

EPISODE 142: THE THREE MILLION BOOK WOMAN – WITH LJ ROSS

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 James Blatch and Mark Dawson on another Friday.

This Friday, we have a celebrity-like interview, because somebody who is a well-known name, is big, and has sold, I think she totted up roughly three million books since a standing start in 2015.

Mark Dawson: We all have standing starts.

James Blatch: Well, no, because somebody could have been-

Mark Dawson: ... came out of the gate and hit number one with her first book.

James Blatch: Yeah, she could have been famous before. She could have had a track career behind her, but she wrote her first book, decided to write a book. It's quite annoying actually when I say it out loud.

Mark Dawson: It is.

James Blatch: I should have said to Louise, that's so annoying you did that.

She's a very lovely person and brilliant. So we've got LJ Ross in a moment.

Before then though we're going to hint at something that's been going on in the background on the Self-Publishing Formula Podcast, which I won't be saying very much longer.

Mark Dawson: No, we're not, we're rebranding.

So we've done, what? Nearly 150 of these, and yeah, we've decided it's time to shake it up a little bit, so we had a little think and we looked for what names we might be able to get, and we were quite surprised that one in particular which is like blindingly obvious hadn't been ... The website hadn't been taken and there is no podcast.

We don't want to say what it is yet, but it couldn't be more ideal. We snapped that. As we record this, we're in the process of doing some snazzy new intrographics, we're actually commissioning someone to do that for us.

James and John went up to London on Friday to meet with a celebrity voiceover artist, which was quite entertaining. So we might as well say who that is; it's Huey Morgan from the Fun Lovin' Criminals.

Now, I know from we talked to a few people in the States when we went to NINC, that won't mean a lot to everybody in the States. It's one of these weird situations where he is very much an America, he's from Brooklyn I'm guessing, or somewhere in New York.

James Blatch: He was wearing a Houston Astros cap when we saw him, but I'm not sure whether that means he was from Houston.

Mark Dawson: Well I wear a Miami Dolphins cap, but it doesn't mean I'm from Miami.

James Blatch: No, no, it's true.

Mark Dawson: No, yeah, he's reasonably well known over here. Fun Lovin' Criminals had a song called Scooby Snacks I think it was called. I'm thinking

this was 20 years ago, maybe 25 years ago. Yeah, wouldn't be longer than that.

Quite big over here, but I don't think they're that big in the States. I was trying to think actually of analog for that, so the reverse. The one I came up with was Bush.

So there's a band called Bush.

James Blatch: I know Kate Bush and George Bush. I don't know Bush.

Mark Dawson: There's a band called Bush, with Gavin Rossdale is the lead singer, he was married to Gwen Stefani, and he's from the north of England, it's an English band. They're very big in the States, or were very big, and not big at all over here. One of those weird situations. I think Huey is, I may be speaking slightly out of turn, but I think it's similar.

James Blatch: That's interesting. All my English friends were going, "Oh my god, you're in the studio with Huey." Assumed that we were being debauched.

Fun Lovin' Criminals was not just a clever name for the band, he is somebody who had a rough start to his life and did break the law, and probably did end up in jail, I'll have to read his Wikipedia page to know for sure.

Mark Dawson: Bit like you.

James Blatch: Bit like me. Singing was the way out of it and he's done a lot since then, although that was their big hit. The band had a few albums, he's done a few solo albums.

He's actually a keen writer, he's got a fiction book in his head, he wants to get that down.

Mark Dawson: If only there was a course he could do.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: If we pay him some money, we could've offered him our services. Anyway.

James Blatch: We'll keep in touch with Huey, he's a lovely guy actually and from my point of view, because it's a technical process in getting the voice down, and you always worry slightly when somebody's a bit of a name that as soon as you say, "Could you try that again?" That they're going to go, "Well, what was wrong with it?"

But he was absolutely, "You guys are in charge, whatever you want." We changed his voice just slightly. We chose him because he's got quite a punchy ... I mean 80% probably of our listeners we think are in the United States. Somewhere between 70 and 80, it varies a little bit.

The US is a big market for us. It's the biggest single country for us. To have an American voice at the beginning also I think tunes into where the majority, the biggest turnover of indie authors is. And it's fun, because it's kind of got that little bit of energy at the beginning, which we want.

James Blatch: We're going to reveal all of this shortly. So we're in the process at the moment of commissioning some of the bits and pieces that go around it, and at some point, probably November I'm going to guess.

We're going to keep the same sequence number, I think.

Mark Dawson: Oh yeah.

James Blatch: So the back catalog is there. In a slightly pompous way, and with me and my journalist hat on, I look back at the 150 odd episodes we've done and I think there is a piece of history being laid down for generations of a really exciting period of time. It's a snapshot.

All these interviews we do will give historians in the future, should they want to chart the transition in publishing, our podcast is as good as anybody else's to track all those changes. We're making history, Mark.

Mark Dawson: That is very pretentious. No, of course, and absolutely true.

James Blatch: Churchill said, "Journalism is the first draft of history."

Mark Dawson: That's even more pretentious. We will put all of these podcasts in a time capsule and bury it under your shed.

James Blatch: Send it to space.

Mark Dawson: Aliens will excavate the time capsule and go, "Who the hell were these two?"

James Blatch: They'll be astonished at the insight that we're giving the world. Okay, shall we talk about LJ Ross?

Mark Dawson: Yes, why not?

I've known Louise for a little while now, so we've done lots of Amazon stuff together. Just this year I did London Book Fair with Louise on a panel, we spoke together at the Amazon Academy in Wales a couple months ago, and we've done lots of things.

We've been to Ulfrot House, done an event there. So I've got to know her and James, her husband, quite well over the years.

Louise is a phenomenon, there's no other way to put it. We had dinner together, because we were at the Amazon Storyteller Awards last week, and we had dinner together with, also with Joseph Alexander and our respective partners afterwards.

Her husband actually told me how many copies of a pre-order that she's got going at the moment that they've done. I nearly fell off my chair. I mean

I'm doing pretty well, so I should hit a million dollars turnover this year. I'm not going to suggest, I'm not even going to guess at what Louise is on.

I think most of her audience is skewed heavily towards the UK, but she, the numbers of pre-orders were ridiculous. Fact it's better than what I can do with the last Milton book. So she's an absolute phenomenon. Good luck to her, she's really lovely.

They're both really smart and lovely people, so couldn't happen to nicer people.

James Blatch: You'll hear in the interview that she lives in Northumberland, a very beautiful part of Northern England, and that's where she sets her books around and about, so the geography of the area plays a big part in that. All of these things add up to why her audience is loyal to her.

We've said it before and we'll say it again, that niche, if you show me the niches, I'll show you the riches. Niche works. Online, so you don't have to try and think, "I've got to appeal to everybody." Actually just writing something from the heart that's specific to you.

Mark Dawson: I don't know. She doesn't write in niches. I know kind of location is one thing.

James Blatch: That's a part of it.

Mark Dawson: I mean Peter James writes about Brighton and sold 15 million copies. Louise has sold three million copies.

James Blatch: I suppose what I mean is being specific is good.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Well she writes, it's a very specific geographical area but the genre she writes in is very big, one of the biggest in the UK.

I've never been to Northumberland, but that wouldn't prevent me from trying one of her books out. It's very interesting. I mean so much so that I'm thinking about starting ... I have been thinking for a while about starting a

new series set in Salisbury with a private detective. No one has done Salisbury apart from Vladimir.

James Blatch: Yes, he's done Salisbury.

Mark Dawson: He's done Salisbury. I'm quite into it, I think it could be quite interesting. There's lots of history here, you've got a cathedral, Stonehenge, Wiltshire's an interesting place. I think it could be quite a fun place for me to write about. That's really looking at what Louise has done and thinking, "I wouldn't mind giving that a go as well."

James Blatch: What, detective? Like private detective?

Mark Dawson: Private investigator, yeah.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Like it. A sort of Salisbury noir.

Mark Dawson: Something like that, yeah.

James Blatch: Yeah, good. You like your noir, don't you?

Okay, well look, it's time for us to hear from Louise having spoken about her. We caught up with her in the hotel this week, or as it stands last week, in London. Let's hear from Louise, and Mark and I will be back off the back of the interview.

James Blatch: LJ Ross.

L.J. Ross: Hello.

James Blatch: Louise Ross. I must ask you about the choice of name at some point, remind me.

L.J. Ross: Okay.

James Blatch: J. K. Rowling, Joanna. J. R. Blatch, James, ah yes, big decisions to make. Right, welcome to the podcast.

L.J. Ross: Hello, thank you for having me.

James Blatch: We've wanted to get you on actually for quite a long time and I've seen you at LBF a couple of times, I know you've been busy bee.

L.J. Ross: I move like a shadow.

James Blatch: Also, you live 200 miles north.

L.J. Ross: That too.

James Blatch: In the United Kingdom. We've tracked you down to an opulent hotel in Central London. This actually looks, on the video, it looks like your house.

L.J. Ross: Oh well, I'm a bit away, I'll sell a few more books before that.

James Blatch: You've sold a lot of books, and that's one of the reasons that you're a bit of an indie superstar.

L.J. Ross: Wow, thank you.

James Blatch: You're described, I think, as the queen of Kindle somewhere.

L.J. Ross: Goodness, that's quite a hefty title. But, thank you.

James Blatch: You've written some brilliantly absorbing books and a great series, and we want to hear all about it. I want to talk a bit about how you got into it, and then we'll talk a bit about process and marketing and so on if you're happy with that.

L.J. Ross: Sure, sure.

James Blatch: Let's start with where it all came from, because I think relatively late for you for writing?

L.J. Ross: Yes, I had a first career; I was a barrister in London. So I did that for over 10 years and I worked in the regulatory field. So healthcare, then financial services.

I used to work for the FSA as was, and then ended up in private equity before deciding maybe it was time for a change. Because also I mean at that time I don't think ... It was several factors, but I don't think it would've been compatible with the kind of family life that I wanted to have for myself. I mean it works for some, we're all individuals.

For me, I wanted to try and pursue something a bit more creative. Although at that point I wasn't entirely sure what that would be, because I think it's true to say that a lot of people might have a dream to do something, but how often do we actually allow ourselves to pursue a dream, because it seems so frivolous, doesn't it? When you have bills to pay and all the rest of it.

James Blatch: Well a lot of people say, "I'd love to write a novel."

L.J. Ross: Exactly. It's just finding that moment in time that works for you. For some people, it's, they can work part-time and write part-time, or they can just find snatched hours at the end of a day.

For me I kind of took the nuclear option and decided, look, I definitely know that I want to do something different and I resigned my position. I decided, look, take six months, maybe do a bit of travel, have a look into what you really want to be for this next stage in your life.

Because I'd enjoyed the first part and everything that came with it, but I think I was ready for another challenge. I'd always been a great reader, I read for years, and I used to read on the tube on the way home. That was my escape. Some people really love films and television, but for me, it was definitely reading and always had been.

But it's a big leap to think, "Well I enjoy reading, could I then be a writer?" Is quite a leap in your own mind isn't it?

James Blatch: It is. So you're a reader but you hadn't had thoughts from a child onwards of wanting to write or...?

L.J. Ross: Well I didn't think so, but my mum would argue yes, because she produced these forgotten little books that I'd made that were all illustrated with animals colored in and everything, and stapled together down the spine.

Obviously as a child maybe I had this notion, but I'd forgotten about it over the intervening years. But she produced it as evidence so I thought, "Well okay." There must have been something there.

No, I definitely, I hadn't really thought of myself as a writer at all, or the possibility of it until I gave myself that opportunity and time.

James Blatch: Well that's really interesting. I'm fascinated to know how you went about becoming a writer from scratch, because normally this is quite an evolutionary process for people.

Mark will tell you, he started writing stories as a 10-year-old boy. By the time he sat down and tried to do it commercially, there was quite a lot already there.

Did you sit down fairly clinically and think, "Right, how do I become a writer?"

L.J. Ross: Well, yes and no.

I had done a lot of writing in my day job. It was just a very different type of writing. I'd been formally trained in drafting for example, so knew all about the kind of formal processes of writing.

But turning your mind to then writing accessible fiction, from writing something as dry as legal advice, is a very different skill. So that was kind of a transitionary process.

What actually happened was I'd left my old job and I decided I'd take this time. A couple of things happened actually.

The first was that we found out we were expecting our son, which was wonderful news, but it also gave me this opportunity on a kind of styled maternity leave to really focus on something different.

I'd thought to myself, in Northumberland there's this beautiful island, Holy Island, also known as Lindisfarne for those who don't know it. It's a tidal causeway island, it's cut off by the sea twice a day, and it's beautiful and very atmospheric.

I'd always thought to myself, wouldn't it be great to set this closed community, murder mystery, who done it style on an island like that? But never really imagined that it would be me to write it. It was definitely a leap.

But I thought, you know what? I don't want to grow old and gray and have regrets, I must try. If it's a total washout, well no one will have lost anything but me. So I thought I'll just give it a go.

That's what I did, just sat down and really just let it flow. I think looking back over the books that I've written, *Holy Island* was the book that really just flowed from nowhere. It was a story that just kind of took its own course as I wrote it.

James Blatch: Did you do any research into the structure of a novel?

L.J. Ross: It wasn't so much, I mean the thing is you could argue two ways. I didn't do a creative writing course or anything like that, but I think that if you read widely, you can start to look with more of a practiced focused eye, even as a reader, on how people are structuring the novels that you enjoy.

I think that if you start thinking in that way, and if you've already decided that you want to write, then you start reading books that you enjoy a second and third time, but with a different eye.

To that extent I was doing my research on structure.

In terms of research on the place, the setting, and the history of the island, I mean that was just a joy, reading up all about that. I mean, some fantastic books. There's a book called The King in the North.

James Blatch: Sounds like Game of Thrones.

L.J. Ross: Well it was. Actually I think I'm right in saying that George R. R. Martin based a lot of his inspiration from Bamburgh Castle and Lindisfarne Castle, which also inspired Tolkien I think for the Two Towers, or the Twin Towers. So yeah. It's an area that definitely inspires plenty of writers over the years and I'm the least of them.

James Blatch: That's really interesting. So the novel flowed. You didn't, at that point, have any independent thoughts.

You probably didn't really think too much about publishing at that stage, you just thought you were going to go down the traditional route I'm guessing?

L.J. Ross: Yeah. I knew absolutely nothing about publishing, I mean zilch at that point. What I said to myself was, "Let's just see if you can finish a whole novel and get through it, and then see what you're left with."

So I did that kind of interrupted with the birth of a newborn as you can imagine. So picked it up, and so that novel took a lot longer than it would take me now obviously. But it was good, because with the first novel sometimes it does take a bit longer and you need to put it away and then come back to it and see maybe what was working and what wasn't. So that worked quite well.

Then at the end of it I looked and I thought, "Well, what do you want to do with this?" Wrote a second and edited it, self-edited at that point.

Then thought, "Well I better get myself an agent or a traditional deal, isn't that what people do?"

I sent it out to, I think a grand total of 12, which is nothing, when you hear tales now of sweeping rejections. I sent it out and I had quite a lot of positive feedback actually, and an offer from a mid-sized press.

It was my husband who at that point said, "I don't know if you've heard of Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing Platform." I hadn't at that stage. I had a Kindle and enjoyed using it, but I had no idea that they had this publishing platform at all. It's not something that had been on my radar.

I had a look online, had a look at the terms, and just thought, "Well, this seems like a no-brainer." Risk free, creative economic control, and I just thought this sounds right up my street. I thought to myself, "Look, you've got nothing to lose, because what's the absolute worst case scenario? Nobody reads it."

That could equally be the case if it was traditionally published, and in fact maybe some ways more likely, because there was no commitment as to widespread distribution, or marketing on the traditional side, or that your book would somehow be stacked front row and center.

It'll be maybe one copy in a bookshop somewhere on the bottom shelf. That was what my expectation level would've been. So I thought it's got to be better than that, and you'll reach more readers this way. If you don't, you've lost nothing.

On the 1st of January, 2015, that's what we did. Got it ready for market you might say, or at least what I thought was ready for market back then, and we uploaded it on the 1st of January, 2015.

By May of that year it had reached number one in the UK chart. I still reel from that to be honest.

James Blatch: Did you market anything at that stage? Had you uploaded it with a nice cover and more or less left it.

L.J. Ross: Well, yeah.

James Blatch: You've done that thing that no one's supposed to do.

L.J. Ross: I know.

James Blatch: Is just upload it, fold your arms and wait for the money to come.

L.J. Ross: But the thing is you have to bear in mind that I hadn't found this wonderful podcast by this stage of my life. So going back in time, yes more or less that.

I started a blog but it was a very new blog. I'd heard of Andy Wier and The Martian and I thought, "Well, I'm pretty sure he had a blog and released it a little bit before he put it out."

So I did that for maybe three or four months before releasing snippets, a chapter here, a chapter there. And I may be got a few readers from that who went on to purchase the rest of the book.

But to be honest with you, that's all I needed apart from friends and family to start tiny snowball rolling. Because that's all it was.

I remember on day one, I got about 25 sales which were all of my family and friends. And I initially thought, "Well, that's the end of it. I'm really pleased, isn't that sweet of them, forget all about it."

But then after that, about a week passed and obviously it totally dropped off into oblivion and then one or two sales per day started to creep up again and I thought, "There is absolutely no explanation for this other than strangers who had been maybe told about the book, friends of friends and that sort of word of mouth marketing that sounds really antiquated now but it's still hugely relevant."

Here I am nine years later and nine books later, I should say nine years, I'm wishing my life away. No, nine books later but it still applies. I mean, I still have people writing to me even anecdotally saying, "I've told all my work colleagues about this book and they've gone on to buy it." And "Oh, I told Jim about that."

So it's very much that baseline level support that still applies and that's definitely the story of *Holy Island*.

And then obviously, I was fortunate that in capturing a readership early on, it made the second and third books and so on so much easier.

James Blatch: I mean, word of mouth marketing will never go away.

L.J. Ross: No.

James Blatch: And I think it's being the most powerful way of marketing but it normally works in smaller numbers. It was early-ish days of Kindle as well.

L.J. Ross: Yeah.

James Blatch: It's been a few years. Well, fantastic. How exciting for you.

How excited did you feel at the time when you saw those figures coming in?

L.J. Ross: Really excited, though also nervous feelings for that ... It's one thing writing a book, it's another actually wanting people to read it.

And that's the paradox, isn't it? You want people to enjoy it, but the way that they're going to find out about that is actually reading it so-

James Blatch: You can feel exposed.

L.J. Ross: You do, you do. And certainly I had absolutely no expectation of those kind of numbers at all.

James Blatch: So you hadn't had it edited.

L.J. Ross: I would say an edit for me now is much more involved process. It had a couple of stages of editing but we went back and re-edited it later with new knowledge.

It still did the trick but I think it's always a case of constant improvement. So I went back and had that re-edited properly.

James Blatch: So by six months, 10 months down the line, where you making an income that would sort of replace your working income?

L.J. Ross: To do to be honest I would say even from March or April. So from three or four months in, I was making an income that I would have been very happy with.

And again, you speak to a lot of people ... it's sort of where your expectation level is at and what you really want to achieve from it. Because I've some people who say, "Well, I'd just like to sell enough so that I can fund a hobby."

Or "I'd like to go on an extra holiday." And that's kind of how I'd set myself, I thought, "Well, let me give it a try and just see if you can make enough for a nice night out to be honest."

I don't think anyone becomes a writer to become a big cheese or anything. You do it for the love of reading and writing I think and everything else flows from that. So that's definitely where I was. But I was incredibly fortunate to be able to call it a full-time profession from fairly early on.

James Blatch: When did the second book come on stream? Was it written at this stage?

L.J. Ross: I'd started writing it more or less as soon as I finished *Holy Island* because I'd been bitten by the bug by that stage. And it was a big bug.

And then I was quite lucky that I had because you started getting some really nice feedback from readers saying, "Well, this is all very well and good, but what happens next?" So luckily, I started thinking about the next story.

And that came around, I'm pretty sure it was the September or October of the same year. It took a little bit longer nine months than a usual self published novel that I could produce now because everything grows a little bit easier with time, I think.

And confidence is the main word for me but that second book was probably the hardest to write. It's like a second album, isn't it?

James Blatch: Yeah. So you've written the book and then suddenly realized that people are going to read it and that's introduced you. You mentioned the confidence that was an important thing for you.

Did you feel under-confident about the whole process?

L.J. Ross: What I would say is that I was shocked and surprised when my first book did as well as it did. I think that's probably a good thing. It's nice to feel that when you do any project, whether you're writing a book or you're doing anything else, you'd like to think that it would succeed and that it would do well but I don't ever bank on it, I never count on that.

And actually even now, I think it's always good to have a healthy fear, those butterflies in your stomach whenever I put a new book out.

I never ever feel complacent that people are going to enjoy it as much as the last because I think if you ever start to lose that fear and that edge, something is lost. I'm quite happy to have those butterflies to be honest.

James Blatch: I completely agree with that. I left the BBC when I didn't get nervous anymore standing in front of the cameras, so I've done this, been there.

Let me ask: it's a small thing but those of us writing ... and I'm doing my first book at the moment, do you have to make a decision which sticks with you then for a long time and this famously initial surname and big examples like JK Rowling, probably the most famous author on the planet.

Did you consider Louise Ross?

L.J. Ross: I did actually. A lot of people ask me this question because I'm a writer of crime fiction and they think is it a gendered decision?

And actually I know the reason is the J stands for James who is my husband. And it's a permanent thank you for him giving me that nudge to actually firstly pursue the dream and secondly, to try Amazon KDP, which is something that I hadn't known about before.

So it's there as a permanent thank you. But actually as it turned out, I think it has quite a good ring to it. It sort of works on both levels, really.

James Blatch: It does, definitely. So James is the hidden indie superstar here.

L.J. Ross: Oh, don't let him hear me saying that.

James Blatch: He's in the other room for that moment. It brings us back to that point of how positively publishing is changing.

The idea that you could have written that book and potentially even though you had some quite positive feedback and not really had a career take off straight away, which happens a gazillion times over the last a hundred years to writers. And then moved on and done something else is a terrible thought.

But indie publishing has allowed you to thrive.

L.J. Ross: Oh, honestly. I mean, I'm a huge fan. I just think it's such a democratic process above anything else. I think it's really a question of personality though as well.

I can understand equally how it may not be for absolutely everybody because you do have to split yourself in two in some ways. You have to be able to be creative and have that outlet, enjoy doing what you do, but then also be hugely objective about it, which is quite a big ask, actually when you've really poured yourself into something of 100,000 words or whatever it may be.

It's a fair chunk of your life and your time and your thoughts. And mostly, if you're writing as I write at least, quite a lot of my own personality will come out in the story. So you feel very invested in it.

And so then to ask yourself to step away from that and look at your baby very clinically is very hard because most people would like to think that their baby is gorgeous. It is hard.

James Blatch: That's a very good point. I think you also do need to do that even if you're traditionally published.

Some authors find it difficult to have their books edited, which sounds really silly, but they don't really take that advice very well.

L.J. Ross: I think it's true actually when you say that because increasingly as well as such crossover from the trad and indie side, everybody needs a social media account of some form or another, everyone needs an author platform, everyone needs to think about these things in a different way.

And that's the changing world and the changing market. But I definitely see it as a positive because having that interaction with people to whatever degree feels comfortable for you, is actually a great way of getting feedback from a creative perspective and I think people forget this.

We get lost in the mire of talking about reviews and numbers of reviews and all this other stuff.

But actually even just one very good review that ... And when I say very good, I don't necessarily mean a five star review. I mean, a review that really

understood your book and what you're hoping to do with it, but was also able to tell you something that you maybe hadn't seen about it.

I've had reviews that have been lovely reviews, but then they might say, "Oh, by the way, I don't know if you knew this about," that element or whatever it may be. And I hadn't and it's being able to take that on board and say, "Okay, that's actually a really good point. Thank you."

Because that will make me better next time. It's the long game. It's not the short game.

James Blatch: What about negative criticism, how do you take that? Because everybody gets bad reviews, it doesn't matter who it really is.

L.J. Ross: Oh, absolutely. I often get that question as well. And then you think, "Well, just rip the plaster off because you're going to get that first negative review and several afterwards."

I think, particularly since I'm writing genre fiction, so you're appealing potentially to a very broad base of people and you're going to get outliers at either end. And so going into commercial fiction like that, you know that you're going to get people who for one reason or another, just don't like an element of your work and that's bound to happen.

I think first of all, just 'be prepared' is how I tell myself to think. And secondly, also just to distinguish between criticism and critique because there is a difference.

I think that people can be keyboard warriors but at the same time people can be incredibly kind. And they can also be very thoughtful and look at a book fairly. And I think that's something to just try and bear in mind when that first negative critique comes through.

James Blatch: I'm interested to hear how the marketing's evolved since then but let's talk a little bit more about the books before we move on to that.

You're nine books in?

L.J. Ross: Yes. So we've got *The Hermitage* coming out on the 20th of October actually.

James Blatch: And the same setting?

L.J. Ross: No, different settings. They're all Northumberland. But each book is set in a slightly different place and so *The Hermitage* alludes to this really ancient little hermitage as part of Warkworth castle in Northumberland so that's why there was a body found in there.

James Blatch: Okay. And as this become a key part of audience expectation for you?

If you suddenly set one in Provence do you think it would upset your fan base?

L.J. Ross: I hope not because every detective deserves a holiday.

Funny enough, you mention it, *The Hermitage* is half set in Italy and Florence and so it's kind of half and half.

But I think for me, it's very important because Northumberland is where I was born and grew up but it's also where I draw quite a lot of inspiration for the story. So I think it would be an interesting move for me not writing about the region.

Every time, I finish a book, I think, "Oh, God that's it. I can't write another one." And then two weeks passes and suddenly 10 new ideas pop into my head and that's how it goes. So I think setting is very important in my books and it is part of the reader expectation.

James Blatch: One of the characters in the book.

L.J. Ross: Yes. Exactly.

James Blatch: Okay. So you're coming up to number 10, is that going to be number 10 one? *The Hermitage*?

L.J. Ross: *The Hermitage* is number nine.

James Blatch: Is number nine, okay. And in terms of the way that you approach the structure, you say the ideas always popping into your head.

When you sit down with pen to paper, what stages the outline?

L.J. Ross: I think what I-

James Blatch: Pen to paper, how old am I? Unless you've got a quill in your apartment up there in Northumberland.

L.J. Ross: That's right, yeah.

Actually I think about the device and so if you think about Agatha Christie's A.B.C. Murders is really good example of this and that they kill off two people before the third murder which is actually the one that's relevant.

That sort of device there was cloak and dagger and what she was doing with that story. And so when I kind of approach a new story, I think to myself what kind of device might I like to use as a general story arc, how am I going to approach this and why then would a character to do this?

What purpose would it serve? What's the motive? And you work backwards that way and that's how it works for me. And then setting weaves around that very nice.

James Blatch: And how did that differ from the first book, which you said flowed? Did you have any structure written down in the beginning?

L.J. Ross: Obviously with the setting, it kind of lent itself to that closed room mystery. I already knew that there would be a limited number of suspects for whatever murder might happen there.

And then when I reminded myself of the history of the island and looked into some of its pagan history, for example and I thought to myself, what kind of nefarious characters might have got lost in this quiet corner of the world and why? And what also might they do to hide what are essentially really ordinary deeds?

People using, I don't know, mysticism and things like this to really mask what is a very ordinary killing. I think trying to find higher purpose behind something that is very base. And so that was what I was talking about with that book.

But it did flow once I had the idea of this character, who was at that point unnamed. Once I had this idea in my head, it really flowed.

And one thing I knew, for the main character, which is Ryan, I wanted him to be incorruptible. And the reason for that is probably a reflection of where I just come from and we all draw on our life experiences and this is how it came out for me.

I had just come from working in the square mile, it was very dynamic. I was working adjacent to financial crime and things like that. And so I kind of thought to myself how wonderful it would be to write escapist fiction, where you have a person who is entirely incorruptible or at least appears to be.

With each new book, there is a sense that he's being tested in one way or another and that his resolve and his moral compass is continually being tested with each new crime.

I think there's something comforting about that as a reader, to think that you're going to get to the end of this journey and he's going to do the right thing or what he believes to be the right thing.

James Blatch: That's interesting because a lot of authors do want their character to have flaws and be sort of bumping up against them over time but you wanted this guy to be a paragon.

He's incorruptible but he's not without flaws. He can be very black and white in his approach to the world, which in it's shades of grey.

James Blatch: A little too incorruptible.

L.J. Ross: Yes, narrow minded.

James Blatch: And rigid, okay. Which obviously does lend dynamic to him, which will impact on the story.

I love that you mentioned about how would people hide their deeds or their behavior, that's how you put the landscape into the books, isn't it? That sounds firmly planted in.

L.J. Ross: Yeah. And it's also just drawing on the history and there's so many legends about people being ... I mean, when you think of a person like Harry Hotspur and the rest of the stuff, the history that we have in that landscape is amazing. And just being able to take inspiration from that is often helpful as a springboard for my own kind of plot lines, which is great.

James Blatch: Great.

You should say how many books have you sold now that you're coming up to number nine, having started with no expectation at all?

L.J. Ross: Probably over 3 million, something like that. I don't know the exact figure so it was kind of tricky working that out. But I think probably in that area.

James Blatch: Congratulations Louise.

L.J. Ross: Thank you very much.

James Blatch: That's fantastic. We're so happy and excited to share that with you.

Okay, let's talk about marketing there. In those early days, a blog was more or less it.

Today, what does your marketing setup look like?

L.J. Ross: In some ways, I've never actually forgotten that. I'm very moved with the risk of sounding like an old John Major and move kind of back to basics in some ways. And I do say this to people because I think there's so much information that can sometimes be a bit of an overload, isn't it? Because you look at it and think, "Well, gosh, I'm not doing all of this and maybe I should be doing that. And should I switch it up?"

For me, I have to say the disclaimer that I was quite an unusual case. And that normally, as I understand it, it would be a few books in and people are building a readership and you sort of build, build, build all the time.

And although that's true, I was fortunate that my first book did as well as it did because that helped with visibility hugely. And so what I would say is, don't judge on book nine, judge from point zero because that's sort of going back in time.

But now because I have been able to build that readership, I've always agreed with Mark's advice about having a mailing list. I think that's invaluable. And I know it's old hat by now but it's still true.

I definitely would agree with the basic principle that, never forget your product. I sometimes see books that are beautifully packaged and they have a fantastic cover and wonderful copy but then I'll read the book and maybe feel slightly disappointed.

I know these things are subjective but I think the general point there is that, if you know your readership, don't forget them.

I think that ties in with a marketing point that once you start in the process of publishing and you become a little bit more established, it's easy or

tempting to fall in line with many trends or things that other people are doing or the style that other people are employing.

And it's difficult to kind of remain ... It's that word again, objective. It's difficult to set yourself apart from that because on the one hand writing is very introverted but on the other you'd like to socialize with people, you'd like to hear what they're doing and how they are writing and what their work is looking at, just as a reader yourself but then to not be influenced too much by that and to focus on what is working for you.

And that comes back to marketing really, I think because the more IP that you can create, and that's really what it is, and the more you can continue to improve whilst also remaining true to, at the risk of sounding a little bit pretentious, to your own voice.

I think that that actually works really well from a marketing perspective because if people enjoy book one, they will read through.

And that comes back to another point that Mark's made about read-through. That really feeds into that. That the only way you're going to get high read-through is if your later book are every bit as good as your first books.

And when I say good, I mean good in the eyes of your readership, because it isn't necessarily about writing for other writers, which is a very different thing entirely, I think.

James Blatch: That's great advice. I think that could probably go to almost any industry. It's like a car manufacturer producing better and better brochures.

In the end, it's got to be about the products, isn't it?

L.J. Ross: Yeah.

James Blatch: How close are you to your readers?

L.J. Ross: I'd say pretty close, actually. I think they're a very loyal readership and a very kind readership.

But having said that, I do always say to people, "If you possibly can, take the time to cross the road and reply to an email that somebody has taken the trouble to send you."

Because as I said earlier, people are so kind. A lot of the time, a sort of formulaic response just won't do. And particularly when I look at my demographic, I think it's roughly late 30s through to maybe mid 60s, mostly female, well-educated. We like to hear from one another.

If a lady's written to me and said, "I had a really tough week this week. My husband died," or whatever sad news it might have been, "and your book managed to take me away." "Thank you for your email. We will reply." It doesn't really wash, and I would feel upset myself if that had been the reply.

So even if I can't do it the same day, I will always flag it, and I'll go back and have that personal interaction. That is something. If you want to think cynically, it's something that will also work in your favor from a marketing perspective, because it's a positive interaction that's someone's had.

If you think about face-to-face sales, if you go and ask somebody for help in a shop and they brush you off, you're far less likely to go back there again.

It's exactly the same with books. Even if you're speaking to a stranger, a total stranger, it's much better to try to empathize, I think, and understand what they're trying to tell you, whether it be positive or negative, actually. Because oftentimes, if people are really connected with the characters ...

I've had readers write in, and it's clear that they have so enjoyed the books, but they maybe didn't think that a storyline was going to go the way that I had written it, which is interesting, because I have no way of knowing that. This is just where I thought the story would go.

And I understand from their email that, really, it's connected to their love of the stories rather than an intention to be negative. So, often, I'll write back and say, "Oh, that's really interesting. I'm so glad that you connected with the character. Tell me. Why? Where'd you think they would go?"

And we end up having a conversation about books rather than it being a negative interaction.

James Blatch: Does that type of feedback ever lead on to ways in which you'll write in the future?

L.J. Ross: Yes and no.

I've been very lucky. I even get a lot of senior police get in touch and say, "I used to work for a Northumbria CID. I wish we could have been like that."

And that's the thing. You want people to realize it's fiction. I do have a knowledge of police procedure from my previous lifetime, shall we say. But I deliberately try not to overload my stories with that, because otherwise you'll be writing a very different book.

I like that people understand that. So people who have even worked in the profession understand that what procedure I do include is hopefully accurate, but it's not overweight and it's very much about ... It's more of an adventure as opposed to real life. Most people, we do have that nice, close contact with readers.

James Blatch: Who knows what a book should be.

L.J. Ross: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: I haven't asked you many specific questions about marketing.

You're running ads?

L.J. Ross: I do. I run the odd Facebook ad. They're very good on being able to identify demographics. There's very useful information there. You can obviously import. I use MailChimp for my mailing list. So yes, it works quite nicely together. We'll run ads that way.

Dabbled with Amazon ads. But to be honest with you, I think, mostly for me, it's definitely maintenance of the readership. You hit it head-on there.

For me, that is my approach, and then anything else after that is more like icing on the cake. I think, really, it's a basic point. And I do say to people that if you can get the ball rolling yourself, actually Amazon is geared to help you. It's geared to sell.

So if you can actually get that ball rolling yourself, they're not there to hinder you. It's they're there to try and leverage your own success.

Again, we're talking nine books in now. After capturing that initial readership, then they were ready and willing to push it out for the next one, and then it just maximizes with every new book that comes on. It's very much taking that and just trying to identify ways that I can help on my side and do that.

I think indirect marketing, as well, is not a bad thing. I think, just in terms of socially, as well. I mean, forget this. It's if you're willing to do a good turn for someone, they will invariably do a good turn for you, particularly with other writers who write in the same sort of genre, that kind of thing. I think you have to look at it very much that it is a shared space.

I hear it sometimes, and I believe that it's a mistake to think that other people who write the same genre as you are competitors, because they aren't. People like to read. I like to read myself. The very last thing that you want people doing is putting away their Kindle or their book.

You like people to still be reading similar things or styles to you so that when your next book comes out, they're there ready, waiting, and, "Oh, great. Next one out." It's a habit to read as opposed to scaring people off.

So I think often helping to promote other writers is something that's a positive move rather than a negative move.

On a very simple level, I also made the decision I am with KDP Select. I consider that a marketing decision. For me, it's worked out with my business. And obviously, I know that some choose to go wide, and that's a very individual decision. But for me, it's worked really well.

James Blatch: Have you always been?

L.J. Ross: I have, yes. My books have always been in KU, for example. And again, I think that's just a whole other market that you're able to reach if you are there, as well. Particularly, if you then haven't been in KU and decide to make the change into KU for example, that's great because it's almost like relaunching.

Particularly, if you have a series, it's like relaunching an entire series, which is something maybe to think about, because that can just regenerate, reinvigorate your whole business.

James Blatch: What do you think about the mainstream bookshops?

Because you've sold 3 million books. I mean, by rights, I should be able to walk into Waterstones and pick an L.J. Ross book up off the shelf. But that's, even for you, is quite a difficult place to get to.

L.J. Ross: I have been contacted by things like WHSmith. Certainly, my books are in independent book shops.

I think it comes back to the point I've made several times, which is a question of individuality. I didn't come into this thinking, "I need to see my books on a shelf in Waterstones."

But I consider it a perfectly valid dream that if people want that, that is a separate dream in itself.

James Blatch: I understand. I almost think about from a reader's point of view. I think that, because not everyone has a Kindle.

L.J. Ross: Sure.

James Blatch: My father doesn't, but he'll probably love your books. He will only, probably, find them ... Obviously, he's going to find them because I'm going to put it in front of him. If he walks into WHSmith or Waterstones ...

L.J. Ross: Yeah.

James Blatch: It seems to me it is something that's going to need to have to change in the next few years, one way or another.

L.J. Ross: I don't know. The print side of things just does quite well on Amazon for me, so I'm with ... Well, it was CreateSpace, but it's now KDP Print. I've always been with that, as well.

And actually, I found that, say, a lot of libraries would just go and source directly from there, because I said consistently told them, "I'm publishing Amazon. So if there is enough of a demand ..." I think that that, again, comes back to basic principles.

Because people were going into the libraries saying, "I really like to read these books," in enough of a volume from word of mouth that people have told them. So the libraries then went onto their databases, sure enough, didn't find them there because, obviously, I didn't register with Nielsen or anything like that. And yet, they sort of pressed override and thought, "Well, we'll still go and source them."

So it is possible, and I think it's a misconception that as an indie-published or wholly Amazon-published author that you can't find your way into libraries and things like that, because I certainly have.

But I definitely think it's a question of personality, as well. That you haven't to be unafraid of going out and finding those opportunities. I think,

certainly, that in terms of accessibility for printed, it's definitely a business decision for me that I like to make all formats accessible as possible. But I think people have been quite willing to just go online on Amazon. Let's not forget, that whether in print or ebook, it is still the largest retailer.

James Blatch: Yeah, it is.

One of the things I noticed in quite a lot of these interviews is that the more successful authors talk a lot about their readers and are very grounded about why they're writing about the product, and I really hear that from you. So I think it's really good that you've expounded on that a little bit. I guess, one of the things we do on this podcast is try and help people like in my position, starting.

L.J. Ross: Sure.

James Blatch: You've quite a lot of that today. But what would be your advice? As particularly having seen the market change, and visibility is more different, perhaps, than it was in even 2015 when you started.

What advice would you hand out to people starting, the fledglings like me?

L.J. Ross: I would say be discerning because the thing is, with any growing market, people have offshoots. You can even just go onto Facebook, and you will see so many adverts for, "Want to self-publish? Here's the way to do it."

But learn to distinguish between a quality organization that can actually help you to learn about what is quite a vast industry now, if you're going to do that.

But also, just to have the confidence. I think what I would say to people is, "Don't forget the reason you go into it." I think that it's easy to get bogged down. It's very easily done.

And I think it's easy to have your confidence knocked at the sheer volume of books out there. But not to forget that there's always been a huge flume of books. There's always been. But just remember that you never had this opportunity before.

Before this era, there was a never a way for people to just take this career into their own hands without having to go through gatekeepers. So it is still a much better climate to be able to push your work out there than it ever was before.

And not to, I suppose, become too negative or too downcast at the prospect of having to be seen within that landscape, because it was always going to be hard.

But I think, that said, invest in your product. I'll look at my copy or the book description. People will say to me, "Look, I've done everything I can think of, and I can't see why this book isn't doing better." So I'll say, "Well, do you mind if I have a look."

And I'll have a look, and I think, "Well, it seems obvious, but if you've ..." I had a book designer, and they send you this beautiful image through. You think, "Brilliant. I'll buy it." But then reduce it to a thumbnail. How does it look on the Kindle Store? You can barely see the title.

It's very, very simple. It sounds like simplistic advice, but it's so seldom achieved as a package. So I would say get everything lined up like that. Then, when you think you've done it right, actually then farm it out and get opinions back, because usually there's something.

James Blatch: That objective.

L.J. Ross: Oh, absolutely.

James Blatch: Standing back a little bit.

L.J. Ross: Definitely, yeah.

James Blatch: You're back to Northumberland, I guess, afterwards. We're here for the Storyteller Awards in London.

L.J. Ross: Yes. That's right.

James Blatch: You're back to Northumberland. And that's where you write, presumably, in the house?

L.J. Ross: I do. I have an office in the house. I write at the kitchen table, still. But I like to get out and about and go in to sit in coffee shops and things like that, because it can be a very solitary profession otherwise.

Obviously, I'm still wary of writer's arse. I've been worrying about that. So get and about, go for a walk.

James Blatch: Definitely. Standing up is definitely one way to get around writer's arse.

L.J. Ross: Yes. You can take the girl out of the North ...

James Blatch: People who don't know the UK, Northumberland is beautiful. It's just a very, very beautiful part of the country, so I can see the attraction. Louise, it's been thrilling talking to you. I've really enjoyed it.

L.J. Ross: Me, too. Thanks for having me.

James Blatch: Well, you're very welcome. It's been really valuable, so thank you.

L.J. Ross: I hope so. Thank you.

James Blatch: There we go. There's Louise. And something I learned that I didn't know is the J in L.J. Ross is for James, because he plays a big part in her success in terms of the marketing.

He was there at the beginning. Perhaps with an eye to the market and the way things were going, has said to her, "Why are we still writing to agents? Let's publish this ourselves." And they have not looked back.

Mark Dawson: James is pretty savvy. We've had a few interesting conversations about algorithms and that kind of stuff, and he's a barrister. So obviously a pretty smart guy, and also writing his first novel, as well. He'll be pleased to know you are well ahead of him.

He's been stuck on 10,000 words for at least the last year.

James Blatch: I've written 10,000 words lots of times.

Mark Dawson: You have. That's very true. No, it's a real success story. They've done incredibly well, and lovely too.

We've been trying to get them on the podcast for a little while, so it's good to get them on finally.

James Blatch: If you want to catch up on my novel writing experience, there is a blog post on our website at SelfPublishingFormula.com if you catch the blog page. I'll add another edition, but the headline is Still Going Stormingly. Still going stormingly, although I do have two chapters to produce between and tomorrow night.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, basically, what do you think about it?

James Blatch: Well, you keep giving me work to do.

Mark Dawson: I was in Boston speaking to the BookBub team when we went over there. Carlin, he works for BookBub, came up to me afterwards and said, "I just listened to the episode of the podcast with Jennie Nash and James. Jennie's my mum." And then Carlin came down to Florida for NINC. I introduced the two of you.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: You both owe Carlin's mum something now.

James Blatch: We do.

Mark Dawson: A thank for her assistance.

James Blatch: Carlin was really great to me. She's a credit to Jennie. I've dropped Jennie a note to that effect after meeting her.

I think that they're plan is to try and end up at the same conference at the same time one day, which would be really nice.

I can't speak highly enough about Jennie, and I thought she's come across really well, both in the interview and in the Book Lab that we had with her. She's somebody who really understands and can articulate why stories work, why they don't work, and some of the traps to avoid. Offering us that info dump pdf was a great thing. I've heard some good feedback on that. Yeah, so things are going well on that front at the moment.

Mark Dawson: Good. Good.

James Blatch: Touch wood.

Mark Dawson: Well, I'm hoping to write a novel in November, so we can have a race if you like.

James Blatch: Yeah. Are you going to do another NaNoWriMo?

Mark Dawson: I might do. Yeah, I'm thinking. Not that I ever done it. I don't feel I need to do it.

James Blatch: No.

Mark Dawson: But I think it's coming at a good time. I'm working on finishing something this month, and then I'd like to get something done by the end of the year. I was at 50,000 words. Actually, I should probably do that in a week.

James Blatch: It's like 2-1/2 thousand a day, something like that. Is that right?

Mark Dawson: Something like that, yeah. I want to try and dictate it, as well, so that will be an interesting experiment.

James Blatch: It doesn't really quite suit the stage I am at with my writing at the moment.

Mark Dawson: No.

James Blatch: Because it's a good first draft thing, I think it would be perfect if you could get around to the point of thinking, "I'm going to knock out a first draft for November." So maybe next November.

James Blatch: Thank you very much indeed for watching. If you're watching on YouTube, my picture changed from a beautiful, expensively produced DSLR picture to the sort of thing that we see Mark standing behind, a webcam. But I'm going to try and introduce Mark to the world of the DSLR.

Mark Dawson: Oh, dear.

James Blatch: It's a bit like ... I had my dad. My 87-year-old father visiting this morning because Microsoft Word wasn't working, and you can imagine how my heart sinks. I feel a little bit the same going to teach how to use a camera.

Mark Dawson: I'm sure I can manage.

James Blatch: I'm sure you can.

Thank you very much indeed for watching and listening this week. We will be back next Friday with another superb episode of The Self Publishing Formula Podcast. Bye-bye.

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