



EPISODE 150: THE MILLION DOLLAR YEAR – WITH MARK DAWSON

Speaker 1: On this addition of The Self-Publishing Show.

Mark Dawson: With hard work and a little bit of talent, it's possible. It's never been more possible to make enough money to leave your job or to make really significant amounts of money like I've been lucky enough to make.

Speaker 1: Publishing is changing. No more gatekeepers. No more barriers. No one standing between you and your readers. Do you want to make a living from your writing? Join indie best-seller Mark Dawson and first time author James Blatch as they shine a light on the secrets of self-publishing success. This is The Self-Publishing Show. There's never been a better time to be a writer.

James Blatch: Hello and welcome to the very first edition of The Self-Publishing Show. I'm James Blatch.

Mark Dawson: And I am Mark Dawson.

James Blatch: Now it's not really the first edition, is it?

Mark Dawson: No, not really. We've had a 149 of these so far. And under our previous inclination as a Self-publishing Formula Podcast. But we decided that now was the time to change things up, to give it a coat of paint.

We discovered that The Self-Publishing Show hadn't been claimed. Wasn't that weird? So we grabbed that as quickly as we could. And in the meantime, we have been very busy putting together what we hope is going to be the best self-publishing podcast in the market today.



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

James Blatch: Yeah. And I guess there are two reasons behind it. One is that we're moving to video a lot more. So we'd urge you to visit our YouTube channel and watch this show if you get an opportunity to. We put a lot of time and effort into the presentation of it.

And thank you by the way, to our Patreon supporters. There is a new URL for Patreon, but it's the same account. Because you have enabled us to invest in this show and really bring it up to where we hope it is today.

And the other reason I think for rebranding and upping our game is that we've started at the tail-end of the pioneer phase. I guess we're still in the pioneer phase of indie. But when there were a few people who were pioneering and working out how to do this. And in a few short years, indie publishing has transformed into a billion dollar industry.

It still feels the same sweet supportive environment, which is great. But it is a fantastically vibrant and exciting, and I hate to use the word but I'm going to use the word, "Transformative," industry. And we want our show to be the heart of that.

Mark Dawson: We do absolutely. The ethos is the same, but the opportunities are much greater now than they were when I started out.

James Blatch: Which brings us on to this episode. So what we're going to do is, we're going to talk a bit about you, Mark. And what you do, and how you do it. And how you got there. And that all comes from a post that you put into the Facebook group.

We have a community Facebook group, which I know most of you will be a member of. Of course you can just search for Self-Publishing Formula on Facebook, and you will find it. And last night you reached a landmark. And you posted in a screen grab of your KDP dashboard. And at the top of that were your year to date earnings from the 1st of January 2018. And it was if I remember rightly, \$1 000 055.

You are a seven figure a year author now. How does that feel?



Mark Dawson: A bit weird to be honest. It's pretty nuts. I'm very flattered and surprised, and feel quite lucky to be in this position. And was very flattered by the support that I got from the community when I posted that into the group last night. It was really, really lovely.

But yes, it was funny. It was a funny evening. I spent dinner with Lucy and her mum, and her husband, with my phone out basically refreshing it every five minutes. Which is kind of what I used to do back in the day, just waiting for that to tick over. It seemed to be stuck on \$999 000 for quite a long time.

And then around about 10 o'clock it ticked over. I grabbed the screen, and post it into the group. And then I had a very good day yesterday. Yesterday I did three and a half thousand dollars worth of sales yesterday, which was the best for ages since the September slowdown.

So really, really pleased to be able to have crossed the line triumphantly. And now I have three weeks left to go to. Just wonder how much further I can push it this year.

James Blatch: And we should say that the KDP dashboard is not your total sales. So in actual fact, if you had a spreadsheet somewhere that had all your sales together, you are very much seven figures a year.

Mark Dawson: Oh, yeah. It doesn't include Audible, it doesn't include my Thomas & Mercer income, which is reasonably significant. Audible quite significant too. It doesn't include non-fiction, so any of the SPF stuff. None of that's included.

So yeah, its revenue this year is considerably north of a million already. But this was just for digital sales on Amazon.

James Blatch: Good. Well, we congratulate you, Mark. And we celebrate your success, which is one of the key aspects of this community that we do that. And the reason we talk about this, and we're talking about it in commercial terms.



And not everybody, the money making aspect is not the end-goal for them, which is of course absolutely fine. But for many people listening to the podcast, it is something that they think about. They'd like to move into writing full-time.

And so this podcast will be about you and how you operate, how you got to this point. We'll try and get some learning from you.

I guess the way you traveled from where you started to where you are today is part and parcel the story of indie publishing, the unfolding aspect of this industry.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. It's not a journey. It's a voyage.

James Blatch: It's a voyage. That's just another word for journey.

Mark Dawson: And it's just as bad. Now, one of the things I posted last night was saying to people, "Here are some things I remember from some stages along the way." So where I was and things I was doing, and getting my first check, getting my first ... Yeah, I was paid by check.

Getting my first subscriber, the first sale, the first BookBub promotion. All of those things that I remember quite well. And those are things that all authors will go through. I've been doing this for a little while now.

And so when you publish your book, you'll be feeling the same things and you'll have the same experiences that I have. Just I suppose with the difference will be there will be more people at that level going through the process when you publish in 2025.

Mark Dawson: So there's more of us now, which is great. And thankfully there's no shortage of readers for us all to entertain with our books.

James Blatch: Yeah. Okay. Well look, let me take you back. Because we've spoken a little bit about this before, but let's recap how you got to where you are.



So writing, I know you've said this before, writing was something you wanted to do and you found yourself doing even as an adolescent, slightly geeky adolescent at school.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. My first piece of longer creative writing was a science fiction novella that I wrote when I stayed after school in the maths department with the maths teacher, Mr. Guttridge on one side, and my English teacher Mrs Harrod-Eagles on the other side.

James Blatch: Mrs. what?

Mark Dawson: Harrod-Eagles. I know, it's a bit weird.

James Blatch: Have you ever used that name in your books?

Mark Dawson: I think I'd struggle. Yeah, so they basically let me stick around so I could use the school computers, 'cause we didn't have one at home. And I wrote a novella.

I remember it being printed out on a daisy-chain printer. So all that, tearing the strips off either side, the little tractor strips. Obviously it was dreadful. I don't think I even have it anymore, which is a benefit. But it wasn't any good.

I guess I was picking away at other things for a little while. And then when I eventually got through university and ended up in London as a lawyer, I started to write again. I had a couple of books traditionally published in 1990 to 2000, 2001 around that kinda time.

James Blatch: Your feeling at that point is that writing is something you enjoyed doing.

Did you think at that stage when somebody said to you, "What would you like to be when you grow up, Mark?" Did you answer, "I'm going to be a writer."



Mark Dawson: When I was at school probably not. I think I always wanted to do that. I was thinking about journalism for a little while. But then I allowed myself to be kind of led away from that path by people who said there's no money in writing.

Journalists don't get very well paid. The odds of making it as a successful and financially viable author are quite long. And I allowed myself to listen to that advice. Which is probably not bad advice, 'cause some of that is true. At least it would've been true in those days, not so much these days.

I followed the natural path. My A-levels was to law school. And then once I got to law school, I had a firm from London offering to pay for my law school in exchange for working for them as a trainee for a couple years.

You get so far down a certain path that it's very difficult to back off it and go somewhere else. And so I was kind of inevitably going to do law for a while. And I did it for about five years, very badly. And quite miserably until I managed to get myself, "Fired," is quite too strong a word, but asked to leave would be slightly more accurate.

James Blatch: Well, you didn't end up in prison.

Mark Dawson: No, I didn't. My second book is called *Subpoena Colada*. And it's based on, maybe based on some things that I may have done potentially.

James Blatch: That's the other for lawyers ending their career. What I'm thinking about here is that for most people, it's a sad feeling really is that they have a creative dream when they're looking at being an actor or a writer, or a painter, or something.

The vast majority I imagine fall by the wayside, because it's difficult to make money in those areas. And they end up doing a sort of 09:00 to 05:00 job that they may or may not enjoy.

Now for you I think two things happened:



One is, obviously it was eating away at you a little bit. And you were motivated to start writing again when you were still a lawyer, I think.

And then there was the bigger breakthrough which happened a little bit later. But just tell me about that.

You had that bug, and it wasn't letting you go at this stage.

Mark Dawson: No. I guess I was always thinking about it in the back of my mind. And then a friend of mine at the law firm asked me to read his novel. He'd written something.

I read it, and he was going to do the traditional take it around to agents and try and get a deal gig. And I read it. I wasn't all that impressed with it. I didn't think it was anything special.

But he had finished something, which was something I had never managed to do before. So that was the impetus I needed to take an idea I had, and then started to write and see where I went with it.

I wrote a short ... It was going to be a short story. It was going to be a collection of short stories which I thought rather arrogantly that a publisher would want to publish a collection of short stories by an author no one had every heard of before.

But I sent theses stories off to an agent. And one of them said ... I think they thought it was, or I may have led them to believe it was part of a novel. And they came back to me and said, "We would love to represent you. Can we have the rest of the novel?"

And, of course, I had to say, "Yes, I've just got a few edits to do. And it'll be a little while." Given that I have about 10 000 words and nothing else.

So I then, I spent the best of two or three months working really ridiculously hard, so coming home from the law and working from like 08:00 till 02:00 or 03:00 in the morning. Pushed myself, thrown myself into the ground to



finish this book. Did so, sent it off. They liked it. And they started to send it around London to publishers. And then we got one who was interested.

They offered me quite a lot of money. In fact, I did two books with them, and I think the total result was about £50 000. So pretty good really. Not small change.

But that was all the money I saw from those books, because they didn't earn their advances out. Which as anyone who knows anything about publishing will tell, is pretty much the death knell of a career as an author. If you can't pay your advance back, you've lost the publisher money.

So I had lost quite a lot of money I think. And they weren't interested in a third book. My agent parted ways with me for lots of different reasons. And I kinda gave up. I didn't write anything for about another five or six years until we all met up at the BBFC watching pornography for a living.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: And the rest is history.

James Blatch: Yes. Well, so you had this chance. You talk about buying out the advance. I'm slightly curious about the maths of this.

Let's say a publisher gives you a 50 000 advance. And you're on a 10% royalty. By paying off your advance, or you're effectively talking about is your 10% paying off the 50 000 you've been given in advance. It doesn't necessarily mean the company haven't made money. Because of course they're keeping after expenses and royalties. They're keeping 60, 70% of the book cover price.

Mark Dawson: Well, advance on royalties. So if you get paid a £100 as an advance, anything the book makes up until that 100 is paid back, your royalty share has paid back that 100 goes to the publisher.



James Blatch: Yes. But what I mean is...Well, okay. You have a clear royalty, yeah? Because you still got your advance. You're talking about of that £100, nominally 15% of it was going to go to you. And that nominally gets set aside against the-

Mark Dawson: Oh, I don't know. I don't know.

James Blatch: Well, what I'm saying is, I think publishing companies can make money from something before the advances are put off. But anyway, I'm curious, because these deals are still being offered. And authors are still doing the sums on whether it's going to be worth it for them or not.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: So this is an aside. I would love to have in front of us two or three standard contracts that publishers are offering today. And we can run some figures. And we can tell people, give people a guide on what they think the book's going to do and what the sort of risk assessment is on this.

But anyway, that's an aside.

Okay, so you had a second bite at it. You're a lawyer, still niggling away at you. And I know how you operate as well. Probably a little bit of competitiveness when your friend said, "Oh, I've written this 50 000 word book." And you maybe thought, "I can do that."

And that's a good driver for you. You have a very typical traditional publishing experience that everybody apart from a handful, figuratively speaking, a handful of authors have. Which is that it didn't do so well. Publishing company lose interest in marketing it after a little while. Drops away and then you sit there thinking, "Well, was that it? Was that my writing career over?"

But then something else happened as you mentioned. So you then dodged jail, finished your law career. Ended up at the British Board of Film Classification where you and I watched films and pornography, filthy



pornography for a living and cut it with our red pens, saying, "Cut this. Band this sick filth."

It was a great job. It was well-paid. It was in a fantastic part of London, Soho. One of the highlights was working in the center of Soho.

And I remember almost the day, you and I and another guy called Jim used to play a bit of poker occasionally at lunch time. And it was around that time that Jim said to you, "I actually made a little bit of money from my writing, my book writing."

And then competitive Mark, also yearning to write Mark, woke up again.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, exactly. So he'd published. And another guy, another friend of mine called Brian also was doing the same thing at the same time. And he was doing a little better than Jim was.

And I opened my eyes to the possibility. So I started writing again. And I wrote a novel called *The Black Mile*, which was set in Soho. So not far from where we were working. And involved a serial killer, a real-life serial killer from the Blitz, during the 40s.

And took me a long time to write. I was very keen to make sure it was authentic, so I was doing trips to the National Archives, look at the boxes of police reports and crime scene photographs from the real case.

Going up to Colindale to the National Archive for newspapers and looking through old microfiches of newspapers in the 40s, which was great fun. And I dumped all of this into this book to make it as authentic as possible.

I think it probably took me about 18 months to write it, which is glacially slow by my pace these days. By most authors' pace these days.

But I put it out there. Before that, I got another agent. She tried to sell it around London, because I still even at that stage thought that traditional



publishing was the way to go. So I still haven't completely learned my lesson by that point.

We got a few nice rejections from people who said that it wasn't quite right, or they published something similar before. And so it was just sitting there on my desk. And I thought, "Well, it's not doing me any good being here. I might as well self-publish it."

So I learnt how to do that. Put that all together. Got a cover, got a friend of mine actually to paint a cover for me. He's a very good artist, and he painted this cover that I thought was brilliant. Changed that now, 'cause it didn't work so well even though this is this gorgeous image.

Put it up there onto Amazon, and waited for the flood of money. Waited for Jeff to backup a Briggs truck onto the lawn, tip it up and all these dollars would pour out. Didn't really happen like that though. The first check I got from Amazon I think was for about \$11. Which was still a cool moment.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: It's still one I remember very much is a seed that something was possible with regards to self-publishing that wouldn't have been possible before.

James Blatch: So you had this moment with *The Black Mile*, which opened your eyes to the possibility.

And at some point around here, a faded post-traumatically disordered ex-MI6 agent came into your life. When did he wander up to you?

Mark Dawson: I was going to say, that's no way to talk about Lucy.

James Blatch: I have no idea that was her past.

Mark Dawson: I don't remember exactly how that came to me, or why I decided to go off in a different direction. It's probably because I realized



that there was a ... I was fishing in a smaller pool with a kind of noir 40s fiction.

I was reading lots of James Elroy. And I'm thinking about that kind of stuff. And it's probably a smaller pool than the one that Lee Child fishes in for example with one of the best selling authors in the world.

So I wanted to write something that had to be attractive to a much bigger audience. But also it would be something that I would enjoy writing. And I've been thinking about a character for a while. I used to love the 1980s CBS show, *The Equalizer*. Starring Edward Woodward.

James Blatch: You would say that.

Mark Dawson: Which is the reason why there are consonants of course, 'cause then he'd be, "Eaooa."

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: I thought I'd love to take that kind of character and update him. And mix in a dash of Daniel Craig, Ian Fleming style Bond. As to not be the Roger Moore Bond that you like. But the more gritty Bond that came back with *Casino Royale*.

And so I thought about that for a little while, and then started to write. And even then it was weird. I mean, I had the first book, *The Cleaner* is one that sold hundreds and thousands of copies. But if I was writing it again, I wouldn't have written that book. Because it's set in the East End of London. I used a lot of gang slang. So it's all authentic.

I've just actually sent a sequel to my advance team. And a lot of the Americans are coming back saying, "Why are they referring to the police as feds?" Feds is an American term. Which is of course it's true.



But I know it's also a term that's used in London. But not many people know that. So I'll probably actually take that out, because if most people are thinking I've got it wrong.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: It's not doing me any good. So I'll probably be taking that out.

But anyway, it's not the most accessible book. It doesn't end happily with all the ends nicely knotted up. It's quite an open ending and it's quite bleak. So it's not necessarily the kind of the exactly what you'd want. It's not Jack Reacher going in and saving the day, and riding off into the sunset. It's very much different from that.

So anyway, I started writing that. And published it. It started to do reasonably well. I don't remember exactly what the numbers were. But it started to sell a little bit. Enough for me to write another one.

I had another idea. One of the benefits of him is, I can put him anywhere in the world where I want him to go. He just travels around.

So I went to Mexico for the second book. And then San Francisco for the third book. And in the fourth book which is called *Ghosts* is set in Moscow. And it's slightly more Bond-ish. And it's kind of very international in its scope.

This was like 2014. I was starting to do maybe two or \$3000 a month. So not a million miles off what I was earning in my full-time job. And I could see at that point that maybe this was something that to my surprise could be something that I could do as a career.

James Blatch: So this decision to write Milton I'm interested in, because a lot of us, and I include myself here are at this stage of thinking, "Well, this is what I enjoyed writing. But I've gotta think about what is going to sell." Writing to market. This sort of decision that we make.



You obviously had that background of enjoying writing a noir book. But was Milton a purely commercial decision for you?

Did you just think, "Okay. What's working? I'm going to do that." And did it take you away from what you enjoyed writing?

Mark Dawson: No. I love writing Milton. I mean, I love writing everything to be honest. No, I've always enjoyed his stories. They're fast, they're addictive for me to write. And it usually translates to something quite hard for readers to put down as well.

The nicest bits of praise I get from readers is that they were reading at 04:00 in the morning, 'cause they just had to keep reading.

So it wasn't commercial. It was a blend of motivations. One of them was, as I've hinted at, was commercial. I knew there's a big audience for that kind of book. But also it had to be something that I would enjoy.

And then thirdly, it had to be something that I could write quickly, and I didn't need to go and do that exhaustive research that I'd been doing for the last couple of books. It had to be something that I could research online.

All of those things have proven to be true. They're easy to write in terms of research. They're appealing to a big slice of the thriller market. And I love writing them. So everything is operating optimally at the moment.

James Blatch: So there's something else we should say at this point. Talking about writing to market is it the number of people available to buy a book has gone up exponentially online. And it's going up every day. I mean, millions of people every month are joining.

New demographics are filling out in our part of world. Other parts of the world like emerging middle-class in Africa and in sub-continent are growing. And Amazon's presence is evolving around the world. So we do



hear complaints from people saying, "Well, there's too many people. It's too competitive now. More difficult to get sales."

But then we also hear stories from people like Octavia Randolph. And I know you mentioned her occasionally. We've had her on the podcast. It's somebody as an example who has a niche that she loves writing and adores it. It's obviously brilliant to writing in it. But frankly, this is not a commercial niche, is it?

Mark Dawson: Well, yes it.

James Blatch: Well, it is a commercial niche. But if you went to a publisher with it.

Mark Dawson: Yes. I think probably publishers would think twice about it. Because they might look at the scale of Scandinavian romance and think that's quite small and it'll be difficult for them to make a profit given their additional overhead.

For a clever indie, you can write well in that niche like Octavia. She has generated a healthy six figure income from those books that she loves. And that is what's possible now.

And that's very similar to me. It's different in that I am writing in one of the bigger niches. So romance probably the biggest in terms of hungry readers. But Lee Child, James Patterson. These are two of the biggest authors in the world. And that is two of the authors that I aim to emulate, certainly in terms of the kind of content of my books.

And with those opportunities it's possible to do really well as you can see, it's possible to make a million dollars from your books in a year, which sounds bit nuts. I've demonstrated that that's possible. And I'm not the only one.

We should probably state at this point that I can think of several authors in the SPF community who are doing better than that. And I've met plenty of



other authors who are doing even better than them. So there are a lot of authors who are doing really well.

Amazon had a stat not too long ago, something like a 1000 authors are making more than a 100 000 a year on the Kindle platform. So what that doesn't show you is, it doesn't show you maybe the 50 000 authors who are making 50 000 a year. It also doesn't tell you how many of those are making more than a 100 000. And it's probably quite a lot are making more than that.

James Blatch: I think I mentioned at the 20 Books Vegas conference there was a moment when Craig Martel asked people to put their hands up, "Who's making 5000 a year? Who's making 25? Who's making a 100? And who's making more than a 100 000 a month?" There was a small number of hands went up. I mean, might be half a dozen in the room. I couldn't believe it.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I can believe it. Absolutely.

James Blatch: And the last thing to say just on this particular subject is that making money at this level, or making this amount of money is not necessarily your own expectation if you listen to this.

You might be listening to this podcast 'cause you want to learn about writing, you want to be able to get your books out there. But you don't have pretensions of being a millionaire from it. And that's absolutely fine of course.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Neither did I. I didn't think it was possible. And I certainly, it wasn't my goal. And I'm not materialistic either. It's a good way of keeping score. But it's not something that I go to bed sweating about.

James Blatch: But you don't go to bed sweating anymore, no.

Mark Dawson: No.



The Self-Publishing Show now. We are well-known. I am well-known for being the author who does Facebook ads and Amazon ads. And I understand marketing I think quite well.

And so the authors who listen to a show like this, or watch it on YouTube, or follow us on wherever they follow us. They're not necessarily coming to me for craft advice. I don't do craft advice.

They're interested in how they can make their books visible and how they can sell more books, how they can start to increase their monthly revenue. So they are probably commercially minded. I'm sure they are.

I've been blogging about my monthly income this year is just to show what is possible with taking good books and then applying common sense. And not radical, fairly sensible and tried and tested advertising principles to those products, and then selling more and more of them.

James Blatch: Yes, absolutely. And inspirational words for people starting out.

I was thinking as you were saying that, we do hear another sort of complaint or negative that we hear from people is that, "Everybody's doing this. It's too competitive these days," et cetera.

But you also have to remember more and more people by the millions are joining the digital world, and are available to buy and read books every day. And it's still growing up.

And even within Western countries, it's not just spreading to other parts of world. Demographics are filling out. And older people read a lot, and they're coming on in droves.

So at the time is becoming, yes more of a challenge. Need to be better at selling. The opportunity for finding your niche has never been better.



Mark Dawson: Absolutely. It's a growing market. I don't think we're near tapping out the size of the market. Far from it.

It's not just the U.S. and the U.K. are fairly well-developed in terms of digital reading. I think Germany is catching up quite fast. The Australasian countries.

Then you got places where Amazon doesn't have a big footprint yet. Scandinavia for example, or Africa. People are coming online in Africa at a very fast rate. So the market is ginormous. We're not anywhere near the upper end of it yet.

James Blatch: I want to take you back to not the J word, but the experience that you went through to get where you are. You put it up for free. So you discovered that you could put it up for free. Now, let me ask you about that before we talk about the fact that you didn't have a mailing list at this point.

How nervous were you about this prospect? And was it a sort of psychological hurdle for you to get over to suddenly make your book free?

Mark Dawson: No, not really. I had been listening to enough podcasts at that point within the indie space to know that this was a good way to generate interest. And I've never been one to think that if I give it away 50 000 times that I won't make any money, because that's not even a fraction of the market.

I was finding it very difficult to make the book stand out. And I knew that that was a good way to do it. And in those days, the way that free downloads were treated was a little bit different.

So it was possible coming to the end of the gold, I suppose the gold rush years, I was a little bit too late for that. A download would count the same as a sale. So you'd get a really high ranking.



And then when you came off free and went back to paid again, you'd have a good maybe a few weeks when your sales would be strong, because the book was much more visible than it was before shoved it up the list by making it free.

So no, I wasn't reluctant at all. I've never been one to look at free promotions as cheapening art, or not valuing my writing. It's quite the opposite. There are plenty of examples in traditional industry of people giving away something in order to get you to buy something else.

You can look at going into a supermarket and having a little taste of salami on a plate. Because they're on sale, if you like it you're going to buy something that might cost three or £4.

And the slightly more elicited example is, we know James, when you go to your dealer on a Friday night and he offer you a free sample of whatever he's just had imported from Holland. He'll give you a free one, 'cause he knows the ones he's got you hooked on on that free sample you're going to want to come back.

And at that point, it won't be free anymore. You're going to have to start paying. So similar to drug dealer economics, I could see that that was something that would work quite well.

James Blatch: Yes. Well, often these huge elicited industries are the ones that lead the way. And we know from our experience with the BBFC that pornography led technology for a long time.

Mark Dawson: It always does.

James Blatch: All the big developments in VHS and DVD, and all this stuff.

Mark Dawson: Print.

James Blatch: And print was led by porn.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.



James Blatch: So there you go. We got a lot to learn from these people.

You gave it away.

You sat under your tree and looked at your phone and thought, "Oh my God, 50 000 people now have my book," which was a great feeling. And then you suddenly realized that you didn't have their email addresses.

Mark Dawson: I don't think I realized that at the time. I think it was something that I realized as I taught myself things I needed to know. And I realized that that was a really bad lost opportunity.

It wasn't just that I didn't have their email address. I had nothing else. So I had no other real presence on Amazon. This was the first book that I had published. And there was nowhere for them to go. There was no end matter. There was no, "Here is a website." Because I didn't have a website. There was no, "Join the mailing list and get," something.

Actually in those days, you didn't even need to do that. You could just say, "Join the mailing list and you'll get updates on when the next book is out." I didn't do that. I didn't do anything.

I really was just basically bringing things up, crossing my fingers and hoping for the best. Which is sometimes that works. But it's not very often. It didn't work that way for me.

James Blatch: Where did you learn your trade? Your early mailing list decisions?

Mark Dawson: I listened to a lot of podcasts. Actually, in the Facebook post I put on the group last night, I remember lots of ... My memory is not great, right? So I often forget things. I'm quite spontaneous. And I'm in the moment quite a lot.



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

But I don't often remember a lot of stuff that's gone before. But I remember lots of things from doing this over the last six or seven years. And I could remember for example, in my wife's old Ford Focus. I'd never driven it till I until I came down to Salisbury, where I haven't for a long time. So I was driving to the shop to buy some food.

And I remember it's a Winter's day, so probably the similar kinda time a year as this. It was cold and wet, and unpleasant. And I was sitting. I think I had somehow, I'd hooked my iPhone to the stereo, and I was playing The Self-Publishing Form ... No. That's us.

James Blatch: That's us.

Mark Dawson: The Self-Publishing podcast.

James Blatch: Sure.

Mark Dawson: With Johnny, Sean and Dave. I listened to all of their back episodes. And they must've had a couple of 100. Or certainly a 100 by the time I got into them. So I listened to all of those sequentially, and just hoovered up all the information I could.

I listened to Rocking Self-Publishing with Simon Whistler. He doesn't do it anymore. But he interviewed in the same way that we do, successful indies and others who are starting out to kind of get best-practice. So I listened to him. Joanna Penn I found quite early on and listened to her podcasts.

I started to listen there. Then I would've gone slightly out of the niche and into the wider space. And KBoards as well. KBoards was great in the early days. It's not so great these days. But I learnt an awful lot from there.

I would've found David Gaughran's books from there. And of course the funny thing is, we've had all these people on our podcast now. So I know all of them now.

James Blatch: And we meet them and know them.



Mark Dawson: And I teach them.

James Blatch: Yes.

Mark Dawson: It's pretty nuts. But yeah, so it just all comes round by. I mean, David's books, *Let's Get Digital*, *Let's Get Visible*. Digital especially I remember was ... I remember reading it thinking like, "This is brilliant. He's a very clever guy." And I could see what his message was, and what he was saying was possible.

So yeah, I just kind of, I sucked up as much as I could. KBoards was a good resource in those days. And people like Hugh Howey was posting there regularly. Russel Blake, again we've had him on the podcast.

Even it was kind of the end just after people like Amanda Hawking and John Locke who were real trailblazers in the days when it was, you could put anything up on the Kindle with a cover you'd made yourself. And you would charge 99 cents, and you would clear up. Because no one was pricing that way.

That was the gold rush. You could make thousands and thousands of dollars in those days. It's not like that now. You have to be a lot more professional. But I was learning from those kinds of people as well.

James Blatch: So you set up a mailing list. In Mail Chimp?

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Eventually I did, yeah. I've always used Mail Chimp for that. And yeah, set that up.

Again, I was looking at some of the early editions of some of my books like *The Art of Falling Apart*. And I actually started looking at maybe editing that, 'cause it's embarrassing. And I looked at the back, and there is a mailing list sign up. But what I've done is, I've just used ... I didn't know how to embed it on my website. So I just used the kind of the ugly URL that Mail Chimp gives you.



James Blatch: Yes. Okay.

Mark Dawson: I could've used a Bitly link or some kind of forwarding link, or PrettyLinks, or something to make it look nice. But I didn't even do that. I just dumped it on the page. It looks absolutely abysmal.

James Blatch: But you know, I'll tell you what's interesting about that. Well first of all, I think I'm right in saying in Mail Chimp, you can customize that link now to make it look a bit better than it was.

But what's interesting about that is, is the obstacles to starting with publishing a book and having a mailing list, some back matter or somewhere to send people are really, really low.

The Mail Chimp plan is free up to 2000 subscribers. You get access to all the automation. You get access to this website, which is effectively an author website for you. It's a landing page that people go to. You don't need to go One On One or Blue Host and get your own domain, or anything like that. You can get going straight away.

And it's not that complicated to start transferring that to your own domain as you go down the road. And that's something we teach in detail in 101 course. But the obstacles are low to this entry point as long as you know what it is.

As long as you understand the workflow. The flow of the reader to your list and so on.

Mark Dawson: I've always been good at that. I'm like logical flows and funnels, and things and patterns. I couldn't see if X ... If this is, X is one, then Y is two. My brain does work in that way.

James Blatch: I'm a reader. Not a number in the algebra equation.



Mark Dawson: Yeah. But you can see patterns. And I quite like that kinda stuff. Logical branching. I did lots of tutoring edu-books when I was younger. I enjoy that kinda stuff.

So I could see how these things could work. But I'm not good technically. I've never coded my own website. I really wouldn't know where to start. I've always paid people to do the things that I can't do, or they would be more efficient for me to have someone better.

'Cause even if something cost me nothing in terms of time. In terms of money, it's going to cost me a lot in terms of time and sanity, and all of that kinda stuff. And it would just make more sense for me to hand it off to somebody else. Especially in these days.

But even in the early days, I would do that too. But no, I was terrible. I was technically not great. But I would learn what was necessary and find a way to get it done.

James Blatch: Let's talk about your writing again. So at this point, where are you with your writing? You've come up with Milton.

You've got a short ... Is it *2000 Yards* I think is the novella?

Mark Dawson: *1000 Yards*. Yeah.

James Blatch: *1000 Yards*. It should've been 2000, the bullet aiming point. If you'd come to me, I would explain that to you.

***1000 Yards*. And you wrote that, at that point as your novella's part of your sales pitch?**

Mark Dawson: No. I wrote that one maybe three books in. 'Cause at that point I realized that I needed to give something away.

We were on holiday in-

James Blatch: North Korea.



Mark Dawson: Yeah. We were in North Korea. No, Spain I think. And my children were young. I think possibly it was Freya. Freya was still a baby. And she'd have a two-hour lunchtime nap.

And so I'd sit with her and I would write. And I wrote that over that week pretty much. So about 15 000 words. And then obviously I polished it and got it ready. And been giving that away. That's never been charged for. It's always been free. And that's, I must've given away half a million copies of that I guess over the years.

James Blatch: So at the point, you set up your first Mail Chimp mailing list. Where were you with Milton?

Mark Dawson: I can't remember. I must've had it from the start. But I probably wasn't giving anything away. I was probably, "Join the mailing list."

James Blatch: Yeah.

Mark Dawson: "And I'll shower you with the benefits of my wisdom," but nothing else.

James Blatch: From the writing point of view, at some point as your mailing list started to grow, and you started to understand this process, your editorial decisions about writing really focused down in these new genres. And we'll bring in Isabella and Beatrix at this point.

And you really left what you perhaps enjoyed more - the noir stuff - behind?

Mark Dawson: No, no. I enjoyed Milton more.

James Blatch: Okay.

Mark Dawson: They're fun books to write. I can write anything and enjoy it pretty much. But yeah, the noir books were complicated, very plot driven and lots of research. And I like research. It's fun.



I could spend a year writing another one of those. And I still get a lot of readers asking me to do another one. But I'd have to spend a year writing one.

I prefer to write three or four books, because I know that won't make four times as much with a new noir book as I would with one Milton book. So economically, whether I ever get back to that or not, I don't know. Probably not. It's unlikely at the moment.

James Blatch: Okay. So you're churning out Milton books.

Sales start to rise. At this point, you're still at the BBFC?

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I supposed coming into the end of 2013, I was starting to see I was making maybe a couple of 1000 a month.

I remember calling my mum. I was taking Freya for walk. From the house we used to live in, I used to love going into the countryside for a walk while she had a sleep. And I remember calling my mum and saying, "I can't believe this. I made \$200 yesterday." And I was going, "Well, if I could do \$200 a day, over the course of a month that's quite a lot of money."

James Blatch: Good at maths.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. I'm not good at multitasking.

James Blatch: 6000.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, there you go. So I think yeah, 6000. That's very good. I could do that.

And that would be enough to think about actually with leaving and writing full-time.

I know new writers will do this. And you'll do this too when you start is, you will obsessively check your sales, right? You will get a tab open on your phone and you'll refresh it every hour. Probably more than every hour. And



you'll get very excited when you make one sale. If you got a promotion on ... If you get a BookBub deal, and you better basically because you're paying someone from Bookbub's mother to edit your book.

James Blatch: How about a family connection?

Mark Dawson: Yeah. So you get one of those, you'll be like, "Oh my God, I ... " 'Cause like, they will be like, "Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick." Sales will just flow in and you'll do three or 4000 sales.

But I remember I would do that obsessively. And then every night, I had this big spreadsheet. And I would go through all of the vendors. So Amazon U.K., U.S. Barnes and Noble, Apple, Kobo, Google. And maybe I had 10 books. And I would go through and I would note down on the spreadsheet each day I would say, "Oh, I've sold an extra two Milton books today on Apple. And I've sold three on Amazon." And I'd work out what the daily amount was.

And when I started, I could do it in 15 minutes. But by the time when I eventually stopped, it was taking me an hour every night to do that. And it was really silly.

This was before Book Report and anything like that made it easier to do that. But I suppose it was validation really. I really enjoyed it. Because I could see part of this developing, that I was making ... Maybe making \$20 a day. Then making a \$100 a day. Then \$500 a day. You could see things happening.

And then I think I wrote in 2014 five or six books. Certainly, it was around about a million words I published. And this was on the train going from Salisbury to London and back. Just couldn't stop writing. It was really productive. Never been that productive since.

And at the start of the year, I think I was making about the same as we were making at the BBFC. By the end of the year I was making about £20 000 a month, which was quite a lot more than we were making at the BBFC.



And at that point, Lucy was also, she was either pregnant or on maternity leave. But she said at the start of the year like, "You need to think about going full-time now, because it's not efficient for you to go to work, 'cause you're making more money doing what you love."

I'm quite conservative and cautious. And I couldn't really put that off any more. So they were offering redundancy. So I was like, "Thank you very much. I was going anyway. But if you're going to give me 20 grand, I'll take that." And that was that.

I think it must've been November 2014 I quit. And I've been doing this ever since.

James Blatch: You must've made more than 20 grand. I think I made 30 grand I felt. I came after you and left before you.

Mark Dawson: But you had dirt on them.

James Blatch: Yeah. I did. I had filth on them. And I still hold them to ransom every now and again if I'm running short on cash. Yes, I mean they were good jobs. Those were 50 000 to \$75 000 a year jobs that you and I had watching films for a living.

And although I'm still amazed, you are very conservative when it comes to money. The fact you're making quarter of a million a year, and you're still um-ing and uh-ing about whether you should move into writing.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Or was that feeling that this is almost too good to be true? That the tap could be turned off tomorrow?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, absolutely. It still feels that way. Kindle's been what? 10 years now. So it's established now. But you do kind of wonder.

There's a number of reasons why. I mean, it does feel too good to be true. And I'm beholden to one company at the moment. Almost all of my sales



come through Amazon. And I don't love it, the concept of being exclusive. But at the same time, I know Amazon very well now. I've got good friends who work at Amazon. I always speak at conferences. They've flown me around the world.

I trust Amazon. I trust the people who work there. They're all book lovers. Very smart. And they love what they do. I'm not concerned about that. On the other hand, to have a little bit of spreading my eggs around other baskets would not necessarily be a bad thing. But it is how it is.

James Blatch: We're in a world where there are readers who consume books on electronic devices, and pay for them in a billion dollar turnover. And whichever companies are facilitating that, they will be there.

So for whatever reason if Amazon does have an implosion, and it's not inconceivable. Facebook has had a rough 12 months. We used that for our advertising platform. They'll be replaced by something else. They're not our concerns.

Our concern is if you work for Amazon and Facebook, you would worry about that. From our point of view, you're going to have a transition period to a new. I suspect this is not going to happen for either of those very large, multi-billion dollar-

Mark Dawson: No. No.

James Blatch: ... organizations. But people don't need to fret that much about it, because the fundamentals are there. I've got my new Kindle by the way. I've got the very new one.

Have you tried this? I could drop it in the swimming pool when you're on holiday.

Mark Dawson: Which one is that then?

James Blatch: Well, it's the Paperwhite new one.



Mark Dawson: Okay.

James Blatch: ... waterproof. I don't know what it's called.

Mark Dawson: Yeah. Yeah. No, I've got an Oasis, I think. Or a Voyage. But yeah, they're lovely.

James Blatch: This is my friend who I was telling you about. It was a small animals vet and said to me, "I'm going to quit my job and write a book." And she got a deal, and it's been published by Little Brown. I think she has got a three book deal. And that's the first one.

I'm going to give it a big plug. She's obviously a brilliant writer. And didn't need my help at all when it came to self-publishing. She just got an agent, got a deal. And that is a very smart looking book. So it's arrived.

That's the only slight hiccup tough, it didn't arrive on publication date, which I'm not really sure why.

Mark Dawson: Well of course, James. She's done well, but could she have done better?

James Blatch: Well, I mean that's the other thing. I mean, let's finish with that. 'Cause we've been coming to an hour now chatting about this. And we've called this podcast The Self-Publishing Formula podcast for a long time.

Today it's rebranded as The Self-Publishing Show. But we also talk of course to traditional authors and traditional publishers. All part of the wider publishing world.

Is self-publishing for everyone?

Mark Dawson: No, probably not for everyone. I mean, it's very easy to do, to actually get a book online is pretty simple to get that done. But to be successful, you probably have to be a little bit commercial. I think it's important.



You don't need to be a genius. But you do need to understand that this is a business. You're going to need to invest a little bit in the minimums of things like cover and editing. Although others will disagree about things like editing. I mostly think it's important. But not everyone would need to do that.

And then you need to think about, "How am I going to make my book stand out?" And that probably means you're going to need to learn about advertising, marketing, promotions, websites. And fortunately, there are courses you can take now.

I can't think of any off the top of my head. But when I started out, there wasn't anything. There was nothing at all like that. You had to learn yourself. It was very different back then. And places like Kboards would be where people shared ideas.

These days we've got Facebook community of thousands of people. We've got thousands of people taking our courses. We've got podcasts like this. A YouTube channel that we're working on now. There's a lot more.

You can basically drown yourself in information. Just gotta open the taps and let it flow all over you, which was not really the case when I started.

But yeah, I mean to answer the question, it's not for everyone. But I think it's probably, it's for more people than others would imagine. And I think the odds ... Well, I don't think it. I know judging from things like Data Guy's analysis that the odds of making good money, like kind of not having to work money, are much more significantly in your favor if you self-publish, or if you have self-published over the last five years, as to whether you've been traditionally published.

James Blatch: I'm going to try and get Emma on the podcast, because I'd love to hear her side of that experience. Well first of all, hear her process about writing for somebody who's come at it I think fairly cold. I don't think she did any writing before this.



So that's been brilliant. Reminds me a little bit of Chloe Esposito and Felicia Yap who we had on last year I think, who both learnt their trade and got fantastic deals.

But what would also be interesting is where they are now. As their second, third book, done a good followup. I imagine. I think Chloe in particular would fly in indie publishing. I think she got exactly the right brand and appeal to the topicals of indie readers, readers of books.

But yeah, there you go. I mean, let's wrap this up then, 'cause we're knocking on an hour now. You have very satisfyingly reached a point where you're making a million dollars a year in revenue.

Just tell us a little bit about the daily workload that goes into that. And the costs that you take out of that revenue.

Mark Dawson: Work load is, I mean, I work pretty hard. So I'm at my desk at half eight, and I often pick my daughter up at about 05:00. So I'll work I suppose normal office hours 09:00 till 05:00 pretty much.

I don't work evenings very often. Very rare for me to do that. And I don't work weekends. So I've got a small family, so it's not possible really. It wouldn't be fair.

But I'm focused. I don't take time off. I get itchy if I don't write. And so I always try to make sure that I get some words in the bank.

And then there's tons of other stuff too. Plus of course things like SPF, which is not a small concern anymore. So there's that.

And in terms of the cost, I'll know a bit more when my accountant runs the numbers for me. But my guess is, my educated guess is probably between 15 and 20% of revenue is spent on costs. So production, advertising especially. That's the biggest expense. And other stuff. Just kind of business-running stuff.



But yeah, mostly adds. You don't have to do that. You certainly don't have to spend that kind of amount. But I think it is important to budget for ... You know, running business. Our business don't run with no capital whatsoever.

We're quite lucky in that there's very minimal requirements for an indie business. But you are going to need a little bit, even if it's re-investing your revenue that you've set for your book sales into adds and stuff like that that will generate more sales. That's the plan.

James Blatch: I don't think I would mind spending 200 grand a year if I was bringing in a profit of 800 000. Brilliant. Well, I think at some point early on we had a chat with you about your background. But it's definitely due a fleshing out and a bringing up to date.

And congratulations again, Mark. I know you got a lot of plaudits last night when you posted that. And that's the other thing we should say about this community is it's a really wonderful community to be a part of. It's one where people want each other to be successful. And you can't say that about every industry in the world. So it feels refreshing and lovely.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it's amazing. And it was amazing last night. It's quite funny, I wrote that post in about five minutes. Just very easy. I would just kinda flow down. I didn't have to think about it. Obviously I've been thinking about it for a little while, 'cause I knew this was coming up.

But I woke up this morning. 1000 likes. I don't know exactly what it is, but it's quite a lot. And maybe 400 comments. Really lovely. So it's great. And I didn't post that to gloat or to show off. It's really to, "This is possible." I'm nothing special. I'm not an amazing writer. I'm not an amazing businessman. I'm quite good at lots of things. Jack of all trades, master of none really.

But with hard work and a little bit of talent, it is possible. It's never been more possible to make enough money to leave your job, or to make really



significant amounts of money like I've been lucky enough to make. So what I wanted to do was to inspire people.

And some of the nicer comments that I saw when I looked at it, were from people who said that they had a tear in their eye. And it's lovely. And if it means I can help others to realize what's possible. And it's not easy, but how easy it is to do it. Then mission accomplished really.

James Blatch: Fantastic. Well done, Mark. We're really excited for you. And hope we speak to many more authors who've been inspired by to the point where they're doing the same thing. We've already had that, and must be very satisfying for you to hear people talk about starting off listening to you. And then transforming their lives.

Now, we've mentioned the Facebook group a little bit. So you can go to ... In fact I can tell you, the URL [Facebook.com/groups/spfsecretgroup](https://www.facebook.com/groups/spfsecretgroup). I think that is.

Mark Dawson: Yes. Or just probably easier to go to Facebook and search at the top for Self-Publishing Formula.

James Blatch: Yeah, you'll find us. And that's our-

Mark Dawson: SPF. You'll find us.

James Blatch: ... main community. We have quite a few Facebook groups. A few are dedicated to the courses for students going through those.

You can support the podcast at [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com/selfpublishingshow). So if you go to [Patreon.com/selfpublishingshow](https://www.patreon.com/selfpublishingshow), you can become a supporter of the podcast. And I will say to people who are existing Patreon supporters. We did email you this week. But we have changed the URL.

You would've noticed it was SPF podcast before. Now it's [/selfpublishingshow](https://www.patreon.com/selfpublishingshow). It's exactly the same. You are still a Patreon supporter.



Nothing else has changed. It's literally the URL, how to get there has changed. And that's it think.

Mark Dawson: Two more things I would say. For people who are in the Patreon community, it would've either been live on a webinar with Tammy Labrecque. As we record this, it was on Wednesday. When this goes out, it would've been last week. Which was fantastic. A really great webinar. So you get access to monthly webinars with people like Tammy in what we call the SPFU. SPF University. *Not a university.

James Blatch: Not a university.

Mark Dawson: So you get those plus tons of other things as well. And one other thing is, it should be obvious now the fact that I have a smart camera. James has a smart camera. We've got Hughie from the Fun Loving Criminals doing our voiceovers. We've got a very, very nice intro sequence now.

What we are going to be pushing this year is our YouTube channel. And that will involve, we're still kinda scoping this out. But it would involve lots of regular content. So maybe stuff on craft I don't do very often. Marketing, business, little snippets that you can dip into and dip out of.

I would recommend, if you're listening on the podcast, go and look at this one now, because I think it will be ... I think you'll be impressed. And remember to subscribe on YouTube as well. So you hit the little bell button, and you can become a subscriber of the YouTube channel. And then when we have new content, there will be useful content. We're not going to give you fluff. You'll be notified of that and you can watch that as well.

James Blatch: Mark, thank you so much indeed for being the guest this week, and the host.

This is episode 150 of our podcast. But the first edition of the Self-Publishing Show. We couldn't be happier that you're listening and



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watching, and a part of our little world. And we look forward to talking to you again next week. Bye-bye.

Mark Dawson: Bye-bye.

Speaker 1: Get show notes, the podcast archive, and free resources to boost your writing career at Selfpublishingshow.com. Join our thriving Facebook group at Selfpublishingshow.com/Facebook. Support the show at Patreon.com/Selfpublishingshow. And join us next week for more help in inspiration so that you can make your mark as a successful indie author. Publishing is changing. So get your words into the world and join the revolution with the Self-Publishing Show.