

## **EPISODE 149: THE ADVANCED READER POWERHOUSE – WITH CRAIG TUCH**

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

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the Self-Publishing Formula Podcast with James and Mark. You're very welcome to be here, and Mark, that will be the very last time I ever say that.

Mark Dawson: Will it? No, it will, that's right. We're changing.

James Blatch: No, I'm not going anywhere. For people watching on YouTube, I did a dramatic flouncy walk out, but I'm back! We are rebranding. This is our last episode. It's episode 149, so can you believe we're getting to 150 episodes next Friday?

Mark Dawson: I know. That's quite amazing isn't it? That's three years pretty much, give or take, we've been doing this for.

James Blatch: Yeah. And we've enjoyed it very much, but we feel it's time to-

Mark Dawson: I haven't!

James Blatch: I've enjoyed it occasionally! No, we do enjoy it. It's been brilliant actually. And when we're out and about ... and I mentioned this the other week, about being at 20 Books in Vegas, and people just knowing us from the podcast, and saying, "Thank you," was hugely gratifying and a nice experience.

But we just thought we'd give it a lick of paint really, and a bit of a rebrand. We are relaunching next Friday as the "Self-Publishing Show." So we're going to be the Self-Publishing Show.

We've got a new home on the internet, the [selfpublishingshow.com](http://selfpublishingshow.com). And we should say this is a rebrand rather than a stop and start again, so you'll find us in all the usual places. At least, Mark, you should do?

Mark Dawson: This is the theory, yeah. Some people have been testing this in the background, so hopefully it will all work seamlessly, but you never know with these things.

James Blatch: You never quite know. But the idea is that our iTunes feed will remain the same, with the reviews, and the love that we've got on there, and YouTube the same. This is going to be an acknowledgment, I think, that the show is as much video as it is audio. And it generally covers all areas of self-publishing, so we're not narrowing ourselves down to anything.

It's exciting. And you're a part of it, so thank you very much indeed for making this show everything that it is. And we say, "Thank you," to our original guests. You can carry on listening, we're not changing the audience, are we? You don't have to stop and start.

Mark Dawson: We're not, no. Who would have thought that the Self-Publishing Show, or Self-Publishing Show would have been available as a URL?

James Blatch: I was amazed. So we grabbed that! [Amazed.com](http://Amazed.com).

Mark Dawson: Amazed and surprised as well.

Mark Dawson: I think it's fair enough. I strongly recommend people watch it on YouTube next week, because we are making a big effort to improve the

quality of the video experience, and it's going to be a show where we're going to concentrate on that. We've got some amazing new intro ... Well, the introduction sequence is just fantastic. I can't stop watching it to be honest: it's really, really good.

John Dyer has been working on that, in the background. And we are very pleased that we've got Huey from the Fun Loving Criminals doing the voiceover. It looks, kind of, broadcast quality, doesn't it?

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: It's really good.

James Blatch: It'll just be the same old us, though.

Mark Dawson: It will. But then we'll look a bit better because I've now got a camera rather than my webcam. So this is the last one you'll see in this part of the office.

The next time will be over there in what's now going to be the Self-Publishing Show outside broadcast wing, with a nice camera and some lighting, and some other bits and bobs I'm going to be shipping in there, not too long. So it will look nice. We're going to look pretty impressive, I think.

James Blatch: I can't wait. Now, on the note of how we got here. We got here with the listeners and the support of you listening, and I want to say a big welcome to our new Patreon listeners, people who support this show, at [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast). We'll have to look at whether we can get a URL set up for that as well. We'll have to talk to our friends at Patreon and get that changed. But that's one for the future.

Let me say a big welcome to those who are joining us as Patreon supporters. I'm going to move this in, so I'm not staring off-screen. And we are saying hello to Mrs Megan Jones, from Selby, in North Yorkshire, here in the U.K. Welcome, Megan. Brittany A. Fitcher, in Fort Bragg, North

Carolina. So, "Yes sir!" Fort Bragg's a big army town in North Carolina. Mike McCrary from Austin Texas, obviously a hippy from Austin. Evie Jones from Falls Church, Virginia. Now, doesn't that sound like a nice place to live: Fall Church, Virginia?

Mark Dawson: It does. I suppose, on hippie, you mean hipster don't you? I don't think he'd be a hippy, in Austin?

James Blatch: Hipster.

Mark Dawson: He's probably not a hipster either, you've just invented someone who's-

James Blatch: He's not at all. He's probably an accountant!

Mark Dawson: It gets worse!

James Blatch: He's an author, that's the important thing.

Mark Dawson: Yes.

James Blatch: Mike, you're very welcome. You didn't realize you were going to be insulted, did you, when you signed up for Patreon supporters? We're excited to have you.

Ruth Harding, from Bury, in the United Kingdom, which, I guess is the Bury near Manchester? Or, possibly the Bury St Edmunds near me. Probably, Bury near Manchester. Kim Hamilton of no fixed abode. Actually, the rest, we don't have locations for. Martina Dalton. Andres Kabal ... Kabel, maybe? Tina Williams. David Calendar. Barbara Cam. Liz Schmidt. And Elizabeth Hager.

Thank you all so much for going to [patreon.com/spfpodcast](https://patreon.com/spfpodcast) and supporting the episodes. You can do that for as little as a dollar an episode, and you get goodies and VIP treatment as a result of doing that.

Mark Dawson: And one of the goodies that you get is ... because this goes out on Friday, we'll have done this already, on Wednesday we've got Tammy Labrecque coming to deliver, not really a Webinar, more of a chat about mailing lists, with James. I'll probably be on that call as well. I may even chip in a bit because I think it's really interesting, and Tammy is very good at that.

We're trying to do monthly Webinars, or events like this that are exclusive for students. So, people in the Mastery, or the Genius Facebook group's courses. And also for all Patreon subscribers.

We'll give you the chance to come along, you can ask questions. These are valuable. We've had Adam Croft on. I've done one. Tammy's coming on. We've got Damon Courtney from Book Funnel coming on. James might do something on video, and Facebook Live, and that kind of stuff.

We've got Craig Martelle, Michael Anderle, coming on. Maybe, David Coghlan. So we'll have a lot of people that I would consider to be experts in the things that we're asking them about, coming on to pass their knowledge onto you, the SPF supporters, in the SPFU \*not a university.

James Blatch: Still hopeful to get my degree, eventually, from SPFU!

Good. Well, we should also say congratulations to our friend Joanna Penn, because whilst we're celebrating 150 episodes next week and we're rightly proud of that, she has been around the block a little bit longer than that, hasn't she?

Mark Dawson: Charming!

James Blatch: I'm on it, today, aren't I?

Mark Dawson: I know she's done over 400 episodes now, so she's way ahead. But she had her 10th anniversary of the podcast, as we record it, it's today. So, we're recording this on a Monday. And I think, next year, she's got the 10th anniversary of ... Now what is it? There's two 10-year

anniversaries basically, but yeah it's the 10-year anniversary of the ... No. Not the podcast. The 10-year anniversary is of her blog, this week: the podcast is next year. So she did a really good episode, looking back at things that she's seen, over the course of the last decade.

We'll be doing something similar to that, next week. Some people may not have heard that I was a lawyer, and happy in law, going to various jobs, and eventually finding the thing that I loved the most. And also heading towards a fairly significant landmark which, at present rate, will be in about three days' time. So we can mention that.

James Blatch: We can have a little party popper?

Mark Dawson: I probably should do, yeah. I'm just looking at my book report right now, and it is just gradually ticking up towards this milestone. We didn't plan this, the 150th episode the podcast and this particular milestone.

James Blatch: I think from my point of view, and from the listeners' point of view, a good way of doing that, next week, is for me to find out how you got there. And that will include ... I know we're not allowed to say the "J" word, but that will include-

Mark Dawson: No. You're not allowed to use the "J" word.

James Blatch: ... the way that you traveled from where you started, to, today. And I'll be asking lots of little nuanced questions about some of the decisions you made along the way, what you would have done differently, what you know today that you didn't know a year ago, and all that stuff. So let's do an episode like that and try and learn from it, and those of us on the way up, try to replicate it.

But, yes, that's exciting for you, and we'll save out congratulations, because of course people might just stop buying books in half-an-hour, and then it's all-

Mark Dawson: It's possible. It's entirely possible. The way Amazon's been in the last three of four months, I wouldn't put anything past that.

James Blatch: We do have a good episode today. We are talking to Craig Tuch from Hidden Gems. If you don't know what "Hidden Gems" are, well, Craig explains it very well in the interview itself.

Effectively, it's an ARC program for you, so your advanced reader. What does the 'C' stand for, in ARC?

Mark Dawson: Copy.

James Blatch: Copy? Advanced Reader Copy. Okay. So it's the actual book that goes out, if you like?

Mark Dawson: Yes.

James Blatch: "ART" might be better: Advanced Reader Team, as we refer to them. Your "ARC" team, I suppose, is what you say?

Mark Dawson: You don't send out an "ART" copy-

James Blatch: No-

Mark Dawson: You sent out an "ARC"-

James Blatch: You could talk about their "ARC", but I suppose-

Mark Dawson: Actually, you could send out an "ARCC" copy. Because they'd be sending out an "Advanced Reader Copy, Copy".

James Blatch: Yes!

Mark Dawson: Sorry, everyone. We're going down a rabbit hole!

James Blatch: This is what Noah had.

Mark Dawson: Nothing will change next week.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: We'll still be unprofessional.

James Blatch: Rambling like this, after the beautiful intro.

Okay, look, let's hear from Craig, and then you and I can have a chat about him.

Craig, hello. Welcome to the podcast. And we should say, welcome, to our Canadian friends over there. Is it getting cold yet, this time of year, or is it still balmy?

Craig Tuch: It's been cold. And then today it just shot up to, like, 28, so it got really hot all of a sudden. So I don't know what's going on.

James Blatch: That's what it's done here, as well. It must be because we share the same Queen, we have very similar weather.

Craig Tuch: Yeah.

James Blatch: And because we share the Queen, I have to start with the weather, because every conversation in the United Kingdom starts with the weather, so I want to make you feel part of the Commonwealth.

Craig Tuch: Somewhere here!

James Blatch: Good. Okay, now let's get on to the business of this. We're going to talk a little bit about your author services, and in particular the "Hidden Gems" service, and reviews, and advanced readers, and all of that stuff to come.

**But let's start a little bit with you, because you are an author yourself Craig. Just give us a bit of background to yourself.**

Craig Tuch: I started writing ... Well, I guess I've always been writing. I was in a job, I was a product manager, actually, for a big company, and never



happy with it really. I was a developer first ... product manager. I started writing and I started putting those books up on Amazon. This is probably, maybe five or six years ago, at this point.

And I started doing well. I was selling. I was writing in romance, not a genre that I typically love to read, but it was one that sold well and I was able to write it fairly well, so it was good enough to allow me to quit my job.

**James Blatch: So that was a commercial decision you made early on, on that genre selection?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah. It was completely commercial. For me, I would read science fiction, fantasy, maybe some young adult even. But I know at that time, this was back before KU even, the market was just better for romance. I didn't mind writing in it.

I took a leave of absence from my job, actually, for about a year, to see if I could make it work, and I did. It's scary, I have a family, I have a couple of kids, it's hard to leave a well-paying job to do something like that, but it worked out.

Then I got into the community for a while and started to see some of the pain points for writers. So I started Hidden Gems. At that time it was called Hidden Gems Romance, specifically for romance.

Started off with a newsletter and then branched quickly into the review service, because it was clear to me that that's where the real tough thing was. People were sending their books out to review but they weren't getting anything back, or they were getting very little.

And really they were mining their own lists of readers, their own list of fans, which is always ... I think it's a mistake, because these are people on your own mailing list that have proven that they want to buy your stuff. They will buy it. You don't need to send them free copies, right? They were already customers, and really you're just missing out on sales that way.

So I started a service where these were people that were not already your fans, and it was a way to expand your readership and get reviews at the same time. And I stopped writing!

James Blatch: Well done on that decision by the way, just to quit your job and give that a go. It's not necessarily the recommended course for everyone and it can have its stresses and strains, but you obviously applied yourself, and chose a genre you don't even read, and made it pay the bills.

Craig Tuch: Yeah. I mean, like I said, I went on a leave of absence, so I had a back-up, right? I could go back.

James Blatch: Okay.

Craig Tuch: And then I didn't have to.

James Blatch: Okay. Good.

You discovered this pain point, which the best services that spring up in the Indie world are authors themselves who've discovered a pain point. I think probably the classic example is Damon Courtney and Book Funnel, who just realized, "There's got to be a way of doing this?"

**And you had a bit of a background, did you say you were in developing before, you were a developer?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah. I was a developer, and a product manager. So I was able to build up Hidden Gems completely from the ground up. I didn't do the developing myself, but I hired a couple of developers and I do all the design.

The software for it, it's based on WordPress, but it's completely built from the ground up, customized WordPress plug-ins that we've built specifically for Hidden Gems.

**James Blatch: And just explain what the service does. You hinted at it before, when you talked about the difficulty of getting reviews and using your list, but tell us what the service does.**

Craig Tuch: Right. So, an author would sign-up for one of the ... I think we have 15 or 16 genres now. They will send us their information about their book, their cover, their blurb, and we send that out to our readers.

Our readers are segregated into the different genres, so we're not going to send a romance book out to a bunch of science fiction readers. Then, even from that, they have a choice, do they want to read that book? There's no quotas. There's no limits. Everything's voluntary.

If they like what the description is, what the cover looks like, everything like that, they sign up, and then we would send them the book, and they would read it. Hopefully, review it. And that's it, pretty much.

James Blatch: And you say, "Hopefully review it"? And it's quite an important point to make here, about the Amazon Terms of Service here, because you've obviously got to be careful.

**Amazon do make it clear that you can't ask for a review in return for goods or payment.**

Craig Tuch: Exactly. All of our readers are book lovers. They know that part of our service is for people that love to read and love to leave reviews. We can't force them, of course, but from what we've found, most of the people ... we have about an 80% review rate, but that's an average.

Some books are going to get less, some are more. I think it mostly depends on the quality of book. If there's issues with the book, a lot of people choose not to leave reviews. Some people do leave reviews and they're not necessarily positive: we can't guarantee the quality of the review either. But hopefully, good-

James Blatch: I guess one important factor here, and you mentioned it, in making sure that the reviews are going to be better rather than poorer, as long as the book's okay, is making sure that they go to the right readers.

Because authors can exchange all day long, silly reviews they've had, and quite often it's, "I read science fiction, so this romance book was terrible!", is a really rubbish review to end to up for a romance reader.

**But you find your audience do segment themselves, and you work hard in making sure there's a high degree of relevancy?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah. We have all the list of genres, and the readers self select themselves into which genres ... they're not just one. Most people read more than one genre, but typically, if they read them all, they probably have a favorite genre, so a romance reader maybe reads some fantasy, some YA and then if we send out more than one book in a day, and typically we do, we'll send off usually three or four, five books out to our list in a day.

And if they see more than one, they'll usually pick their favorite or they can sign up for all of them. We don't send them more than one typically unless they're very disparate. So, I might send a cookbook out to a reader on the same day that they get a romance book.

But I wouldn't send two fiction books generally on the same day. And people have at least a week before we're even bugging them and reminding them, "Hey, if you're going to leave a review, now's a good time to do it," so they have the time. They manage their own time as well.

**James Blatch: And when you say send out the books, we're talking electronic versions, ebooks?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah, they're all ebooks. We send out a link for them to download and then once the review period's over, we shut that link down basically.

**James Blatch: Okay and you've obviously got an automated system in place to nudge people along, as you say, and hopefully get them to leave a review?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah, we send reminders. They have a reader form and if they choose not to leave a review, there's a spot on the reader form where they can write, "I didn't like the book," or "I didn't have time to read it," or, "I changed my mind," whatever the reason it is, they can fill that out.

It's a free form field. I don't generally even read it that much. It's just there for us to capture, but yeah, they can write whatever they want.

**James Blatch: And how much does this cost the author?**

Craig Tuch: So, the author is paying \$3 per reader that we send the book out to with the first 10 readers just being a flat \$20, that's their deposit. So, there's a deposit to lock down your date.

We're sold out pretty far in advance. Right now, I think the earliest bookings we have are about April or May next year.

James Blatch: Wow.

Craig Tuch: Yeah, it's tough, yeah. The service has exploded a lot lately.

James Blatch: I better start planning ahead.

Craig Tuch: It's tough we have a waiting list and we do try to move people up as fast as we can. The issue is the amount of readers we have. If we had unlimited readers, then there would be no waiting list, but we can't force people to read.

If a book isn't as appealing, then we don't necessarily get the number of readers that a person wants. So, if somebody asks, we have a 50-reader minimum. So, you can't ask for 10, but if you ask for 50 and we only get you 10, we're only going to charge you for 10, right?

James Blatch: Okay.

Craig Tuch: We're not charging per review, because we can't guarantee the reviews, but we're charging per number of people that have signed up and that we're sending the book to and then we have a max where we won't charge more than basically 140 readers.

So, if you ask for max, you'll pay the price, it's about \$400 and then we'll send it out to everybody that wants it. So, even if you have 200-300 people, you'll still just pay a flat \$400 or whatever.

**James Blatch: I'll ask you a bit about the value of that in a moment, but just on the service itself then, how do you grow your list?**

Craig Tuch: Well, there's a number of ways, but that is the biggest pain point in the business really is I advertise on Facebook saying, "Hey, do you love to read? Come join our service."

Authors will send out an ad to their own lists saying, "Hey, join Hidden Gems," I have an affiliate program where I'll pay an author a certain amount per sign up that I get from that sort of thing.

So, if they send it out and they get 100 people that clicked from their link to our service and signed up, then I'd pay them for those 100 people or whatever.

There's various ways, but expanding the list is my number one priority, because I don't want to have a waiting list any more than the authors do and I know it's a pain for them.

**James Blatch: Are you happy to share the size of your list roughly or do you keep that confidential?**

Craig Tuch: No, it's hard, because it's segmented so broadly. I think, overall it's 10,000 or so, but I clean it every couple months, because we pay for the

list size as I'm sure you know. So, having a bunch of people that never read books and never open the emails even doesn't do anyone any good.

So, I continually clean, every couple months, I'm pulling off a couple thousand people. So, it's been hovering around 10,000 or so for, I don't know, the last six months or so.

James Blatch: Okay, so let's talk about the value of a review.

### **How important is it to have reviews?**

Craig Tuch: I think it's really important. I think there's a number of studies that I've linked to in a few of the articles that I've written online where some of them are saying ... I had a couple up here ... displaying reviews can increase conversion by 270 percent is one of the reviews.

And even bad reviews, there's studies that say that a few bad reviews are not a bad thing. In fact, they are a good thing in the sense that they provide more legitimacy to your reviews.

If you see a book that has 100 reviews and they're all five-star, you're kind suspect, right? No book has that. You can look at some of the best books in the world and they all have bad reviews. There's always people that don't like books.

But if everyone loves your book, then you're kind of thinking, "How realistic is that?" So, there are studies that say that having a few bad reviews even benefits your sales. Now, of course, you don't want all bad reviews, but a few of them.

There's a number of things it does; it generates buzz, word of mouth, people buy things based on reviews. You go to Amazon, you want to buy anything, one of the first things you're looking at is how many other people bought it. It's the social proof of someone else already took a chance on this product and this is what they thought of it. I don't have to be the first one kind of thing, right? And then there's services like BookBub that

require you to have a certain number of reviews before they'll even take you. So, from a marketing perspective, you need reviews for services like that.

James Blatch: Yeah and someone who pointed out the other day to me that they're the new gatekeepers. We say that the gatekeepers are gone, but the reviews, readers now, that is the service to which not exactly, but sort of decides whether a book is going to fly or not.

You don't need an agent to read it until you know you're not publishing this. You can just put it up there and see what people think, so reviews are effectively a new gate keeping service. Very egalitarian.

And you talk about it being valuable and a lot of people do struggle in this area and I'm just trying to think in terms of value, if it's \$400 for your maximum service and you're getting roughly 80 percent, for \$400 you're getting more than 100 reviews? Is that realistic?

Craig Tuch: Typically, yeah. Typically, a lot of people ask for the max service, but they don't get it and to be honest, romance and erotica are pretty much the only genres that we get a high number of sign ups and that's mainly, because there's more readers and there's more readers that we started with, because we started with romance only. Even with the arc product for the first couple of years I think we only did romance.

So, our list was pretty romance heavy. There's some genres that are very polarizing, so self-help, general non-fiction, those kind of books, you either are interested in the topic or you're not. It's not a general fiction book that you're going to give it a try, right?

You don't care about dealing with anxiety or how to have the perfect nails or whatever, right? So, you either care about that or you don't. So, those kind of books typically might only get 10 or 15 people signing up for them. A lot of those people still ask for the max, but they don't pay anywhere near that.



Mainly, it's the romance and romance, a good, contemporary romance will get 200-300 people signing up and then, yeah, they'll usually get, on average, about 80 percent of those.

But even romance, if it's a very genre-specific romance, if it's let's say there's some sci-fi romance or historical, regency romance, those ones don't do as well with our readers. Not to say that they don't get good reviews, but they don't get the sign ups, the number of people signing up in general just because there's less demand for them in our group, in our list.

It doesn't mean that there's no demand out there, just in our particular list. And we're working to grow that and certainly all genres and all subcategories, but it takes time unfortunately.

So typically most of our authors are not paying the max, even though a lot of them ask for it. Most of them are paying more like the minimum or even less than what the minimum is.

James Blatch: I mentioned terms of service there early on. Because we do hear these stories of authors who might mail their own list and say, "Oh, it'd be lovely if you'd leave a review," and then see reviews being deleted, because the Amazon secret algorithm police have decided there's a link between a particular reviewer and an author.

### **Have you had any problems in that area?**

Craig Tuch: There are all sorts of problems with dealing with Amazon. I don't know of any specific link with our reviewers in general but our reviewers have been affected by them.

Usually if I see that somebody's having an issue with it, often they'll email me and tell me they get the standard all of a sudden, their reviews stop working and there's a message that they're affiliated in some way with the author or they're biased, their reviews are biased or whatever.

So, I have an email that I send off to those readers that suggests what they should do about it and typically, in the past, it's worked fairly well, doesn't always work, but I don't know what the particular circumstances are of that reader.

I don't know if they have done something wrong, because it's not specific to one review. Unfortunately, when they do this, when Amazon does this, what they do in almost every case is they delete every review the person's ever written, even for purchased items.

And so, you don't know what the problem was, just one day, they just can't write reviews. Some people even before they've written the first review for us tell us they're getting that message.

There's little that I can do directly, but what I do is I tell them, "Here's what you do. Send an email off to ..." there's a couple different, there's a review appeals address, there's a UK one and a .com one that specifically is an Amazon address for problems with reviews where you want to say, "This isn't a fair judgment."

And sometimes, I tell them to email [jeff@amazon.com](mailto:jeff@amazon.com) to escalate it even further up the chain, because we know that they don't like bad press and typically, these people are unfairly targeted.

It is an algorithm that goes through and judges based on who knows what and often, it works. They often get the appeal reversed and all their reviews restored. So, they don't actually delete them, although they disappear, but they all come back. So, they've basically hidden them, I guess.

James Blatch: Yeah, just checked the box. And from the author's point of view, worse for them is that there's a bunch of reviews just disappear from their book, so then you're an author saying to Amazon, "Why have my reviews disappeared?"

**And that's difficult, because I guess you don't really know who's left a review or what their background is.**

Craig Tuch: Yeah, and often the problem looks worse than it is. Sometimes, I'll have somebody say, "Oh, I had five reviews disappear," and then I'll have another author saying, "Oh, I've had two disappear," and another one will ... and all of these people will email me at once and I'll find out it was really just a few reviewers.

It wasn't a cumulative this guy had five and this guy had six and this guy's had three and add them all up. It's actually the same reviewers just got knocked out, because they deleted everything.

And then, but if I send them the email and they send the emails off to Amazon, then often they get restored and in the past, we've had good luck. But yeah, you can't tell.

Amazon isn't saying and you can't ever ... some people don't get restored and they don't ever tell them and I actually feel like unfortunately, it is a failure in Amazon of a lot of the first-line reps not understanding the rules.

Often, they'll quote a rule that is not even true and I'll say back to the reader, "Ask them to send you a link of where it says that." Because it's not true, they'll be like, "Oh, you're not allowed to do this," and I'll be like, "Sure, you are. Where does it say that?"

Or they'll send back a link to something that they've just totally misinterpreted it and it has not been read correctly and that rule has never been applied that way to anyone else, but that Amazon rep decided that it meant this and blocked the person, so it's unfortunate.

James Blatch: One of the pitfalls of the modern author.

Okay, before we just move off Hidden Gems and onto the other services that you offer, you mentioned the waiting list up until April of next year.

**Is that presumably some genres have a shorter wait list than others or do you get fewer submissions on some areas or ... ?**

Craig Tuch: At one point, it was romance that had the longest waiting list, but because we have such a large list in romance, some depending on the books and how many reviewers they want, I can often send more than one in a day. If somebody only wants 50 romance readers, I can sometimes put another 50 in that day and send two romance books off, because we have more than enough to cover that off.

I've been able to pull back a lot of the wait for romance. I mean, obviously it's still a long wait, but it used to be that romance was way ahead of all the others.

Now, the others have sort of caught up. I think the other genres are sort of maybe March or April whereas romance is June, so somewhere around there.

James Blatch: Wow. That is amazing.

Craig Tuch: But I'm pulling back. Just before this call, I sent three or four emails off to authors saying, "Hey, we've got an earlier date for you." Part of the problem of booking so far in advance for an author is they don't always know what their schedule's going to be like and things change, right?

So, I'm always getting cancellations or moves, date moves where somebody says, "Oh, my book's not going to be ready, can we move it another day?" So I'm shifting the schedule around a lot.

So, books are getting moved around, but I can't guarantee anything.

James Blatch: You need a list 10 times the size. You need 100,000.

Craig Tuch: That would solve all of my problems.

**James Blatch: Yeah. Who doesn't want free books? Who doesn't want to read books for free?**

Craig Tuch: That's what I think, right?

**James Blatch: Was Hidden Gems your first author service that you created?**

Craig Tuch: Yeah, we started Hidden Gems Romance was the website and it was at first, as I said, a mailing list. We still have that where we send off a list of books that are on sale or free three times a week, but that's romance specific.

The lists I have for the other genres just aren't big enough to support that. You're not going to get enough people interested and we still run that and that's a fairly affordable service.

Most of the spots are only \$10. And then, from there, we branched into the review service and I started working on a beta review service, beta reader service, so that's more of an in-depth read, where the reader is providing very detailed information.

The author can provide questions, usually I suggest at least 10 questions specific to their book. So, you might ask did the relationship between the main characters seem realistic to you or did it fall flat or, you know, it depends on the genre.

They can be very specific or generic, whatever the author wants and then the readers sort of answer those questions as they go and provide sort of that more detailed feedback.

So that's something that we're working on now it's in beta testing, I've run probably about 15, 20 of them just for free. I do that for the authors when I'm testing out a new service. So far the feedback's been really good. So that is, we're going to hopefully be launching that soon, but if people wanted they could email me about it.

Then we also provide cover design and editing services through some in house designers and editors that we were closely with, not in house as in this is my house, but as in like there's specifically ones that we've added and that we are confident give the quality that we're known for.

James Blatch: Okay and your service there I guess is suited to early authors, authors with either no list or a small list who don't have an advance for either team. Bigger authors more established might have their own advance relative to it.

**But here you're getting the type of feedback that the ARC teams can give that can help shape the novel pre publication. Is that what you're aiming for?**

Craig Tuch: For the ARC group?

James Blatch: Yeah.

Craig Tuch: Yeah. So I mean we get both. I have some New York Times bestsellers that use our service regularly and I have a lot of new user, new authors that use it.

My own personal feeling, I touched on earlier is that it's not always the best to use your own list. You've built this list up of people. People sign up to an author's list because they like the author's work, they've read the author's work and they want to hear when the author's going to have another book out. Those are people that are willing to buy the book.

Even though a lot of people launch at a lower price, even 99 cents right? And you're only getting 30 cents back. So let's say you have 200 people that sign up for your book, from your own list. So you don't lose out and let's see, you're launching at 99 cents. So your fine setting out those 200 for free right?

So that's fine you only miss out on 60, 65 bucks. But the problem with that is that it's not just the money you've lost but that those 200 people that probably would have bought your book in the first place, that rank is really what you're missing out on.

Those 200 people would have probably bought it all around the same time when you launched and that would have shot you up the Amazon seller list,

which then leads to more organic sales, because people see you in the top of the list.

So by sending it to our list or someone else's list you're not cannibalizing your own known buyers as well as you're exposing yourself to a people that have maybe have never heard of you and then they get a free try at your book and maybe they become fans and that happens a lot.

I see a lot of authors get back to me and say, "Oh I got a bunch of people signing up for my list and I've got all these people sending me emails now." There's a lot of benefits beyond the review itself to using another service. There's a lot of exposure you get.

James Blatch: Do any of your readers end of then going off and finding the author and joining their list? I'm assuming you obviously you don't pass email addresses because that would be not the way it works.

### **But is this in any way shape or form a list building service for authors?**

Craig Tuch: It's not a list building service. It happens. I can't stop it. But I don't provide a way to do it if the reader decides to go off and find the author which is not often not hard to do. You just go to their website or even it's in their book and sign up then they can. I know what happens because I've seen comments.

So one of the things we do is we send, on our form, on our reader form we have a spot for readers to leave an optional comment to the author specifically. It's not anything that goes to the review site. It doesn't go to Amazon, it doesn't go to our website. It's a comment they say, they leave for the author and then we send that to the author at the end of the service.

Sometimes I'll see somebody else say, "Hey I loved your book and I went and I joined your list and I want to read more of them." This and that. It happens but it's not meant as that sort of a service.

**James Blatch: Okay so if we list your services that you've got now Craig, have we covered everything that you are offering at the moment?**

Craig Tuch: Yes. I think we're always looking at new stuff but in general those are our main things.

Our next big focus will be the beta reading service because it seems like that's one of the ... I've gotten some comments from authors saying, "Oh other people do covers and other people do editing so they don't need those service now." That's true most authors when they find a good editor, when they find a good cover designer, they don't need any others.

We want to be able to offer a complete suite of services and then be able to bundle and have pass savings along. That's one of the reasons why we're offering those.

But one of the things that they say is, "The review service we can't get anywhere else to this level and this quality," and the beta is what people are asking for a lot as well because it's hard to find beta readers and you have to usually, you have to go multiple places to find more than one and really with beta readers you want more than one because everyone's got an opinion right?

If you get one person beta reading your book, do you know that their opinion is the same as everyone else's or is it a very personnel opinion that they had? So it's often better to have three or five people reading the books so that you can then see, "Okay everyone is saying this about my book. So I really should pay more attention to that specific point."

**James Blatch: Where can people find these services Craig?**

Craig Tuch: On [hiddengemsbooks.com](http://hiddengemsbooks.com) and then in the author's services section we have all the services listed out. If people are interested in the beta reading service is not listed there because, we're still testing it. But



they can certainly emailing me and I'll let them know the state of it or whether we can take on some more tests.

**James Blatch: Any plans to resume your writing career?**

Craig Tuch: I would love to, but I'm so busy now. It's just that this thing keeps me very busy. It's pretty much a one man show. When I write emails I write as "We," but it's more the royal "We."

I do have a couple developers but they are just for developing. So they're busy with building out the new stuff, I'm busy designing the new stuff. I would love to read but I have a list a mile long.

One of the things I want to get and I think will help us get more readers is an app, where people can share the app and they can get their books on the app and then notifications that new books have arrived. One of the biggest problems with a service, any kind of mailing list service right now is the mailing list is they go to spam, they get blocked, they got lost in the shuffle of the inbox.

I would love to disconnect from that but it's a hard thing to do. I think an app would help. Now I'm designing an app. There's always more to do. I have an idea for a non-romance, YA sort of sci-fi book but I don't know when I'm going to getting to write it.

James Blatch: No. No I know that position is-

**Craig Tuch: How's your book coming along?**

James Blatch: It's coming along now. I've got a program where I get kicked up the ass every week to produce some chapters.

Craig Tuch: Oh yeah, yeah. I saw. I know.

James Blatch: So that's the only way it's getting written really because I'm a bit like you it's very difficult. But anyway yes it's cathartic though writing isn't it? It's a good thing to do. I would having got completely into it now

and quite intensively into it now, I think I would miss it like anything if it suddenly disappeared.

Craig Tuch: Yeah and I think, and I'm sort of keeping up with it by writing feature articles and guest posts for other websites but that's all I can, and my own blog as well.

But that's all I can really, we try to write some author centric emails on our blogs, giving tips and I have people, that's another thing if authors want to write a guest post for us, they're welcome to submit something. That's the only way I get any done these days.

James Blatch: Craig, well look, busy man thank you so much indeed for taking time to join us today and a [hiddengemsbooks.com](http://hiddengemsbooks.com) is the place to go. I suppose if I was clever I would have sorted out an affiliate link with you in advance but that's fine we'll just send everyone there and you can buy me a beer at a conference at some point if anyone signs up.

Craig Tuch: Sure.

James Blatch: Great. We'll look forward to seeing how it grows, particularly your list, which is like your number one priority at the moment isn't it? To get that waiting list down and get that list up.

Craig Tuch: Yep definitely. Well thanks for having me on. I really appreciate it.

James Blatch: Okay there we are. There is Craig who has his team of advanced readers for you to tap into and get that feedback and get those reviews and everything else and he's expanding the service as you've heard.

His big thing, his big focus of course is growing that list. But he's in a great position, one of the many companies in this self-publishing area who are providing a service, worked out a need, supplying a solution to it's and are growing in the process so it was good to talk to Craig.

You got quite a big older ARC, do you not? Not quite as big as Noah's, but 700 odd?

Mark Dawson: Yes about that yeah. 650 I think at the moment. I've culled it a little bit over the last six months. But I'm expecting a book back from my editor Jen today and I'll get that turned around and out for comments tomorrow for release on the 21st. So they will get about 10 days to look at that.

### **James Blatch: At what stage do you send your book out?**

Mark Dawson: Well there's not much point in me sending out a book that hasn't been copy edited because they'll just send back the same misspelled word 200 times.

What I do is get my copy editor to clean it up so that when it goes up the only errors in there are the ones that she may have missed. And there will be some, there always are. And that's not to someone to say there's something wrong with that it's just, it's difficult if not impossible to catch them all with one pair of eyes.

But the beauty of that is it's gone through a professional edit. The thing goes out to 200, 300 people who actively feedback and anything that slips through, someone will see it.

People read in different ways. Some of them will be very, very particular persnickety even and will go through very, very carefully and will suggest things and will see things others don't.

Others will read it on a more of a macro level and will kind of correct, not so much the punctuation or the spelling, it will be more about the constant work that we mark. They serve two distinct functions so by the end of the process I have a very, very clean manuscript with possibly no mistakes in it or very few.

James Blatch: To me in a way that's almost still micro level. Does anyone feedback to you and say stuff about the story, or the character and say, "I don't quite buy into this."

Mark Dawson: No that's not, that is kind of very macro. No I don't get that. Very rarely, occasionally, I think my book Redeemer, I didn't like the ending and they didn't like it either. So just having that confirmed to me was the ... I think they would've changed it anyway but it was, if there's any questions that would've persuaded me that I needed to work on it.

I spent another couple weeks reworking the ending significantly and then sent it back to them for, if you want to read the new ending. Tell me what you think, and they would love that.

So that's the only time, but I've written 30 books now, remember. I don't need developmental help very often. I have a very instinctive feel for story, just through a lot of practice. Occasionally they'll pick that up. What I refer to macro level issues usually, I mean facts really, fact checks or continuity as well.

He had a red coat on here and then a white coat on three pages later and then the micro level of it, kind of the typos and the punctuation and that kind of stuff. So when everything is put together, lots of different being with different approaches to the actual manuscript.

By the end of that process it's clean and then I'll send it again for a proof read because it's possible I could introduce changes, as I'm introducing changes, I could then have errors in the changes.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: So by the time that process takes about a month all in and it produces a very, very clean manuscript.

James Blatch: When people write to you and say that, "The Glock 9 millimeter snub nose bullet will create a blood splatter that reaches 20 feet. I have personal experience."

### **Do you ever refer those emails to the police?**

Mark Dawson: No, I don't actually. What I think is worth finishing, I don't know, it's not kind of, not to be mentioned. I got an email from Amazon today, a general email, saying that they are now changing the, I don't know the screen of it, they're now changing the front end of the KDB platform. So instead of getting irritating emails about errors that readers have reported, there's now a central hub, which I think is cool, the quality dashboard or something along those lines.

What's it called? Quality issues. They'll report open issues, books that have been suppressed, typos, reports, all kinds of stuff like that. It's much more convenient and it just reminded me now that one of my books, the first one I ever wrote has actually got a quality warning on the product page of the mem, because I did an ... It's terrible, very lazy of me, I did an optical transfer.

James Blatch: Oh no scanned it.

Mark Dawson: I don't scanned it effectively. So it's looking some of these errors, looking earlier, it's taken, it's changed the word corner into the word comer, C-O-M-E-R because the R and the N, that looks like an M, if you think about how they look.

James Blatch: It's already faced with the coma.

Mark Dawson: It's put flat mate spelled one where the L should be. So I really need to change that, but no one buys that book, it never actually, it sold a bit last month. Now I'm going to change that I'm being very lazy.

James Blatch: Is that The Rockstar?

Mark Dawson: Yes. It is yeah.

James Blatch: That's The Rock-, I have read that book.

Mark Dawson: Well it's the first one I ever wrote.

James Blatch: I'm pleased that you do get that though because I do point out typos in books I read and I don't think I've ever read a book without finding at least one typo and highlighting it on the kindle and just putting a note. I'm pleased that they do go somewhere.

Mark Dawson: They do go tot the authors. Not first, but this will tell you. It's called yeah, Falling Apart since I optically transferred it and uploaded it very lazily it's made in \$85,000.

James Blatch: There you go.

Mark Dawson: It's not bad. But I needed to fix it because maybe some people would've come in and bought that without reading anything else by me and they may never read another one now because they're like, "He's obviously just scanning these books. He doesn't care."

James Blatch: He's in a coma. He's driven me around the coma. Yes.

I remember when I changed the name of my character from Jack, once I change it from, oh to Jack to something else. But of course the result of that, it replace all through a document is the unforeseen consequences of somebody putting, Oh I changed it from jack to Nigel. So people started putting on their Nigelcoat before they went out the house.

Mark Dawson: You know there's a way to avoid that don't you?

James Blatch: Yes I do know that now, I did this a long time ago and I still wet behind the ears, like I'm not anymore.

Okay good, excellent well we're drawing it out, we're drawing out the last vestiges, the last vestiges of daylight of the Self-publishing Formula

podcast and we will return, brand spanking new as the Self Publishing show, episode 150 and you will have a little party prop there to pull to hopefully mark your big milestone this year which we'll be all very excited about and yeah we look forward to finding out who is marked awesome in episode 150.

James Blatch: It's me. I knew it.

Mark Dawson: That was quick.

James Blatch: See you next week.

Mark Dawson: Yeah thanks. Bye-bye.

Narrator: You've been listening to the Self Publishing Formula podcast. Visit us at [selfpublishingformula.com](http://selfpublishingformula.com) for more information, show notes and links on today's topics. You can also sign up for our free video series on using Facebook ads to grow your mailing list. If you've enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. We'll see you next time.