very satisfying to do.

I think we get too much into our heads. It's easier if you just say, I'm going to sit down and I'm going to write.

There's been times where I sat down, I'm like, "This is crap, nobody's going to read this. This is horrible. Why am I doing this?" But then when I step away from it, and I come back the next day. I'm like, "Oh, wow, I wrote that? That's actually not that bad."

I think it's just pushing past your insecurities. I think anybody has the capacity to write faster if they can just free their mind and say, it doesn't have to be perfect when I write it.

James Blatch: Isn't it great what the internet's given us? All these writing sprints and competitive little moments, they're proud Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, they had to write to each other and say, we should do

a writing sprint on May 2nd. Then also they would have to count the words with a pen and a little bit of paper.

Anne-Marie: Yes.

James Blatch: Whereas now, you can do let's do 1000 words, 5000 words, whatever. I've done a couple myself recently and they're great.

Do you write in Scrivener or Word or how do you do that?

Anne-Marie: I write in Scrivener. I love being able to move things around. I probably don't utilize Scrivener as much as I could. But I just like it the way I do.

I write chapter to chapter. I find it hard for me to jump ahead, and then come back and right. I pretty much write from beginning until end.

I would say that the more money you make, the more motivated you become. It's amazing how you're like, "I really want to get another book out because my book sales are slipping down, I got to get moving on this book."

But for me, my YA books just spill out of me. I can write them in like a week, because I just love the stories so much. They're very similar. You're talking, we're writing high school kids in a high school. Your setting is very similar from book to book.

James Blatch: How many words are your books?

Anne-Marie: 50000 words.

James Blatch: Okay, so quite short for novels. That's also part of the genre.

Anne-Marie: Yes. When I write it's straight romance. That's the only really plot going on in this story. If I was to add a lot of other subplots, like my YA fantasy ones, word 75000 words because I had so much more going on.

If you're trying to stretch your romance, it's almost to the point of annoyance, I think to some readers because you're like, "Well, they should just get together already, or I knew this. Or you're just being a repetitive in your stories." If you're just writing straight romance, no other subplots, 50000 words is pretty much, I think your maximum. 50000 to 57000 is where I write, where does it end? But I think if you try to drag it on, you would just ... I know I would be annoyed.

Can you imagine you're watching a movie that's a romance and you're like, "Oh my gosh, okay. Get on with this. I'm done bored. I know that he wants her but can have her and she's depressed." All those things, you're like, "I'm done. Just get together, and all that sort of thing.

Especially my books, that's how it comes.

James Blatch: You can't have that kiss on the first page.

Anne-Marie: No.

James Blatch: Okay, so let's talk about marketing then. Obviously, you've cracked this side of it.

How did you made this decision to indie publish? How did you learn the system?

Anne-Marie: Well, I think of you hit your genre and your tropes and your cover.

My biggest marketing tool would be probably newsletter swaps, which are huge, especially when you're trying to establish yourself as a sweet romance author.

For us, our also boughts are super important. They'll be authors who will write sweet romance and they're like, "I don't know what's going on. All of a sudden my also boughts are morphing into ones with shirtless guys. What do I do guys? This is not where I want to be."

I think newsletter swaps for me has been huge. Finding other indie authors to swap newsletters with has been really essential in my wheelhouse, especially with launching books.

But to keep my books high and ranked to keep that visibility, AMS ads and Facebook ads. I talk about those and as scary as Facebook ads are, I think they're my favorite because you get that immediate feedback.

With Amazon you're just like, put it up and if it works it does, and if it doesn't it doesn't. I'm setting my budget at \$30 and they're spending pennies.

But Facebook, on the other hand, will show your ad, and it can be good and bad because all of a sudden you're like I think I spent \$100 in a night one time and I woke up the next morning and this is when I really wasn't making money and I had to go to my husband. I was like, "I spent \$100 that I don't know what happened, and it was like a blink of the eye."

Because I set my cost per click or what I was willing to pay at 60 cents. And man, then Facebook spends your money pretty fast.

James Blatch: They'll spend your money really quick. Whether the advert's working good or bad, they'll spend the money.

Anne-Marie: I call them up and I was like, "What happened in there?" They're like, "Well you set your ..." Then I was like, "Well you're right. It's my fault. So, I can't get mad at you because I was not the smart person."

James Blatch: Mark always says, start small, start to scale up slowly just to reiterate that to people. It's good advice.

You did a lot of this research on your own. I know you have bought our course and you've presumably learnt on other people who are in the sector.

But you've done a lot of this donkey work yourself.

Anne-Marie: I would say if you're going to look for a course and this is me, I was not paid to tell you Mark Dawson's course is amazing, because he does all that guesswork for you.

I started out and I was like, "I'm going to learn this myself." So I did actually listen and watch a lot of Mark Dawson's YouTube videos that he's so graciously just gives freely.

Joining Facebook groups as well and learning from those people who are experts at reading books. And then a lot of it was just figuring out myself.

The hard part about sweet romance and Facebook ads is there are not a lot of traditionally published sweet romance authors. And so it's hard to find your audience on Facebook because those aren't people you can target.

So if you're a starting out author, and you don't have a huge newsletter that you can use as a look alike, it's really different to find an audience that is receptive to your books.

So I tried to go more the actions that people like. But I think sweet romance has like 6,000 likes on Facebook. So it's not even a big category to really market to. But I thought about like a lot of religious people like certain types of books so I've marketed to them and also just like, if you like love stories or if you like ... I don't know I just kind of picked a bunch of just actions that they would enjoy and that seems to be a sweet spot. I do pretty well with my cost per click with them.

But we would love to see more sweet romance you know, traditionally published authors so we can market to them.

James Blatch: You say there's not a huge presence on Facebook and difficult to find the successful authors and yet it's a billion dollar in the Indie industry. No question about it.

Sweet romance turns over number ... we've spoken to many, many five figure a month sweet romance, clean romance authors in this sector.

Anne-Marie: Yeah.

James Blatch: How crazy was it all these years in the traditional industry? What were they, just snobbish about this thing? Didn't want to publish them? This audience hasn't been created by the Indie market, it's just being served by them.

Anne-Marie: If you think about how big Hallmark is, and that, if you think I want a clean, sweet romance story, it's Hallmark that you're talking about.

And actually, Hallmark has now moved into the e-book category where it used to be just movies. Now, you can actually write e-books for Hallmark and you can submit to them to have them published.

But I think, if you think of Harlequin, they're huge, huge romance giant and they set the stage for what's going to be published. And it is sad because there are readers who want to don't want to read spicy romance and why aren't you serving them?

I'm hoping that with the traditionally published people seeing how well Indies are doing they're going to start picking up on that.

Because I believe a rising tide raises all ships. So if the traditional publisher is getting into this and not writing all those other things that we will actually be boosted up as well.

James Blatch: Would you take a trad deal now?

Anne-Marie: Yeah. No, it depends. Actually, I just want my books put into movies, but who doesn't?

Netflix has been really big on putting out some YA romances right now. So I'm hoping that they see me. I actually have a friend who's been reached out to by a publishing company or a producing company. That's only like the gate and then there's all these paths that you have to cross and hurdles you have to get over but like that's for example, I think one of the reasons

why YA books have been doing so well because Netflix is feeding people with these YA romances and what do they do? I want to go read more YA romance books.

So really, if you kind of see like, well, if I help out that person then that's taking money away from me when actuality it's not that way at all.

Me and my husband go to a movie every week. That's what we do for our date night. I've got five kids, I need a break. And I don't want to go out and walk or talk or work. I just want to sit and not be touched or bothered.

And so to think like, this is the last movie I'm ever going to watch, that's not true. Which is why movies are continually put out every week because people go see it. We want to be entertained. We want a moment away from our life.

If we're supporting people and getting more people converted over to being a reader, then it's only going to help us in the long run.

I think that if I could get a movie producer, like a production company, then I would probably find an agent and then I would like to see what they could do.

But I've watched Hugh Howey and he's like, "I turned down seven figure author deal, because I'm like, no, wait a minute. It's not your name that's being put on my book. It's my name is being put on your book." And I'm starting to feel that way.

But it's hard because you're like, you tell people, "Oh, I'm a self published author." And they're like, "Oh, yeah, okay. You couldn't make it as a traditional author?"

I'm like, "Oh, No, no, no. I made 20 some thousand dollars last month. You don't understand. Traditionally published people don't make this much in an advance. So this is actually better." But it's hard because that stigma is on you as an Indie author.

James Blatch: It's changing. Without question.

Anne-Marie: It is.

James Blatch: Perhaps not as fast as we'd like. Well, I'm sure there's a Hollywood mogul or two listening to this podcast.

Anne-Marie: I'll keep my fingers crossed. Check out my books, they're great.

James Blatch: Netflix, listen up. We know a few people who've been contacted, particularly production companies targeting Netflix, who are certainly spending on productions at the moment. And I hope that continues.

We've rattled through the time. We're up to 40 minutes and I want to say thank you Amy. I think we've covered all the main areas we said we were going to talk about.

We talked about how to make sure that your cover and blurb et cetera, clearly signal what's in there, how to write to market, how to do marketing. We sort of touched on that a little bit.

But I think it's been absorbing, listening to somebody who's got a lot of this right, and is enjoying reaping the benefits of it.

Anne-Marie: If I could put a little plug for our podcast, but it's called The Writing Gals, we're not as big as you. But if you want to learn more about sweet romance from authors willing to give you information, join us on Facebook or YouTube.

And we're not as fancy we're very, like low tech Google Hangouts on YouTube. But we love to talk about romance and what we're doing and really wanting to get the word of sweet romance out there, so people can not only start writing in it, but knowing that there are authors that are willing to give you what you want to read.

James Blatch: Sounds great Amy. Where do people go The Writing Gals?

Anne-Marie: We have a YouTube channel which is called The Writing Gals. And then we have a Facebook page, our paid Facebook group that's growing every day called The Writing Gals as well.

It's just four of us sweet romance authors that are there that just kind of goof off and talk. Our tagline is Four Sweet Romance Authors Staying Up Late because our podcast goes every Thursday night at 10:00 o'clock central time. So we're pretty loopy towards the end. And kind of goofy because it's like 11:00 o'clock and we're all tired.

James Blatch: So, Thursday night is obviously not date nights. Thursday Night is podcast night. I'm getting in to the calendar. Good look

Moonlighting, by the way was the name of the TV series from 1,000 years ago that I remember I had Bruce Willis and I think Kathleen Turner [ed note: Cybill Shepherd] and people watched it every week because of the sexual tension between the two. Apparently they didn't get on, but it was unbelievably simmering in this kind of detective agency.

Anne-Marie: The new movie that Netflix just put out The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society.

James Blatch: Oh yeah.

Anne-Marie: They're not touching like none at all and when they do touch, you're like, "Oh my gosh." It's amazing that you can still create that tension without having it go all the way.

James Blatch: Well Moonlighting I think I remember was on at tea time. It was nearly evening. Thinks so, yeah. And it was definitely in the PG area, so brilliant.

Amy thank you so much indeed. You've got, well it's the middle of the afternoon. I got something to say about it. At some point it can five children in the house and I guess you need to do some work before then.

Anne-Marie: I do.

James Blatch: Okay. There you go.

We were having a quick chat about this off air about how big the genre is. And one thing I think is clear is that although we can both name some fairly big well-known publishers of clean and wholesome, sweet romance books.

You quoted Mills & Boon, famous British house, and I think it's Harlequin, or we're arguing about Harlequin or Hallmark in the states who do something similar.

Traditional publishing, a lot of the big houses have been a little bit snobby about this and it's been, definitely been an area that's had life breathed into it, thanks to the Indie revolution and a lot of people are making good money in this sector.

Mark Dawson: It's been a pretty big niche and it's I don't think it's ever really gone away, it's the kind of stuff that my mum reads. There's a lot of readers out there. They tend to be fairly avid readers who get through them really quickly.

It's a big lucrative area and Indies have moved into it in the same way that they've moved into every single area. Lots of potential.

James Blatch: Now this area of, Amy and I were talking about it, of making clear in your blurb and your marketing what it is you're getting in your book to make sure that you don't end up as she did on ... people get bad reviews because they're expecting it to be clean and there's a sex scene and in all vice versa and they thought this is a romance racy romance, and it turns out to be very clean, they're equity disappointed.

If you don't manage that expectation with your marketing you can end up falling foul of these reviews.

How does that work in your genre then Mark to broaden this out a little bit because you and I know a lot about the tone and impact of violence because we used to work as film examiners in the UK.

And we know straight away that if you put a certain level of visceral violence in the film, it changes its tone and that can confound expectations if you put it into a James Bond film like Casino Royale is a good example when that happened.

Do you write like that? Do you not write a visceral violence scene because you want it to be a kind of James Bond thing or do you deliver, do you make conscious decisions about the level of violence you deliver?

Mark Dawson: I don't do gore very much and it's not really because I couldn't write that way but I just don't enjoy writing that way.

Chris Carter is a pretty good example of the loss of writers either who just pile on the gore make it very gruesome which is not really ... I wouldn't read that, I don't think I probably wouldn't want to write it.

But for the Milton books, they're quite like the Casino Royale level Bond. So they're fairly visceral. The Beatrix Rose books tend to be a bit more action packed and a bit more kind of Jason Bourne, but Milton tends to be more realistic. It's more character based.

If he gets shot. It's not something that he shrugs off in the next scene. He's going to be with him for the rest of the book. And then one of the books he gets shot about midway through the book and there's no spoilers there. But by the end of it, he is basically almost out on his feet.

I try and make it realistic. I've never had readers come to me and complain about the violence. Weirdly occasionally I'll get people complaining there's cursing.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: But they've got no problem with violence. That's something that we've seen, we saw a lot when we were looking at films.

People would complain about, or we would have to be conscious of sex but not so much violence because people tended to be more upset by sex and more immune to violence which if you think about is ass about face.

James Blatch: Yeah. Good expression but yes it's always been weird but that's very well known particularly in western countries that, yeah you can have a far higher level of violence than you can sex in a film before it goes up the categories or in genders complaints and people.

Mark Dawson: If you look at the films that we saw in America, the MPAA, going completely off topic but they would be much more conservative about sex, less concerned about violence.

We would have been complete opposite we'd be much less concerned about sex but more concerned about violence, which is probably, from my perspective, we would have that the right way around. Others may disagree with me on that but that's certainly we saw.

You see an all media. It's certainly something that you see in books less as I say with regards to violence, I've never had a complaint about my books being too violent.

But I have had people complaining about the uses of F bombs. Especially when people email me, I really enjoy replying to those emails because I will rather them F dash dash dash, I am going to spell it out maybe even emboldened and putting in caps because frankly they can-

James Blatch: Do put the F-word as many times as possible explaining why it was in the book.

Mark Dawson: I try to, yeah. In a very polite way. I quite like the conflation of English blindness and literally spelling out the offending article.

James Blatch: Foul and abusive language.

Mark Dawson: It gives me a small amount of pleasure, so I'll keep doing.

James Blatch: Yes, I like that, good.

I want to say congratulations for Amy because she's from a standing start as really understood and got into the genre and you can tell from the way she was explaining the use of the plot points to me, the way the books flow that she thoroughly understand how audience and delivers time and time again, almost in her sleep now, she can write these books.

And that is a very good commercial operation. And she's unashamedly open about that. She was in the interview that she chose this genre because it was going to make money. And she's got five kids at home. She needs it too as well and she's been successful at it.

I love these celebratory type interviews with people who've nailed this and I shouldn't say nailed this because that obviously would go out of clean and wholesome, but she's got it right. Should we say.

Mark Dawson: Would you consider her story had an HEA?

James Blatch: I don't know what that means.

Mark Dawson: Listeners he's looking confused. Well, there's lots and lots, I didn't notice until recently. There are tons of acronyms in romance and HEA is a happy ever after.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: Her books will be acquired by genre groups that have a happy ever after.

James Blatch: Yeah, and the kiss and the kiss was very important. The build up to it and the kiss. And you can't put the kiss on page 10 as she was saying. It's got to be towards the end of the book. It's all about getting to that kiss.

Right. So thank you, Amy, for coming on to the podcast was great to have her on and I hope it was useful not just for people who write in that genre but thinking about A) writing to market and B) when you're in a genre making sure that you signal that genre clearly to your potential audience to A find your audience get visibility sell books but also make sure that you don't end up confounding expectations of readers.

That was like my little Jerry's final word wasn't it, little summing up, I feel quite pleased with that.

Mark Dawson: Jerry Springer. Yep, that's right.

James Blatch: Dates me doesn't it that one? Good thank you very much indeed for listening, for watching this week. That's it.

We're going to come back next week, we'll probably have a shout out to our new Patreon guests next week and we are working towards the end of the year, it's a busy time for us coming up in November. Probably going to open up Ads for Authors we think in November. Is that right? Yes, I think November.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: I'm going to be heading off to 20 books in Vegas to talk about live video and how it works best for authors. So I might see there, but we will always be here on a Friday you can count on it like the kiss at the end of an Amy my book. It's always going to be there. Thank you for watching. Thank you for listening, we will speak to you next Friday. Bye bye.

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