



EPISODE 151: BOOKLAB #4 – WITH NIKI DANFORTH

Voiceover: On this edition of the Self Publishing Show.

Jennie Nash: He bookends with the hook at the top and he brings it back to that at the end. I like how he tries to build intrigue for the reader. Yeah, it was perfection.

Voiceover: 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 the 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: Yes, hello. Welcome to the Self-Publishing Show. My name is James Blatch.

Mark Dawson: And my name is Mark Dawson.

James Blatch: Now this is another one of our much anticipated, very valuable Book Laboratories. BookLab. This is number four, Mark, I think.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, something like that. We've been doing them for, when did we start? Last early this year? Year before? I can't remember.

James Blatch: May have just gone over 12 months. I think three a year is probably what we'll be aiming for. And they're quite involved because we have to have three experts who pour over basically the front page. The Amazon shop window of one particular book from one of our Patreon supporters.

And this particular edition, we have chosen a book called Searching For Gatsby which has been written by Niki Danforth.



Now, I should say Mark, so far we've had fairly positive feedback haven't we, on all aspects of the books in the BookLab.

Mark Dawson: We have, yeah. I think the participants have got plenty of good value out of being dissected publicly by us.

James Blatch: They have. But I'm going to tease ahead and say there's one element of this book that does not go down well with our expert, and say for the first time we've got some fairly negative criticism coming back on it.

It's also quite a long episode, I'll tell you now. But it's very, very valuable.

Jennie Nash who's doing editorial critique has been excellent, and she has excelled herself once again, not only by giving some very insightful advice to Niki, which we're going to listen to first, but she's also produced ... Oh, your little Facebook like counter.

Mark Dawson: Oh, they were there. They were there.

James Blatch: That's okay.

Mark Dawson: I wondered what that was. The ceiling was shaking but it wasn't that.

James Blatch: It's a very clever little real-world thing.

Mark Dawson: We should probably say this for those who are not watching on YouTube, that behind me over my shoulder, I have a Facebook counter which syncs with my, we'll share the Facebook page I want. That one's my book page. And when someone clicks like, it automatically updates it, and that's in real time.

So, they're mainly for bricks and mortar stores. So if you're a florist for example and you had someone in the shop and they wanted to like you, they could see it tick over as soon as they tap their phone. Someone, somewhere in the world has just liked my author page.



James Blatch: And we thank them for that.

Mark Dawson: I certainly thank them. Absolutely.

James Blatch: And we're going to perhaps switch that over to Self Publishing formula. I don't want to boast, but a few more likes than you have on your page at the moment.

Mark Dawson: We do. We do.

James Blatch: Okay, so there I was just explaining, getting into Jennie Nash's feedback that once again, Jennie's also added some value for listeners of the Self Publishing Show. She's produced two handouts.

The Hierarchy of Editorial Concerns, which is a really excellent pdf. And the One Hour Chat to Audit. Now, you can get all of these. You can get the original cover. You can get the before and after blurbs, and you see all the way through the blurb submission from Bryan how he and his team present you with a new blurb, so you could all be headlined a few hours in that, etc.

You'll see all of that, and you get these two great handouts from Jennie, if you go to selfpublishingshow.com/booklab4. So, it's a new URL to match our new show name, which is selfpublishingshow.com/booklab4.

Okay, without further ado, let's hear the editorial feedback. This is Jennie looking at the look inside. Those few pages, whatever percentage it is of the front of your book that you get to show and display to potential readers on Amazon. So, Jennie, reads that and gives her expert editorial feedback. So let's hear from Jennie and then we'll move on to the next one.

Before we start, we talked about info dumps last time, and you gave a fantastic handout, and we got lots of great feedback about it. People commented in the Facebook group that they had been writing for years, and they learned stuff for the first time from you, so thank you so much for that.



The info dump's question, the info dump is because you've obviously triggered quite a few people's ... triggered, actually the kids say that from being angry, don't they? But has triggered a few thoughts and questions, and one in particular post cost my eye, which I thought it was worth just putting in front of you, if you don't mind, Jennie putting you on the spot.

Jim Kean posted a section, in fact an opening section of a big sci-fi book this year, which he describes as being one of the "It" sci-fi books. *Autonomous* by Annalee Newitz. Now he said this book's been really successful. All the sci-fi readers have read it. Isn't this an info dump though, and we'll include this in the handout so people can make their own decision.

What did you think of this opening paragraph?

Jennie Nash: You did put me on the spot, because this is the thing that I hear a lot, and this is a great example actually, and I think it was a really astute question.

I particularly love the writer, I'm just going to call this out because I think it's so great. The writer says, "I'm trying to learn how to get this right." I mean, I love how intentional he is about it, and looking towards somebody doing it well to try to learn. And something I do actually advise against, is doing this.

Because I love his intention and I love his seriousness, but looking to somebody who's a big, hot success and written a big "It" book is not always the best way to learn. Because we're often looking at genius or we're looking at somebody who's just happened to hit the trifecta of luck, and timing, and talent. And it's all come together in this perfect storm, and then here we are trying to write our story and just trying to get the fundamentals right.

Sometimes looking at that is not the best way to learn. It can be frustrating, because there's not always something to learn. I think what you guys are doing on BookLab is a better way to learn, which is let's look at people who



have some room to improve and have some room to grow and figure out how they could do better.

That being said, this is a really interesting example and we can try to see what we can learn from this. So, I would agree that I have not read this book, in fact I have not even heard about this book, which I find now somewhat embarrassing because I like to be, think that I am on top of everything in publishing. But who could be on top of all the things? So, this is apparently a book that's doing really well. And it does sort of feel like an info dump.

It is an unusual way to start a novel, because there's so much information here, and it is a little unnecessary at this moment, which is a moment when we know nothing else.

So, I would probably be advising a writer I was working with to let this slow down a little or start it in a slightly different moment. I might in fact give that advice to somebody.

I think that the question writer is correct in saying, "Isn't this kind of info dumpy," so why is it working? I think it is the right question to ask, because it is kind of info dumpy.

But what's good about it, the reason why I think it does work, and this is so critically important. This woman is in this place that is clearly very unusual. It's a sci-fi book so we know something's going on here. And what the author is doing very well is letting us inside of this woman's head.

In the first couple sentences, that's not true. She is just in a field, she's been working in this place. There's something sort of strange going on because she's got these special lenses, and then there's this very unusual line that the yellow flowers are emitting streams of environmental data. So we know we're in a very unusual world.

But here's the place where this becomes not an info dump. The author says, "Probably, Jack reflected, the same farmer's tan had afflicted every



Shen for generations. It went back to the days when her great, great-grandparents came across the Pacific from Shenzhen and bought an agricultural franchise in the prairies outside Saskatoon. No matter how far she was from home, some things did not change."

My guess is that, that is an encapsulation of the entire point of the story. We've got an immigrant. We've got a woman that came from generations of farming. But clearly, we're in a really different world of farming, where we're farming environmental data.

So what the author has done is dropped us in a world, dropped us in this field, given us these bits of information, but in that second half of it, given us the internal reason this matters to Jack. This matters to Jack because this has everything to do with who she is, who her family is, what the world is, who she's trying to be in it, so it's not, that makes it not an info dump.

That makes it really good storytelling, because there is deep meaning here. There's deep underlying tension here. We really want to know what's going on. And we want to know what's going on, not just with the physical reality.

What is this field of flowers that emit data, and what are these goggles that are deactivated lenses, and what is this person doing there? But what does this have to do with who she is and who her people are, and what's she's going to be?

So, that line, no matter how far she was from home, something things did not change. Don't you guess this is going to be a story about how maybe she's going to try to change it?

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jennie Nash: So this is just actually superb writing, and it is a little info dumpy, but a really excellent writer is able to pull off things that the rest of us are not able to pull off.



James Blatch: So to rephrase your point, you can't necessarily read James Patterson or Stephen King and think, I'm going to do what they do.

Because they're operating sometimes in a different realm to us mortals.

Jennie Nash: Yeah, the danger would be if somebody just took the first three sentences here and wrote a whole paragraph like that, you would never get anybody's attention.

I'm often in the position of helping people trying to land agents. That's the point at which I often come in and help somebody. And if your first paragraph is just the sun is glaring and there's circles under her eyes, and it's a farmer's tan, and there's flowers and they're emitting this thing, and it just is blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, and your whole opening paragraph is that, probably the agent's just going to whip by it for the other 300 submissions in her inbox.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Jennie Nash: So this is a very delicate balancing act that this writer has done well.

James Blatch: And we should say this is, I've just had a look at the publisher. This is from Little Brown, who an imprint of Hachette, and I've met some of these guys and they have a fantastic editorial staff there.

Every word of that would have been gone over several times. It's not an accident, it's not one that snuck through.

As you say, she's doing something and getting away with it. Doesn't necessarily mean that you and I can follow that, or I can follow that, I should say.



Jennie Nash: Well, and you know what's interesting is, is levels of getting away with things, so here's what, it's three sentences. I would argue actually that it's two sentences. The first two sentences are a little bit flat and straight information. But all of a sudden in the third sentence, we've got flowers emitting streams of environmental data, and it's like wait, what?

And then boom, that fourth sentence, we're right inside the character's head. So your readers will give you a little leeway. They'll read a couple sentences, they'll read, you know, "Okay, like let me see that this says. What's going on here."

But if you're not bringing it right after that, if you're not engaging them and telling them what it matters, and getting inside that head and letting us see this character struggling with whatever she's struggling with, you're not going to grab them.

So, the writer of your question here was extremely astute because it is technically at the start an info dump, but it's also so well done right after that, and so interesting.

And can you see that world building that went on here? This is a whole world that has logic, that has, there's things about the sun. There's things about flowers. There's things about travel. There's things about legacy. There's like, this is a whole world. An agricultural franchise in the prairies. Like, what?

You can see there's a whole world happening there, and the writer was not making this up when they wrote the paragraph. They know this world inside and out, and they chose to drop the reader into that moment. So, it's very powerful, but also a very astute question from your listener.

In the hands of a really good writer, a lot of information can come across in a really excellent way, and not as it just being dumped on it. So an info dump is not necessarily just where there's a bunch of information that's bad.



An info dump is where it feels like the writer is dumping this information and it's not organic to the story or part of the story. If it's filtered through a character, and it's filtered through a story, and it's got a reason for being there, you can give all the information you want.

So, normally if you're seeing a very accomplished writer doing that, you should look for the other things they're doing as well, in addition to that info dump thing.

And then the other thing that I have to say about this is I hear this all the time, and that you can see I'm smiling. It makes me smile so much, because people will say, well like anything that I teach, people say, "Well, James Patterson doesn't do that, or John Irving doesn't do that. Or, Elizabeth Gilbert doesn't do that." Like all the famous, super best selling, mega stars.

You can't learn to write by looking at what the mega stars are doing. First of all, they've probably earned the right in their career, to do whatever they want. Second of all, they probably have some innate story telling genius that the rest of us just don't have, and if you have it, you would know already that you have this innate genius.

So, I think pointing to exceptions in very well published writers is not useful to somebody trying to make their way and trying to learn. It's actually more effective to look at things that aren't working well, I think. Or things that you don't enjoy.

Prior to the airing here, you and I were talking about a book that you read where it just was like, "Eh, this is not working for me." That's the learning point, because then you can say, "Okay. Well why not? Why isn't this working for me?"

And usually you can identify why or why not, and that to me is more effective than looking at Stephen King and saying, "Well, he does that, so that's what I'll do."



James Blatch: It's like watching Serena Williams and then going out to the tennis court and wondering why you can't do what she did yesterday. Just more like that.

Jennie Nash: Exactly, and I've been a little bit obsessed with the Masterclass, which is a new business, or maybe it's not so new. You mentioned Serena Williams. They have Serena Williams teaching you to play tennis, or Steph Curry teaching you to shoot a free throw, or ... I'm blanking on the comedian.

James Blatch: Annie Leibovitz, I think just a photographer, and James Patterson does the writing.

Jennie Nash: Yes, and but exactly, and I love them, they're amazing. But actually you're not learning how to do the things they're doing. What you're learning is, how do they do the thing they're doing.

James Blatch: Yeah. That's definitely the case with James Patterson's one.

Jennie Nash: Yeah, what is their particular genius. And it's fascinating to see what is their particular genius, but you can't really replicate that because they're a genius.

James Blatch: Yeah. It's a profile. A deep profile of them. They are good, and I enjoyed that.

Okay, well I thought I'd get it out of the way because it was a talking point, which is great, and I think we're going to get another one.

We have Niki Danforth's book, which is called *Searching For Gatsby*. And you have the job of reading the 5% or so that you get as a look inside, and telling us where it's working, where it's not working, etc.

What are your thoughts, Jennie?

Jennie Nash: This is a great lesson for us, because this is a third book in a series, and it's a private eye series. A lady detective, sort of amateur sleuth.



The protagonist of the story is a 50 something divorcee who solves crimes, which is just a great setup. And this is book three in that series.

What I immediately saw in reading the sample material is, something that probably a lot of people skip over, and I'm going to point it out. Because in the beginning when there's that front matter, where it says this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents have been changed.

And just before that, you'll see that this writer has received the copyright to use the lyric from a Bruce Springsteen song, *Dancing In The Dark*. And I point that out because, I look at everything when I look at a book. And when I looked at that front matter and I saw that, I thought, "Oh, this is a serious writer."

Because most writers don't know that they should get permission for lyrics. They don't know that they're part of a whole publishing eco system. They don't follow the rules necessarily if they're bringing their own books out, and this writer has done that.

So, in my mind, that immediately marked her as a pro. And everybody should pay attention to that sort of thing. The copyright, the permissions, and particularly around song lyrics.

People can't believe that you're not allowed to quote a Beatles song, or a Bruce Springsteen, but you're not. There are rules around these things, and she obviously did what she had to do to get permission, so I just wanted to give a shout out to her for that, because that's fantastic.

James Blatch: Very good, absolutely.

Jennie Nash: So that was the first thing that I saw.

The next thing that I saw is, the opening pages, the introduction of this book also marks Niki as a real pro because this is a really fun opening. It's got a lot of momentum.



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

We follow a guy. We don't know who he is, but he's out in the woods. He's got this dog with him. He's up to no good. We can tell he's up to no good. He's doing something secret and sneaky. He's trying to maintain cover. He's in the woods, and immediately the writer is engaged.

We want to know what's going on. Who is this guy? What's he doing? And since we're following him, there's a sense that, like is he really the bad guy? What's going on here?

So there's multiple layers of curiosity that have been raised in this opening. And the writing is really fun. It's snappy, it moves along. We get inside this guy's head.

The paragraph that starts, it's about three down in the intro. "Clicking open the trunk, the wiry man steps out of the old Honda Accord. A car speeds by and he almost ducks down. Get with it, old man, he chides himself. It's just folks heading home."

I just love that little bit of writing, because we can see this guy. He's wiry, he's old. He's talking to himself in this soothing sort of ... he's got this sort of wisdom and we like him. But we also know that he's probably about to commit a crime.

So this opening is interesting, it's fun. It's got multiple layers, it's really well written. It's snappy, it's great. And it has what I refer to as narrative drive. So narrative drive is that thing you want in everything you write, where it's the engine that's pulling you through, and it's driving you through, and it's one thing and you want to know. The reader wants to know, "What does that mean? What's going to happen next? What's going on here?"

And that's especially in this type of a book, in anything that's a mystery, a detective, a thriller, anything. You want that drive to be really strong. Really it's in any genre.

So, a lot of this opening is just very, very well done. I also like as we get a little bit further down, this guy changes his clothes and he sneaks into a



mansion. Now we know he's up to no good in this house. And it's very interesting because he comes across a rare book room, and then he comes across a first edition of *The Great Gatsby*. And he immediately knows what the book is. He recognizes particular typos that are apparently well known in that edition, so all of a sudden now, we've got this guy who's a criminal. He's sneaking around the woods, he's an old guy, he's got this great sort of wisdom and voice that he speaks to himself in, and now he's a rare book expert?

You're thinking, "Okay, here's a whole other level, what's happening here?" I love the reference back to the title because it's all, you know the reader, what's so fun for a reader in a book like this is staying a little bit ahead, right? You're thinking, "Ah, I think I know what this is going to be, or what role is this book going to play?" So, it's just a lot of fun, that whole opening bit.

You're probably thinking, "Okay is she just doing everything well? Is that it? Are we done? Are we done here?" And there is a big but coming.

James Blatch: Okay.

Jennie Nash: When I got to the end of the intro, it felt very flat for me. And when I talked about narrative drive, one of the best ways to lock in narrative drive is at the end of scenes, the end of chapters, when you're driving to the next thing.

At the end of the intro, this writer leaves us off with these words. "The thief returns the book to its shelf in the glass cabinet and goes back to searching the room." So, in the reader's head, you are probably thinking to yourself, "Okay, and so? Like what, okay?"

It's sort of flat, whereas she could have done something there to set up a decision or a moment, or a crossroads or some sort of risk that, that thief takes. Something they see that's going to propel us to the next thing. And



instead she doesn't take that opportunity. And I noticed this at the end of chapter one and chapter two as well.

So, what we're talking about here, now, this is my favorite thing to talk about, is you've got something that's really good. How are you going to get it to great? That's what every writer wants, is to go from good to great.

This is really good. The opening is really good. We just went through all the things that Niki does really well. How is she now going to take it to great?

To take it to great, you have to start looking at some higher level concerns. I actually want to bring up a graphic that we're going to share with the listeners, that I call the Hierarchy of Editorial Concerns.

James Blatch: I should say, for the YouTube version, people should see this on screen. If you don't watch the YouTube version, just listen to it. You can download everything, including the full version of the Hierarchy of Editorial Concerns that Jennie's very kindly presented for you, if you go to selfpublishingformula.com/BookLab4 and YouTube's the place to be for this particular episode, Jennie, because it's going to be visual. So here we go.

Jennie Nash: The Hierarchy of Editorial Concerns is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. So that's the famous Hierarchy of Self-Actualization for Human Beings. And I based this on that famous pyramid of hierarchy.

And what you can see is that at the base level of the pyramid are the fundamental elements every story has to have. A story has to have a point and a purpose. The world of the story has to be believable and logical. There's got to be this narrative drive. This cause and effect trajectory that's propelling us forward.

And the protagonists have to have some clear desire and something standing in their way.



If your story doesn't have these fundamental elements, you can't really move on. You've gotta get those locked down before you can move up the pyramid.

And as you go further up the pyramid, the second stage is the point of view needs to make sense to the story, and it has to serve it. And the point of view characters have to have emotions that we can see and feel, and be part of. That means the writer needs to be showing and not telling, and the protagonist needs to make decisions with clear consequences.

So, from what we've been talking about, what Niki's been doing is she hits a lot of these points really strongly. She's got a lot of those locked in. And even I would say, the third level up she's got locked in pretty well.

But now we're starting to get to the point, how do you go from good to great is at the top levels of the pyramid. So, we can take that graphic down and come back to Niki's work now. And what I want to talk about now is some things that I found that are correlated to that hierarchy, that she could be doing better to take it from good to great.

James Blatch: Okay.

Jennie Nash: I've got three.

James Blatch: This is great. This is a very well thought, as I'd expect from you Jennie. Well thought and structured.

Jennie Nash: So the three things that I think Niki could be doing better is, she often slips into a passive voice. And this really in my mind, stops her narrative.

I'm going to point out just one place where she does this. It's back up in the introduction and I'm sorry, I'm just paging through to try to find it, to point you to where this is. It's so hard on the Amazon site because you can't bookmark anything. But I've got it.



It's right after the first line break in the introduction. There's some little dashes that form a line break there. And the line there is, "The mysterious stranger, who moments ago looked like any other property owner in the area, has transformed completely, dressed now in black from head to toe." So this is a very passive sentence, and the way you can tell is that telltale "has transformed."

She's talking very passively and objectively about this stranger. This is our old guy in the woods. He has transformed completely. The reader's not invited into that. We don't get to see him transform. We don't get to see him change his clothes. We don't get to see him dress in black from head to toe. We're just told that he did it, and we're told in this very passive way. He has transformed completely.

And it's little things like that, that when you look at the really excellent writers, they're cleaning up all these little instances that actually push the reader out. What you want to do is always let the reader be in. You want us to be inside the action. You want us to be inside the protagonist's head, inside the scene as it unfolds.

And the minute you start to passively tell us what happened ... this is telling us what already happened. He already changed his clothes from head to toe.

The fix on this is very small. It would probably be taking that one sentence and making it two sentences, or three, and letting us see the guy take off whatever he was wearing before. His denim shirt or his plaid jacket, and put on a black turtleneck and let us actually see him do it.

James Blatch: Is that not him in the previous section though, slipping off his jacket? The guy hangs it on another branch. Is that him?

Jennie Nash: Yeah, so she set that up. That's exactly right.



He comes to this tree and he ties his dog up, and he uses the tree as a kind of a dressing area. He's clearly done this before, because he knows the tree, the dog is going to wait for him. He's got it all set up.

James Blatch: I see what you're saying. The transformation is more than just the clothes. There's a transformation of this party, he's slipped into his alter ego. His other character.

But we don't really feel that or experience that. We just told it.

Jennie Nash: Exactly, and if I were coaching this writer, I would say, "The biggest thing that just happened, happened offstage." And it's a tiny little thing, but we didn't get to see it go down.

We saw him begin that transformation. We thought, we got the sense he's done this before. It seemed like a very big deal.

I don't know because I haven't read the whole book, but I suspect that this guy is not at all what we think he is. I don't think he's just a part-time cat burglar. He's probably something to do with a famous, antiquated, very pricey book dealers or something.

I want to know what exactly the clothes he takes off were. And what is this transformation. He pulls on this black ski mask and a black vest. But yeah, let us see that he's all new. He's a totally new persona and we're in it and we get to be there with him.

James Blatch: Because I was going to say, these moments when somebody does something are opportunities for you to get inside somebody's head when you're a writer. So when they have to drive somewhere, that's a great time for them to be not concentrating on the road, because they're distracted, and it gives you an option and I'm finding this now, it gives you the opportunity you need to tell what they're thinking or where they're going with this.



Jennie Nash: And I will share with your listeners if you help me remember, a post that I wrote that is, a mistake a lot of writers make is letting physical detail stand in for the true story.

So in this case, the writer has the guy come up, he takes off his fedora. I love that, we know he was wearing a fedora, he puts on these sneakers, he takes off some moccasins.

We see him doing that, it's very physical and we see him going through that, and now he is transformed. But it's that physical detail, it's sort of left on its own and we want to know what's the meaning of that physical detail.

And people often do this, I see this all the time in people say, "Their skin was sweaty. Their heart was pounding. Their throat closed up. They felt flushed. Their gut hurt." All the physical realities.

But the truth is that emotion, the physical realities are the end result of emotion. We feel those physical things after we have felt some sort of emotion and some sort of transformation actually. And a lot of writers miss the real story 'cause they're so focused on the physical.

This writer is actually doing it very, very well. When I am talking about taking stuff from good to great, it's just the tiniest sliver of a change where, let us now see him inhabit that transformation.

There's a really great quote that the actress Meryl Streep once said. Somebody asked her, "How do you play a queen? If you're a queen, how do you play that authority? How do you play that regal-ness, how do you do that?" And her answer was, "You don't have to do anything, it's all about how the other people in the room treat you. It's all about how they see you, how they perceive you. Do they stand up when you walk in the room? Do they rush to you when you walk in the room?" And it's inhabiting that reality that a queen probably never gets to walk in a room and not have that happen.

And so knowing that, and letting us feel that and see that, that's the kind of thing we're talking about here. I was pointing out the "has transformed"



because we've been taken through the clothing, but then just the choice of that language there, the guy has transformed completely, he's dressed in black.

Change that sentence just a little bit. Let us see what that feels like. Let us see how he inhabits that skin, if you will. Let us see what that means to him. Does he feel confident, and stealthy, and awesome? He's probably done this a million times. Let us feel that. Let us feel the transformation.

It's a kind of passive language to stand in for something that's really important-

James Blatch: This transformation?

Jennie Nash: Yeah, and this tiny little tweak of the language. When I was going through this I literally highlighted the words "has transformed completely." Those are the offending words, and there's three words. It's not very many. But fix those up and I think this story goes to a whole different level.

So that was thing one that I thought Niki could do to take her work from good to great.

Thing two I mentioned before the opening falling flat at the end of the introduction. If your listeners will go through and look at the end of that intro and then scroll down and look at the end of chapter 1, she does the same thing at the end of chapter 1.

Chapter 1 is fascinating. There's a total shift. We leave the guy in the woods behind, and now we're with the protagonist, Ronnie, who is the detective and she's at a big party, a fancy party at a mansion, and the reader obviously knows it's the same mansion the guy is breaking into, so there's a lot of tension in that.

There's a party going on, and we're with Ronnie there in chapter 1 and we really start the story that's going to bring Ronnie together as this amateur



sleuth with a crime that's going down. That's what's happening in chapter 1, it's a shift into the protagonist and into this party and what's going on.

But at the end of chapter 1, again she lets the scene really stop. It says, "More importantly, without this woman right in her face, the evening is now nicer for Marilyn. She's quietly singing to herself and her mood appears to have lifted." There's nothing driving us forward there. It's just end of scene.

And it's fascinating because in chapter 2, now we know a little more about Ronnie: she's divorced, there's a love interest, we get to meet him, there's a lot of fantastic banter. And at the end of chapter 2, an explosive sound outside makes us jump. So now the party's disrupted by something. That's a fantastic ending.

James Blatch: That's a good last line, isn't it?

Jennie Nash: Right? So imagine if there was that type of a last line at the end of the intro and the end of the first chapter. We would have that much more compelling reason to, we can't read a sentence like, "An explosive sound outside makes us jump" without going, "Well, what was it?"

You really want to think about your reader. This is a sad reality, but your reader is tired. Your reader is busy, your reader is overwhelmed. Your reader can watch Netflix if they want to. They can pick up any other book if they want to.

You need to really keep them engaged in your story and give them a reason to care about the characters and about the situation. And when you come to the endings of things, and I teach this in every scene in every chapter, you want to end with something changing and it doesn't have to be an explosive sound outside the party.

It can just be a decision, a new way of looking at something, maybe a realization that you think that person just lied to you, maybe a resolution that you're going to do something different. Something that is the person



taking some sort of action or having some sort of agency over what they're doing.

We want to see that and cleaning up those ends of chapters is a fantastic way to just take the narrative drive and amp it up a notch. Especially in this type of a book.

James Blatch: I'm smiling because it just explains why Lizette, who works for you and works with me now, for about the first half a dozen scenes, the last line she always said, "But what was Rob going to do?"

Jennie Nash: Yes.

James Blatch: "What's he going to do?" Because I think I did the same thing as Niki did here, and I think writers may do this because you know what's going to happen, and you think you're setting the scene, so everything seems fine, but it's not going to.

But of course unless you give a hint to a reader that it's not going to be okay, that things are going to change dramatically, they don't know that. So it's not enough to say, "she relaxed and was enjoying the evening" at the end of her scene. I can see, I'm starting to get that.

Jennie Nash: The thing that makes me more crazy than anything else is, if I point that out to someone and let's say Niki was here with us, and I said, "Do you see how it falls flat at the end of the intro and chapter 1, but how you nail it here in chapter 2, go back and make something good happen there at the end of those first two."

Often times what the writer will do is they'll say, "But I don't want to give anything away. I don't want to give away what's going to happen."

And in fact, in this case you don't want to give away about the burglary or the book or whatever, but you do want to give away what are these people thinking? What's going on in their head? Why are we paying any attention to them today?



I often say that, "Why today, are we paying attention to this woman, and why not yesterday? Why are we looking at this moment, in this scene at this party instead of when she was getting ready for the party?"

What about, "Why are you presenting this moment?" And the answer is always, always, always going to be, "Something is being revealed about your character."

Story is about change. That's all it is. It's about how do people change. People change in a million different ways, right? Change can be good or bad. Change can be falling in love, falling out of love. Change can be an explosive sound outside and there's a burglar in the house, what are we going to do. Somebody is going to rise to the occasion.

Change can be, "I look across the room at somebody that I've known all my life and I think I actually don't really like you." That can be change.

Change can be, "I am tired of my dumb job, doing whatever, I am going to get a different job." So change can be a decision, a resolution, a crossroads, it doesn't have to be big drama.

But if a story is about change, a scene in a chapter is measuring a small arch of that change. And we've got to make sure that you're showing the reader that.

I started by saying, "The craziest thing is when people say, 'It gets really good at chapter 17. Really cool stuff happens in chapter 47.'" Your reader is gone by then. You've gotta give 'em a sense of that arch of change at every single turn.

Niki could amp up her game here by giving some better chapter endings.

James Blatch: This is why you talk to me at the beginning, and talk to your authors about why they are telling this particular story. In other words, what is this about? Because that would help you with those moments.



There's no point in it being passive at the end of a chapter if you know that the theme of this book is how divorce has changed somebody or something destructive.

Jennie Nash: I'm so proud of you right now. What you just said, because you said, oh my gosh I love that.

Okay, here's the thing your readers can do: go to Niki's page, and this is what I did after I read her sample pages, read what people are saying about this story. She's got some pretty good ratings.

James Blatch: Yeah, she has.

Jennie Nash: She's got 111 four-and-a-half star ratings. Read those, really read them all and see what are people saying about this book. Why do they care? Why are they reading it? Why are they paying any attention?

And it's exactly what you were talking about because how refreshing to see a PI who is a woman, a divorced woman, who is trying to make her way. Who's trying to find herself. Who's got these skills, and she's bringing them to bare to help people solve crimes. That's a lot of people are responding to.

So knowing there's got to be something in Niki, that she connects to that. I don't, obviously, know a thing about her, but maybe she's a child of divorced family? Maybe she's divorced herself? Maybe her best friend got divorced?

You don't chose a divorced PI just for the heck of it. You probably do it because you have some deep connection to that, and you take it and you make something a fictional thing from it, and knowing why you're doing that, and what your story is about.

And another reason I'm so proud of you for saying that James, is that every story is about something. Every story makes a point.



This is supposed to be a fun, page turning PI. It's very much like Clue. Down in chapter 3, the game Clue. It's very Clue-like because Ronnie actually herds all the guests into the library where they're going to stay until they figure out who done it. So it's fun, it's kind of a romp, right?

It's kind of a, sometimes they refer to it as cozy mysteries. It's not like a grizzled, hard-bitten noir kind of thing. It's meant to be fun. And so some people will say, "Why does that have to have a point? It's just a fun story." But it does have a point. Every book has a point. And readers want to feel that, and know that.

Not that you have to hit them over the head with it, but I think Niki actually does a good job weaving this in. There's a real sense that this character is not just cardboard cutout of a detective. She's a real person, with a real life, coming to this work for some particular reasons, and we want to know that.

James Blatch: And you can tell that from those comments. As you say, in reviews, how many said that they felt a connection with Ronnie, and that can't be because Niki's just randomly created somebody. She is telling a story about who somebody is and the effect things have had on them, and what's shaped them.

And that's the stuff, right? That's why we read books. When we can make that connection.

Jennie Nash: That's exactly it. I would urge people to read, instead of going, like you were talking about the famous writer who does this thing and why can't I do the thing they did, instead of looking at famous writing in that way, what I would urge people to do is go read what people say about the work.

We have this amazing resource at our finger tips, which is Amazon and Goodreads, and you can do that. You can go to the latest blockbuster and go read what people say. And if you spend an hour reading what people say about a Steven King book, you're going to just get so much information



about what the readers are taking from it, and why they care, and what this means, and it's a really great kind of a study.

The example this week is a really great one to do this with because there's only 111 comments. It's not overwhelming. You can really get a sense of what people are feeling. And again, she's got those story fundamentals really locked down.

What I would like to see her do now is get these next level things, and the transitions at the end of the chapters is it. Look at the intro, look at the end of chapter 1, and look at the end of chapter 2, and see how at the end of chapter 2 she does much better job of hooking the reader and yanking us into the next chapter, and in the intro and chapter 1 it falls a little flat.

So to take it to the next level, she could bring that decisiveness to the end of her other chapters.

James Blatch: Absolutely. You have a third? Of course, you have a third point.

Jennie Nash: I have a third skill that Niki could do to take this to the next level, and it relates to info dumps- which we talked about in the last Book Lab. So we could link up that last Book Lab, so people could learn about info dumps.

But she actually has a couple places where she does, what I would call mini info dumps, and I'm going to point one out to you, because somebody who's trying to really get structure down, is not going to need to focus on this. But somebody who is doing the fundamentals very well would want to focus on this, because this is how you get the next level writing.

At the very beginning of chapter 1, in the second paragraph, you hear Ronnie say, "Then there's my late-model, bright red, Mustang convertible. Which pales in comparison with it's top down of course, even though it's late September."



So this is a fun detail that she drives this fun car, and she drives it with the top down, this is great, but nobody in the history of human kind has ever actually said, either to another person or in their own head, "Then there's my late-model, bright red Mustang convertible."

We just don't think that way, or talk that way. And it's actually a little mini info dump. It's a little mini awkward moment where the writer is trying to convey something to us but it's not baked into this story.

And I want to show you a little bit further down where she does this really well, so you can see the difference. Because it makes such a big difference.

So, if you look in chapter 1, just down from the top, there is the lyric of that Bruce Springsteen song we spoke about. And just after that, there is a line where Niki does this thing again, it's a little awkward moment info dump. Where she says, "I run my fingers through my shoulder-length, straw-colored hair."

James Blatch: I say that to myself all the time.

Jennie Nash: Right? What the author is trying to give us a picture of this person, and it's just sort of clunky. "I run my fingers through my shoulder-length, straw-colored hair." But a little bit later down, about four paragraphs down, she does that Meryl Streep thing that I was talking about instead.

Where instead of having the character speak about her own looks and her own self, she has the friend say something. Now she's talking further down, she's talking to her friend Marilyn, and Marilyn says, "'Don't you realize, darling, that you're a hot ticket ever since you came back on the market.' 'Hot ticket my eye, come on I'm closing in on 56 and that's hardly a hot ticket.' Marilyn drops into her lower vocal register, 'All in the eye of the beholder.' Her throaty laugh is irresistible and I join in. 'Seriously Ronnie, look at you' my hostess says, 'lean and blonde, and stylish, and hip and amusing.'"



This is great because this is an organic way for somebody else to let us know how Ronnie looks. Instead of herself saying, "I run my hand through my straw-colored hair." It's perfect, this place down here where Marilyn does it instead.

So again, it's a tiny moment, just a little awkward thing, but if you clean those things up, then this is just going to trip along, and it's going to have so much more meat and authenticity, and it will really take it to the next level.

To finish up my little mini lesson on taking your work from good to great, I also have to share with everyone a document I call the "One hour chapter audit." And it lets you check off the things that you're doing and not doing well.

You can just take your chapter, spend an hour, tick off the things, and it goes with that hierarchy of editorial concerns. And so you can realize, "Oh gosh, I've got some fundamental things I really need to fix." Or you'll be able to look at your checklist and say, "I just need to clean up some of these little things, and I'll be good."

So for Niki, that's what I would suggest is, she's got it. She's got the fundamentals, but now let's really lock in the stuff that's going to make it really sing.

James Blatch: That's fantastic Jennie. We could listen to you all night on this subject.

Jennie Nash: If you hadn't stopped me, you might have.

James Blatch: That would be fine by us. Really great. And I'm so pleased for Niki that she got such constructive feedback from you as well. I know that she was excited about having her book selected for this night.

Can't imagine for one second, that when I speak to her, which will also be in this episode, that she won't be thrilled with the type of feedback she's



had. And she should be proud, right, of what she's writing and creating here because this is gripping, compelling, it's funny, it's quirky.

And you can just tell from those 111 odd, nearly all four and five star reviews, that her readers are lapping it up as well.

Jennie Nash: Absolutely. And the things that I'm talking about here are, well what I would say is that they're frosting on the cake. She's got the cake.

So if somebody is trying to get their skills and their story fundamentals in place, they don't need to worry about these things yet. And in fact I think it would be a disservice to somebody, to worry about line by line little problems like this. These are nit-picky little problems. But for somebody already doing everything well, this is how you go to the next level. And I think Niki could get there.

James Blatch: A long interview with Jennie, but really worth every minute of it, and pleasing obviously for Niki to hear that Jennie absolutely loved the whole 50-something divorcee of the book, because, well frankly there's not enough people creating characters who are in that position, but it reflects a lot of people's lives, so she loved that aspect of it.

I very rudely asked Niki if she was 50 and divorced in her interview, just in case, you know, it was semi-autobiographic. But she's happily married, so she's invented Ronnie, the name of the character, it is Ronnie Lake of course.

Mark Dawson: The power of the imagination.

James Blatch: Yeah, so that's amazing isn't it, what the imagination can do.

Mark Dawson: Incredible.

James Blatch: And I will remind you, as Jennie said, that she's included her two handouts, "The Hierarchy of Editorial Concerns" and "The One Hour Chapter Audit."



Let me ask you Mark, are you still learning how to write?

Mark Dawson: Yeah, of course, all the time. The more you read, the more experience you get. You can always improve. I'm confident in my voice now. I've got a lot of books behind me, but you could always improve.

It's not so much now, I'm kind of worried about moving punctuation around, I mean, confident enough that some of it comes naturally, but you can always improve your word choice, pacing, dialogue, structure, all kinds of things can always be tweaked and improved.

So even after all those books I've written, and the copies that I've sold, I'm still never satisfied with how good I can become.

James Blatch: That sounds like the right attitude to have.

Okay, now I told you one of the experts did not give favorable feedback on what he or she saw. Well it's not Jennie, we've heard Jennie. She really liked Niki's writing, but gave a lot of good advice as well. Let's find out whether it's the blurb. So let's hear from Bryan Cohen.

James Blatch: Last time we spoke, you were in my bedroom in Vegas.

Bryan Cohen: It's true. It was a lot of fun. I never expected how fun it would be to be in your bedroom.

James Blatch: That's right, and we both sat down thinking we were doing different things, which is how it always happens in Vegas bedroom, but we managed to, we got a bonus episode out of you actually, which is a really good one at that. Mindfulness.

Bryan Cohen: Oh, thanks.

James Blatch: As a bonus to people watching on YouTube, you've got beautiful earrings.

Bryan Cohen: I do.



James Blatch: They look amazing.

Each side of my head. We've got some trailing, white hoop earrings.

James Blatch: It's not them. It's the Japanese fans on the wall behind.

Bryan Cohen: Oh, yeah. I shouldn't turn my head then.

James Blatch: No, no. Let's preserve that picture.

James Blatch: Look, okay-

Bryan Cohen: You love those fans. You're always talking about them.

James Blatch: I mention them every time. I'm having them at some point and I'm going to drop into Chicago-

Bryan Cohen: I should send some.

James Blatch: You're going to innocently invite me for dinner and a couple of days later, you're going to be thinking, "Wasn't there something on the wall there?" And I'm going to be, "Ha ha ha ha." The evil badly English in a film.

Bryan Cohen: I like that.

James Blatch: Alright, let us crack on with this. It's a packed episode, this particular one. You have done a cracking case on, a cracking job on the blurb.

First of all, before we get into that, let me ask you what you thought of what was already there from Niki.

Bryan Cohen: Niki's original blurb had some really nice things working for it. I do enjoy the hook. It's got a fun tone to it, he's handsome, wealthy, and oh-so-mysterious. It's fun, it makes it so you know that this is not some dark, mystery.



But it also, but the hook also sounds potentially like romance. And so you have to make sure that when you have a hook like that, it's not just fun and games, it's also doing some lifting for you and making sure the reader who finds your page likes that kind of genre.

So it's tough because there's a lot of good things and we even cribbed a few phrases, "German Sheppard at her side" which is perfect for that kind of mystery genre, female detective with a dog, sort of thing. But yeah, there's lots of good points of it.

James Blatch: One thing that's coming across from this particular Book Laboratory experiment is that Niki is a good writer. And that comes through in the blurb that, so that first line then from Niki's original is, "He's handsome, wealthy, and oh-so-mysterious, but you can't judge a book by its cover, right?"

So, your point there is the one I thought of as well, which is that, "He's handsome, wealthy, and oh-so-mysterious" could easily be the opening line blurb from a billionaire romance series.

Bryan Cohen: Exactly.

James Blatch: And you've got to signal, we say this on every Book Lab, you've got to signal what punters are going to get with your book very clearly. And that perhaps is unintended consequence of a quite nice turn of phrase though I guess.

Bryan Cohen: It's good writers can do themselves harm by giving that cue to the reader certainly, so you're spot on.

James Blatch: Now your blurb is a little bit longer than Niki's, but we're trying to like-for-like, and then as always, people can get at [selfpublishingformulacomeforward/booklab4](https://selfpublishingformulacomeforward.com/booklab4), can download the before and afters to follow along here.



Your new top line for the blurb is, "A rare edition, a murdered thief. Can a mid-life PI solve the case before the killer ending?"

Textbook Cohen blurb.

Bryan Cohen: Cohen Best Page Forward style right here for ya.

James Blatch: Let's first of all point out that you have addressed what we picked up with the possible problem of the nicely-written top line before, is that your top line signals the genre.

Bryan Cohen: Yes. It is a mystery, a murder mystery, so we need to know, hey, someone died. We need to know there's a detective whose working on the case.

And we need to know, this is something we always push which is, we need to know that character is in danger. There are real stakes here for Ronnie Lake to solve this case, or she might die. And we have the little bit of a, "rare book edition, killer ending" pun in there to show the fun that Niki showed off in her original line, but doing it in a slightly more subtle way.

James Blatch: Great. Niki's next line is, "A 50-something divorcee turned private eye, Ronnie Lake turns the pages on her current case with her beloved German Sheppard at her side. Adultery, betray, and romance are the main characters until murder steals the scene and plunges her into the exclusive world of rare book collecting."

Your line, "Ronnie Lake has reinvented herself. With her trusty German Sheppard by her side, the freshly-licensed PI refuses to take her 50's lying down. But Ronnie has a real-life murder mystery on her hands when a dinner party ends with a would-be burglar's demise."

So tell me what you did there.



Bryan Cohen: Once again, I think Niki, what she did here is strong, and we kind of repackaged it in a different way to give the audience, give the readers, a little morsel at a time.

It's a longer sentence, her first, that begins the "50-something divorcee," but we're just saying, "Ronnie Lake has reinvented herself" to start. We love to give the reader just the sense of a character in a very short period of time.

And you like to think a lot of readers for this genre might be in their 50's, their 60's, as well and their kind of, they get an understanding of the reinvention that comes with divorce. And we don't necessarily mention the divorce here, we wondered about that- whether or not to include it, but I thought just sticking with saying, "that she refuses to take her 50's lying down" was kind of a better way to handle that.

I think that the way sometimes the reader mind works when looking at a book description, when reading it, is if you put in too much information in a single sentence, it's difficult for them to retain all of it. And that's why, "Ronnie Lake has reinvented herself." Oh, okay, one piece of information. Versus, "Divorcee. Private Eye. Current case. German Sheppard." Four pieces of information.

So we give these little bite-sized chunks, and then we try to set the scene a little bit differently than she did with the "Adultery, betray, and romance" kind of going into these big topics versus us saying, "Real-life murder mystery. It's a dinner party that ends with, wait a person is trying to steal something dies." That's kind of some interesting intrigue there.

It's very similar I would say to what she has, it's just done in a different way to try to not overwhelm the reader, but still to intrigue them at the same time.

James Blatch: I told you before we started, there's something I really loved about this blurb, and it's in this line. And the more I talked to Jennie Nash,



and there's a bit of an overlap here in terms of learning here about how we present our information, and I could hear Jennie applauding the way you've done this.

Because she talks about info dumps a lot, and when you're giving people information it takes them out of the narrative, which is a very easy thing to do and we're all guilty of it, but here I think you've done this really beautifully.

So when Niki said, "A 50-something divorcee turned private eye," you've turned that into a sentence that says "The freshly-licensed PI refuses to take her 50's lying down." As you said, what a perfect way of moving you along, but also subtly giving you that little bit of information.

Now that's the golden key really to that succinct writing and I think I would be right in saying that Jennie Nash would be on her feet applauding the way that you've done that.

Bryan Cohen: Well, that's awesome to hear. I still need to meet Jennie, by the way.

James Blatch: Yeah. We'll have to arrange that.

Bryan Cohen: We've got to set that up. But, yeah, whenever you are including plot in your description, you need to have momentum along with it and you need to keep the momentum going or else it will take readers out. I absolutely agree with that.

James Blatch: Niki's next to line in the original blurb, "When a priceless first edition vanishes, everyone becomes a suspect and a target but the literary shocker speaks volumes about a historic book series curiously lost to time that holds the key to it all."

In your rewrite, you have, "After discovering that a rare edition of *The Great Gatsby* is at the center of the case, Ronnie dives deep into the world of collecting but when her investigation brings her closer to a rich book



connoisseur with an eye for romance, she's unsure if he's a partner or a suspect."

James Blatch: So this is, again, this is something you do.

You build like a pyramid, don't you? You give yourselves a little bit more license to flesh out the story in this third line.

Bryan Cohen: Yeah. I think that one thing Niki did that was interesting was she established that there's this romantic interest in her description, but she left it in the hook and then didn't necessarily come back to address it.

It's almost got a cozy feel with a dog sidekick and an amateur private investigator, it has that cozy feel and with cozy mysteries, you almost need that will they or won't they romantic interest in there, so we know that readers are interested in that, we've seen that from the series that we've written descriptions for that have been successful, so we had to build that up but, and this is key from the information Niki gave us about the book, that she's not fully sure if she can trust this guy and so we needed to bring that up, and this is almost an exact re-phrase of what she has.

Everyone becomes a suspect and a target, but now re-framing it in this romantic interest, unsure if he's a partner, or a suspect, it makes it more personalized.

Even though everyone means more people, the stakes are actually higher in our version because it's someone that the reader might care about because they have a connection to the protagonist.

James Blatch: Yeah. And it's intrigue, isn't it? Which both sentences do have but, yes, I like that, finishing off with is he a partner or a suspect?

Now the last line of Niki's original, which is be sure to ensure the ebook bonus prequel to Ronnie Lake's story in the first several chapters of Stunner and the beginning of Delilah.



I have to say, that was the sentence I liked the least of the original. You always do say you've got to say at the end this is what you need to do, buy the book or whatever.

I found it a slightly confusing sentence, actually, to try and untangle what's on offer here.

Bryan Cohen: Niki's not the only author I've seen fall prey to the thinking that a reader wants bonus content and that that's more important than the story itself and that they're more likely to buy a book if they know there's a bonus prequel in it.

Maybe that's the case in a box set, but even then it still feels like that's a reason to get existing readers, oh there's a story I've never read before, I'll pick up the box set. But for someone who is coming into this fresh, there being this bonus prequel is not going to excite them.

In ours, we close out with one more cliffhanger line before we get to saying, "This is the book you're interested in, this is the book you're going to care about more."

We don't even mention, and when we get descriptions from other folks, through Best Page Forward, we don't always mention those kinds of bonuses just because we don't think they necessarily sell books.

James Blatch: Yeah. What I found confusing about the sentence is it talks about the prequel to Ronnie Lake's story and then talks about two separate books, several chapters from this and several chapters from that, so are they both the prequel to Ronnie Lake, so it's not a massively coherent sentence. It sounds very rude of me to say that but it didn't work for me, anyway.

So what you'd done, at this point, you had carried on with the blurb more directly about this book, with the line, "Will Ronnie discover the secret behind the novel before the killer shuts the book on her life?" I like what you've done there.



Bryan Cohen: We always try and include this. It's so funny. I was just writing a children's book description, putting the final touches on it this morning, and it makes you think. Even a children's book has a cliffhanger that you want to leave the reader wanting more, even if they're a parent just looking for something to help put their kid to sleep at night.

This goes back to my theater days, my improv days, you always want to leave people wanting more because you want them to come back to the next show, you want them to read the next book.

Before the killer shuts the book on her life, a little poem, a little bit of a nod to there being a lighter tone to this murder mystery. The stakes one more time.

The cliffhanger often ends up being kind of a rephrasing of our hook. Solve the case before the killer ending, before the killer shuts the book on her life. What are the stakes? Why should you read this book? What might happen in this book?

Obviously Niki isn't going to kill her character. Pretty obvious, but you almost want the reader to know that it could happen. And so you include that in as the cliffhanger.

James Blatch: And by the way, that is, of course, the mainstay of a lot of storytelling. The fact that people know that James Bond is not going to die does not stop us feeling threatened when he's hanging off a cliff or somebody's holding a gun to his head.

So of course you can do that. You can put your hero ... And nobody's going to say, "Well, they're not going to kill Ronnie Lake." They're going to see the intrigue and the possibilities of the story.

Great. And then you've got your pay off lines here. "*Searching for Gatsby* is the third standalone book in the Ronnie Lake murder mystery series. If you like realistic female characters, canine sidekicks, and twists you won't see



coming, then you'll love Niki Danforth's suspenseful tale. Buy *Searching for Gatsby* to start turning the pages today."

Don't forget to ask people to buy the book.

Bryan Cohen: Yes. I see back and forth some people saying, "Hey, calls to action don't work for me. Calls to action do work for me."

We use it. We've seen it help conversions but, as always, look, we have written a lot of book descriptions but that doesn't mean that we know everything, certainly. You get to see your sales data in real time and you get to see how well your ads are performing.

Test out one for a month, test out another for a month. Make sure the number of clicks are pretty even between them so that you don't accidentally fall prey to the, "Hey, this isn't selling." When you've only sent a quarter of the clicks to it that month.

The data needs to speak for itself but try one way or the other and see what works best and then go with the one that works best.

James Blatch: And if people do download the before and after, not only do you see the before and after of the main blurb, but Bryan includes the code version to go on Amazon with a little bit of HTML code for the bolding and paragraphs.

Actually that's got a really good sub-headline, "Start reading this murder mystery right away." Which sounds a really obvious thing to say but if you're using Facebook Ads targeting system well and this ad lands in front of people who like reading murder mysteries, what a great ... "Start reading this murder mystery right away." It doesn't say buy the book, spend the money. It just says, you know, here's a chance to start reading it and it's ... I really like that.

Then there are 10 Amazon ad headline options for you, and this is, I guess, part of the service with Best Book Forward, with your blurb service.



Bryan Cohen: Best Page Forward, James.

James Blatch: Oh, Best Page Forward. Sorry.

Bryan Cohen: No.

James Blatch: Best Book Forward's the conglomerate you're going to found.

Bryan Cohen: Exactly. Yeah.

We include all of that because we know how important the advertising is, obviously, you guys certainly know that, and we recommend just testing a line here or there, test different ad copies.

No one would ever tell you only create one ad with one set of keywords. Try a boatload of them, 10 or more, and then see which one has the best click through rate, which one's getting you the best results.

I know Amazon doesn't always make it easy to show those but test different things out and see which one is going to bring you the best return on investment.

James Blatch: Superb. Excellent. Bryan, thank you so much. Another cracking job on the BookLab and it's been a good one, this one, because the writing's good, the blurb was good. You've improved it, definitely. Something made a noise in my head then.

You've improved it and Jennie talked about the writing, which is great, and then the cover, Stuart didn't really like it and I didn't really like it.

For the first time we've really got something that we've thought, "This is not right." And it would be interesting to hear how Niki responds.

I am so pleased that her writing is brilliant and everyone's excited about that because I couldn't bear to do three chunks in a row of Niki listening to an interview of people saying, "Yeah, she's not good enough." So you've



rescued us there by ... Well, she's rescued herself by doing a good job with the blurb and the writing.

Bryan Cohen: This is definitely one of those where you feel really good that ... And I'm sure Jennie and Stuart feel the same way, getting to elevate something to another level, getting to make the marketing match or exceed the quality of the book, I feel like at this point it's matching it because obviously the book is probably just as strong as her original blurb and so getting that opportunity to do that, and you guys doing this with the BookLab to help get authors to have the marketing that their book deserves is such a wonderful thing, and it's such a wonderful service you guys get to provide, so my hats, my many hats, are off to you, James.

James Blatch: Tipped. Well, it's very kind of you. I can hear one of those mournful American fire engines wailing.

Bryan Cohen: I wasn't sure if it made it to the microphone but it did.

James Blatch: They sound like the saddest vehicle on Earth.

Bryan Cohen: They are.

James Blatch: But you go off to sleep to them in New York, but there you go.

Bryan, thank you once again for a sterling job and we will see you in a BookLab number five at some point in the future.

Bryan Cohen: I can't wait, James. Thanks for having me.

James Blatch: Okay, there you are. There's Bryan and Bryan, again, was handed a pretty good blurb to start with but he definitely made it better and we're going to hear, finally, in this super long edition of the Self Publishing Show, we're going to hear from Niki herself and what she thought about all this feedback in a moment.



But the blurb, again, Mark, and it was a really interesting first moment, it is a great opportunity to hammer this point home again, that your blurb must reflect your genre and the first line of the blurb, and it was so obvious once Bryan pointed it out.

But Niki didn't see it until it was pointed out, that it sold the book as a romance and it's not a romance, so you've just got to make sure that each line reinforces what the reader is going to get.

Mark Dawson: Yeah, it's very important. And, again, it's not easy, it's not an easy task for an author to pull off.

Sometimes it is necessarily to step out of yourself and look at others in your genre that are selling well and/or think about asking someone else to do it for you, because it is very difficult to divorce yourself from the 80,000 words that you've written and then still that down into a punchy, bite-size chunk, which Bryan is very good at doing, so, yes, very interested to see what he had to say.

James Blatch: And I think I mentioned to Bryan I really loved the way he came up with that line, "The freshly licensed PI refuses to take her 50s lying down." So he's very poetically and easily and comfortably given you quite a lot of information about the character and the person, but instead of it being an info kind of stop and start, she's in her 50s and she's divorced, it's just a flowing sentence that tells us more about the character than simply that she's 50s and divorced, or the sassy character that she is.

Mark Dawson: Yeah.

James Blatch: Great. So the before and after blurb included with the handout for this episode.

Finally, you've probably guessed that if it wasn't the blurb and if it wasn't the editorial feedback, it may have been the cover that didn't go down well with our experts. Let us hear about the cover for *Searching for Gatsby* from our cover design expert, Stuart Bache.



Welcome back to the podcast. We should just say you do still live on a building site.

Stuart Bache: I do.

James Blatch: The tipper trucks, like the opening scene to *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, where they come to plow Arthur Dent's house down to make way for a bypass, they-

Stuart Bache: Well, I hope they don't do that.

James Blatch: No. No. They're building houses, aren't they, where you are?

Stuart Bache: Yes, they are.

James Blatch: Rather than the other way round.

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

James Blatch: Just whilst we were chatting before it was quite noisy so I'm pointing it out if ... People shouldn't be alarmed.

Stuart Bache: I apologize. It's not my fault.

James Blatch: No. It's not your fault. You don't have to apologize. Okay. '

Lovely to have you back on the podcast and we are looking at Niki Danforth's *Searching for Gatsby*, so we are talking about the cover.

What do you think of the cover, Stuart?

Stuart Bache: I'm a nice guy, always remember I'm a nice guy, but it needs a lot of work. I think the best thing I could say about it, the most positive thing I could say about it is the image itself, so the character and the building and the sky and everything isn't that bad at all. It sort of suits the genre in many ways.



However, the actual composition itself is lacking. It made me feel that perhaps Niki had designed it herself, which isn't a bad thing if she has, that's amazing, because it's not an easy job but there are aspects to it that are a little naïve, so, for example, the bars that are at the top and the bottom.

There's a green bar at the top and a sort of blue bar at the bottom. These overlap the image if you can't see it, if you're not able to view it and you're listening, it sort of overlaps the image to sort of ... Crops it into a little square, the image into a square in the middle and that is kind of a non-fiction thing that you do with non-fiction, but it's also something that you do if you don't know how to add type to an image.

It's a really lazy way of designing something. I'm trying to be as positive as possible because it's ... I mean, it's not a bad ... I've seen bad covers.

James Blatch: Yes, I've certainly seen bad covers. It's not a bad cover.

Stuart Bache: It's not a bad cover.

James Blatch: There is some type on the image, but in terms of the title, that is quite a specific thing of how to do that and make it stand out.

Look, I'll put you at ease a little bit because you're out on a limb. We've given you a cover that is more challenging to talk about here, but I'll also say, with all due respect to Niki, and I can tell you with the comfort of knowing that Jennie really likes her writing and thinks she's talented and is great, this cover definitely doesn't work for me.

At first glance it doesn't work for me. It looks a bit like a sort of school textbook.

Stuart Bache: That's what I mean by non-fiction.

James Blatch: Yes. Sort of O Level textbook or maybe an old Penguin that's been put together again from a 19th century novel and issued to students



at university. It doesn't say a modern, exciting, witty ... All the things the book is, at all to me.

Stuart Bache: No.

James Blatch: And that's regardless of the technical ability that's gone into creating it, which is well beyond me. It is for us, at least, us two people, it doesn't work for us.

So let's talk a bit more technically about why you think that's the case. Now, you said, first of all, the banding hasn't worked in this case, it's given it the wrong look.

Is there a place for that kind of banding, top and bottom? Or is that, as you said, non-fiction?

Stuart Bache: Banding, like I say, it always feels like lazy design to me because it's an easy way of placing stuff over an image rather than having to deal with how to incorporate type with an image, and especially in this genre, you don't get a huge amount of banding.

For me, it's like when people add really, really hard drop shadows to type to make them stand out, because it forces it to stand out against it, and it doesn't look like it should be there, and everything in design should work together, it should sort of help each other.

So when you're designing the book cover, you think about where the type's going to go and you think about where the image is going to go. And this is what a lot of people do, they find a perfect image and then they try and squeeze the type in somewhere, so you see it slotted in at the top or at the bottom, wherever they can get it, because they love the image so much.

So with something like this, I think it would be worth starting again. If she can't start again then I would just go with the image that's in the center here and work with that.



If there is any more image, because at the moment it's a square, so if there's any more to the bottom or the top, or she can go back to her designer and perhaps expand the sky a little bit so that she can add some type up in there.

I think in terms of styling, there are two directions that you can go, and the two more popular ones at the moment are very similar to the action ... Sorry, action thrillers, like Mark's books and Lee Child, is that there's a lot of mysteries, murder mysteries, have a character walking into a scene. That is what the cover does.

I guess the actual books out there that you could emulate are the sort of Cormoran Strike series. Is it Galbraith, well, the J.K. Rowling thriller mystery, so that's one direction, and then the other side is J.R. Ellis, the Yorkshire mystery, murder mysteries, sort of more on the side of Agatha Christie, that kind of thing. Even though those are set in the past, the book covers these days are actually quite modern and use a scene, so they have a scene, like a manor house, very similar to this, or something foreboding, like the scene of where the murder took place, that sort of thing is really popular in this genre.

But in terms of typography, this looks like avant garde, which is something you can get from your ... Most computers, I think, it comes with most PCs and stuff. It says to me something very 1920s, and this is a very modern book.

James Blatch: Although there's a Gatsby reference.

Stuart Bache: And then it does say Gatsby. It does say Gatsby. But it makes me think of the 1920s, the type face and the title. Actually, I think generally in this genre, it's either a very kind of dynamic sans serif, like Helvetica or something like that.

If you look at the Cormoran Strike stories, is a very cool, dynamic way they use the typography, but for this, I think this is the direction she'll probably



go, which is more along the lines of the classical murder mystery, would be to use a really nice serif, a really sharp serif, like Garamond, something like that.

Actually the J.R. Ellis, who has done really well, I think he's done by Amazon, I think it's Thomas & Mercer or someone like that, really bold, colors but it's a really sharp. Actually it probably is Garamond when I've looked at it before, but if you look it up, that's the sort of thing. It sort of sets it in a nice sort of ... I don't know, a Midsomer Murders kind of feel to it.

And I think that's the kind of direction you want to go. When you want to come across something like this, as I always say with book covers, you want to know instantly what you're getting, and with a cover like this, you don't know instantly what you're going to get.

It could be espionage, it could be set in the 1920s, it could be, like you say, a textbook for school. It could be all sorts of different things, so I think trying to get that down, trying to get the genre down first and which direction or which part of that genre you want to ... Because murder mysteries and thrillers and all sorts of things, there's so many different ways of doing it.

James Blatch: Second only to romance, I think, in terms of the sub-genres.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, exactly.

James Blatch: So if you took away the banding, the picture was full frame, I was going to ask you one technical about that. So if that picture, let's assume there's not much more of this, of that picture, at least in height, could you use the cloning tool or something in Photoshop to increase the amount of clouds at the top.

Would you need a high degree of skill to do that?

Stuart Bache: You would need skill to do the cloning tool. A cloning tool is really good for very small things.



James Blatch: Oh, okay.

Stuart Bache: So it's good for getting rid of little titchy bits ... Titchy little bits and pieces, but with something like this, what you could do is, if you don't have a means of buying anymore or if you can't go back to your designer, whatever, right there you have the information.

So you have the clouds in the sky, so what you could do is duplicate that layer, make it larger, overlay it to the top and then sort of use a soft brush to get rid of the, you know, to delete-

James Blatch: The join. Yeah.

Stuart Bache: The join. That would help. Otherwise, just go find a new sky.

James Blatch: But you mustn't end up with two moons, because that would be a science fiction.

Stuart Bache: No, exactly. Yeah.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Stuart Bache: That's true.

James Blatch: Okay. So that's great.

And then at the bottom, I guess that's even more straightforward because that's very linear and repetitive already at the bottom, isn't it?

Stuart Bache: Yeah.

You could probably use the clone tool on something like that if you wanted to, just for bits and pieces.

James Blatch: And that by itself, and then you've got to find a way of putting the title over the picture and you've covered that sort of thing



before, and if people haven't taken it, we should plug the webinar that you and I did, which does go into detail of how to do all of this thing.

[Selfpublishingformula.com/coverdesign](https://selfpublishingformula.com/coverdesign). There is a webinar where Stuart actually demonstrates how to do all of this step by step, so worth looking at if you want to know the detail, but we'll definitely talk about it in broad terms at the moment.

So let's get the picture full frame across the whole thing.

You then put that text, top and bottom, on there, and I think that immediately starts to make a significant improvement for me in terms of glancing at it and knowing what it's about.

Stuart Bache: I think that would definitely help. I think the title would work much better if it felt a little bit more modern, and I think a bright color, like a yellow, yellow works very well with blues, or orange, that sort of color, would work really, really well and make it feel a bit more modern so that you're not sort of, once again, feeling like you're back in the 1920s again, but something like Garamond, Adobe Garamond, a really sharp serif would work really, really well and maybe put the title onto three lines, so Searching for Gatsby on three lines.

James Blatch: What do you think of the blue wash that's been put across the photo or the image?

Stuart Bache: I think it's okay if you didn't have those bars. I think the color of your type or whatever could just sort of bring a bit more depth to it. I mean, often this sort of color washes are used in this sort of area sometimes.

I would say that some of the Agatha Christies I've worked on in the past, or when I worked at Harper Collins, had more color in because, say for a manor, for example, like in this image, the light, the yellow light against it really helps bring a bit of warmth but also bring in that kind of sense of, you



know, that foreboding, like what's in there? It's nighttime and there's lights on and this person's walking towards it on their own.

James Blatch: Yes.

Stuart Bache: That would add some cool sets and interest to the cover. So, yeah, some colors would be nice in there, if you can put them in.

James Blatch: It's interesting shading and light in that image, actually. There's quite a lot going on, isn't there, with darker areas that are almost sort of spot lit raised exposure.

Stuart Bache: The moon's not as bright as it could be, and I don't know why that is. Her shadow's not that bad. I can see what they're trying to do, and she's been cut out very well.

James Blatch: Does the shadow make logical sense for where the moon is?

Stuart Bache: Well, not really. But the moon isn't very bright either, so it doesn't seem like that's the source of light.

James Blatch: Okay.

Stuart Bache: When I talk about composition, this is the things that I mean, like if there's a shadow, it has to come from somewhere.

James Blatch: Yeah.

Stuart Bache: It kind of looks good, the shadow, but if the light was coming from the right way, and actually it isn't coming from the right way, because if you look at the bushes on either side, the bush to her right, there's a deep dark shadow to that side which means the light is coming from the right hand side, so really her shadow should be short and to the left, but that's just me being really nitpicky, but those are the sort of things you do when you design.



You look at the things of where you think the source is. If you can't see it, then the shadows on other things will tell you where it is. But this is me being really picky.

The big thing for me I found really interesting, because I did look at the blurb, because I wanted to try and get an idea of what the story was about, because it didn't tell me instantly and I didn't want to say, "This should look like this."

Then read the blurb and it's actually super modern and it's nothing to do with the 1920s, which was the case, but one of the first lines that sort of stands out is, "But you can't judge a book by its cover, right?"

I thought it was really interesting, because you really shouldn't have things like that on your book anyway, because the first thing it does is make you think, "What do I think about this cover?"

James Blatch: Yes.

Stuart Bache: And when it's on the cover like this, it does make you think, "Okay, I'm not sure this is right at all."

And there is something I should point out before, and I should have pointed out earlier, you don't need to have, "By" on your front cover. Everyone knows if you're the author then we know it's by you.

I think it's an old-fashioned thing to do. A lot of people used to do it in, you know, about 30-40 years ago but you don't need to have, "By" on there.

James Blatch: I don't know whether Niki designed it. I will talk to her, obviously, after she's watched all these interviews. Hopefully she'll take it in the spirit it's offered, I'm sure she will. I don't know whether she designed this herself or a friend did it or something, it doesn't look like a pro design to me.



So I'll put you on the spot a little bit, Stuart, and say how much would it cost somebody like Niki to get a cover design by someone like you?

Stuart Bache: By me, it ... You're looking at something like between £300 to £400. I'm on the more expensive end of things, but you can get some fantastic covers, and fantastic pre-made covers, for \$99.

And up to 150, and I think I would always recommend an author, if they don't have a huge amount of budget for a cover, which is understandable, they are one of the most expensive things. As Mark and you know that it's always ... It's something that you shouldn't worry about too much, because a bad cover will actually affect you so much and it's a good investment.

But I would always suggest to an author if they haven't got a big budget is to go and get a pre-made cover, rather than try and do it themselves. I know that we've got the course and everything, if you can do the course that's cool.

If you're doing something now and you need to get your book out there, then a pre-made cover is better than you tinkering around, unless you've learned how to do it yourself properly and understand the genre.

James Blatch: We say this all the time. The cover is so critically important and there are people who enjoy doing their own covers and are good at it and we've seen them in the groups, in your group in particular.

Some have gone on to be designers for other people, but you do need to be wanting to be that person and have a good degree of training and talent at it. If you think you're not that person, then surely that 300 quid, I knew the high end of it is going to be a good investment if you're serious about your career and making money.

Now particularly, I would think of the beginning, because at the beginning you don't really know some of the fundamentals you've talked about that need to be in place for this book and it's genre. That would come naturally for a designer. So you could pay for that one cover, then maybe from that



point onwards, you're really clear then as to what the cover needs to look like, what it needs to say. Maybe that's the point at which you then try to do your own ones after that.

Stuart Bache: Not really to-

James Blatch: ... not really do it technically yourself, but also all the editorial decisions that you make very naturally don't come naturally to other people.

Stuart Bache: No, but you might not be able to learn necessarily to pick up how to design it perfectly yourself, but there are ways of learning how to understand your genre.

The research, all of that sort of stuff doesn't require you to be a pro designer or to be able to find your designer is great and to work with a pro is even better, but from the very beginning, you as an author should understand your genre, and what works, and what doesn't.

We often talk about the familiarity theory, and standout, and all that kind of stuff. Those things are really, really important right at the beginning of your career because if you don't respect those things, because this is you.

This is part of you. This is your face. This cover is your face as an author, and if it's bad, people aren't necessarily going to delve into your brilliant work, and as you said, it's a really good book and she's talented.

So it's a shame and that's what happens when people say, "You don't judge a book by its cover." Obviously, it's a massive lie, because otherwise I'd be out of a job.

James Blatch: This book needs to be seen and read, and Jennie was squealing the whole conceit of the 50 something divorcee woman as being the heroine of the book. She thinks it's absolutely perfect.



The world's crying out for this type of thing now. A lot is right with this book, but I'm afraid, Niki, we have to give this a uh-uh, kind of a miss shooter on this one.

But that's good that she's got something valuable to work on.

Stuart Bache: Yeah, When you're at the bottom, you've only got one way to go.

James Blatch: At the bottom. If the knife was there -

Stuart Bache: You know, I'm terribly sorry it's a British thing, I'm going to get all hot now.

James Blatch: No, you're wrong.

Stuart Bache: I apologize Niki, it's not right at the bottom but you have so much potential and it's there anyway so I think ... You've got the story, all you need is a good design.

James Blatch: A great cover.

Stuart Bache: And a good designer.

James Blatch: Superb, Stuart thank you, I can hear the JCB coming so we'll quit now.

Stuart Bache: Yeah it's on its way, and it's coming to crash through the wall I think in a minute.

James Blatch: The bypass is on its way.

Stuart was not alone, was he Mark? In not really liking that cover.

Mark Dawson: Now I didn't love it either, which is probably why I chose Niki for this one, because I thought that Stuart could do some good work on this one. So, yeah, he should see what he felt about that.



James Blatch: Of course Niki's got a problem now, because she's got, three, I think three books in the series all with the same design and she's completely, well in fact I tell you what, before I talk about that, why don't we sum up this episode by hearing from Niki herself about what she thought of the feedback and then I'll tell you about her problem in terms of how she goes forward now.

So let's hear Niki Danforth, the author, thought of these expert opinions in the Book Lab.

James Blatch: Niki, why don't you start before we hear what you thought about what you heard. Just tell us in succinct terms, who Niki Danforth is.

Niki Danforth: Well, Niki Danforth spent a lot of years working in television just like you James, and at a certain point sort of wound down out of that career as a director and a producer in the field, on television and then in the corporate world, and had always had a fantasy of writing and just decided to give it a go, and my first book was my first Ronnie Lake, *Stunner*.

Learned a lot, and very quickly met a wonderful editor, can't imagine doing a book without her so, that's how I got here. I just decided new chapter in life, kind of like Ronnie Lake, and give it a go.

James Blatch: Can I ask a personal question, is there a divorced element as well?

Niki Danforth: No!

James Blatch: I wouldn't normally ask somebody that, but obviously it's a key factor and it was something, you talked about good editors so let's start with Jenny, because Jenny was really taken with that cause she just thinks it's a very, not a zeitgeist I think, James' thoughts are very ... every day thing.



That's what we invent our heroes to all be, usually a little too perfect, and here's somebody who's recovering from a very typical life time experience, and she thought it was great!

Niki Danforth: What I really appreciated that Jenny liked is where Ronnie is in her life. She's mid-life, she's the next chapter of her life and it's not just that she's divorced.

The divorce happened for a tragic reason, all of this is in the first book, which is kind of a prequel ... in terms of how does somebody decide to become a private investigator? They don't just wake up one day and say, "I want to be a private investigator!" Or rarely, does that happen. It happens for various other reasons.

Ronnie had been downsized out of her corporate job in television distribution in Manhattan, so she was out of a job. She had tragically lost, she and her husband had lost their son in Afghanistan, and he was a war dog handler, and Warrior, whom she adopted, was the last living being with their son. So that's why Warrior is so dear to Ronnie.

The marriage could not withstand the death of their son, that's why the divorce happened. She's also an empty nester with two other adult daughters.

So, it's divorce, no job, death of one of her children, she's ready for a new chapter. And, she gets pulled in accidentally, into an investigation concerning another member of her family in the first book, and she discovers that she really likes doing this, working on this, and decides to give it a go.

And in the second book, which is really a long short story and was part of an anthology, she's learning, she's taking classes, she's working for the P.I. that she hired in the first book, learning the methods of investigation and everything that goes into being a P.I. and in the third book, *Searching for*



Gatsby, she is now a newly licensed private investigator, and this becomes her first real case on her own.

James Blatch: Okay, so what a great character fleshed out, and you've brought life to Ronnie Lake. Layered and textural and motivated and all the things that we want in our characters.

What did you think of the feedback you heard from Jennie?

Niki Danforth: I loved her comments because they were all right on the money, and what I appreciated was that she was really focusing in on some things that are so easy for any writer to miss.

First of all, I couldn't disagree at all about the endings, the endings that she referred to in my introduction and in the first chapter, and then she referred to getting it right at the end of the second chapter. I get to the end of a chapter and I often say, I need something with a little more sizzle here, and I can't figure it out, and I just cut.

James Blatch: I thought it was a great bit of feedback wasn't it because there's something for all of us.

Niki Danforth: It was a great bit of feedback and it's something that I can go back in and take a look at and do, because she talks about, that it's a great way to ramp up the momentum and keep driving your story forward, so I thought that was fantastic.

She also talked about how it's easy to fall into a passive voice. You don't even realize it, and again she referred to that transition, when the old guy in the introduction changes to his cat burglar outfit and I say he's transformed. She wanted to see much more detail about that, even if it's just a sentence or two, and I thought okay I'm going to have to go back and take a look at that and see what I can do with it.

I'm very much looking forward to seeing her PDF that she referred to, it's her chapter audit that you can do, per chapter.



James Blatch: Yeah, the chapter, the one hour chapter audit and the hierarchy of editorial concerns. I'll send, as a treat, you get those straight away, I'll send to those to you after this interview.

Niki Danforth: I thought I could go through and use them, that sounds like a really good, workable document.

James Blatch: And that point she made about the transformation goes to the heart of what Jennie talks about a lot, is that don't info dump, don't tell people things, but use something, that it tells the reader what's going on, and that what she saw in that, him changing, with the perfect opportunity to flesh out his character, and he changed into this person.

Niki Danforth: Yeah, and then I tell you James, I had to really laugh when she looked at my two little mini info dumps. After listening to the last Book Lab, where she talked quite a bit about info dumps, and I had started to send you materials for my Book Lab. I went into my look inside feature and I was re-reading it and I came to, "I run my fingers through my shoulder-length, straw-colored hair, as my left-foot" and I went "Oh my god Niki, that is an info dump phrase if I've ever seen one!"

But, I promised I wouldn't touch anything so I left it. I couldn't disagree either, those can slip in easily, you almost need distance from your book to go back after a while and then these things pop out at you.

James Blatch: Well, that's why traditional publishers might take two and a half years to go rewrite the book several times.

Now, here's a question for you, so changing the blurb in the cover is one thing which we'll come onto in a moment.

But, are you going to rewrite a lot of this book do you think? Or you going to take these hints and tricks forward with your new writing?



Niki Danforth: I think right now at the moment, I'm going to apply them moving forward, because I've got two in the works, and I don't want to lose momentum there.

And then, my goal here, really, is to get a bigger backlist of these Ronnie Lake books so that I can start applying the strategies that you teach, that Mark and you taught, throughout Self-publishing Formula, that work so much better when you've got 10 books in a series. So, that's really my goal and my focus now, is to work on Ronnie Lake.

James Blatch: Okay, so let's move onto the blurb then and again, I think for the third time in a row Bryan looked at your blurb and thought, "pretty good job!"

But, I think he made it better, what did you think?

Niki Danforth: He made it better without a doubt. I've been following Bryan's work on all of these Book Labs, and because I thought he was so amazing, and what he produced was so amazing, I hired Bryan to rewrite the blurbs from my children's books and they're terrific, and they're performing well on Amazon.

So, I was thrilled to have this opportunity and know that he would be rewriting *Searching for Gatsby* as well, I like everything he's done with it.

James Blatch: And he did, I mean I was really taken with some of the terms and phrases that he came up with it. The way that he got the information over, and he is a wordsmith, there's no question about it, and the way he and his team come up with this.

Niki Danforth: Well he hit the genre right at the top, and I really did not do that. He was right, it could've been a little more ... is this a romance book? And he got the mystery genre right away.

James Blatch: That was probably the key criticism of it, everything else was margins, and that's such an important thing, that first line's gotta tell people



what this genre is and yeah, that did come across a bit of as a romance. His turn of phrase, 'she wasn't going to take her 50s lying down', which is a really nice way of telling you who the person is and making it sound appealing at the same time, as a feisty character.

Niki Danforth: And that she's not 22 years old, she's 55! So, I've not been sure of doing that on my page on Amazon because I thought am I going to turn away readers even though I populate these books with a lot of younger characters.

My main character is this mid-life woman starting a new chapter in her life, that a lot of baby boomers can relate to. And, he completely embraced it and put it out there in, I think a perfect way.

James Blatch: So you're going to adopt this blurb, unfettered?

Jennie Nash: Yes, I'm going to use every word that he puts there, put it in, onto my sales page.

James Blatch: And it's a great package you get, because you get all the Amazon lines and headlines as well, which you can use, so good. Yeah that was a definite hit from Bryan.

Niki Danforth: I like that he bookends with the hook at the top and he brings it back to that at the end. I like how he tries to build intrigue for the reader. Yeah, it was perfection so I'm very excited about that.

James Blatch: Yeah, well let's see what difference it makes, that's the key thing so we'd love to hear about that in the future.

Now, finally! One area where there was not universal praise, which was the cover, and I have to say and I said it on the interview I wasn't a fan of the cover either, so I'm sorry about that and Stuart feels mortified. He's such a nice guy, Stuart, unlike me, I'm happy to criticize anyone, no I'm not.

But Stuart was like oh my god I'm going to have to say something here!



But he didn't think it worked, so how did you feel about that? Cause it's always difficult isn't it when you hear that common criticism.

Niki Danforth: I'll tell you, I can relate to the earlier Book Lab participants who all acknowledge nerves when the time came to listen to the takes from the different experts.

Because, when you sent this to me and I saved it for the morning, I got up, I got a cup of coffee. I said, do I read my New York Times first or do I look at these videos? I was nervous, I had butterflies, and I started with Stuart's first.

James Blatch: Oh you did? Do you know I put it in the other order for you and I hoped ... did you see that I cunningly put it so that would be the last thing.

Jennie Nash: I know you did! But I didn't know if you maybe you were changing the order of this one, so I just started there and I went, "Okay, let's just listen."

I didn't panic, I listened, I took notes all the way through, and I just stopped and fortunately, somewhere along the way you acknowledged how you both talked about the fact that Jennie had given me ... Really, it had been such a positive evaluation.

So, I listened to it, I stopped, I went to the other ones, I listened to Jennie, I listened to Bryan, and I said, I'm going to sleep on this.

The next day, I went to SPF University, and I watched the one that you did with Stuart, because I wanted to find out more, and I was wowed by that, and I was wowed by those montages showing genres because it seems that I really missed the boat on the genre with my cover.

Looking at those screens that you talked about and referred to at SPF University, showing the different genres really hit home for me. I also loved listening to him talk about the fonts. Talk about the way he combines



images, everything about it, that Facebook group at the end, some of those covers in there, it just blew me away.

I finished watching that, and this was not a do it yourself cover James, I worked with a designer. The first one actually got a pretty good responsive, and it even won an honorable mention in a cover contest online, I can't remember who's contest it was, but it got a pretty good response, and then I was trying to stay with the look of the series.

And again, I remember one of your other Book Lab participants talking about designing a cover, trying to keep in mind the size of the thumbnails. And so, I had the bands with the titles that you can read easily.

But I can't disagree, I wrote the whole list, I started thinking about, can I just take what I've got on this cover and make these adjustments? But I'm going to have to do that with the other two, or is this really an opportune time, since I anticipate having two books coming out first half of 2019? Is this really a more appropriate time to rethink it from scratch?

I need to think more about that, I don't have an answer or solution yet. It surprised me, but I'm open.

James Blatch: Yeah! Well it's great, because Mark and I do see from time to time some people who just don't have the art of taking criticism and argue back about it and you're just thinking, yeah it's going to be difficult to make real progress in life if you don't take on board valuable advice.

Not everything you're going to be told is going to be worthwhile but everything requires an evaluation, I think it's brilliant the way that you've done that.

Niki Danforth: James if I was going to blow something, thank goodness it wasn't the writing, I'd much rather blow the cover and you know, the writing is where it all starts right? The book.

James Blatch: Yeah, absolutely.



Niki Danforth: The cover is something I can fix.

James Blatch: A really strong positive for you is the feedback you got on the writing, and the cover you can fix.

I should just mention since you mentioned the SPF University webinar. So, that's available for people who have taken one of our courses or are Patreon supports of this podcast. So, it's a bit closed off, SPF University, but there's a version of that webinar out in the public domain and you can jump on that if you go to selfpublishingformula.com/coverdesign and I think you'll vouch for this.

It's a really excellent webinar. Stuart goes into all the genres, explains why they work, why they don't work when you get things wrong and then goes onto show you how to actually create a cover or how it's created in Photoshop if you either wanted to be interested in how they do their job or you yourself want to have a go. It's useful to understand that.

Niki Danforth: One thing I wanted to mention, Stuart encouraged me to look at certain covers by certain authors, which I did, he mentioned Robert Galbraith, I have all those books, and I looked at those covers.

A little bit more difficult for me to go straight from those, they use a variety of fonts, but you've got that running man idea on quite a number of those covers, where you don't really see specifically, you feel the danger.

He said to take a look at J.R. Ellis, and I took a look at L.J. Ross, who was interviewed in a podcast not that long ago, and I see what he's talking about in terms of the genre.

When you look at all of those covers, the genre grabs you right away and I realized my cover does not do that. Actually, L.J. Ross, with such an inspiring story too, she did the rare thing of hitting a home run with her first book, which I've now downloaded onto my Kindle. I want to see this world that she's created, but her covers also communicate, quite clearly, the genre. I can do better on that.



James Blatch: So critical and becoming more critical in the more crowded market, and that's a potential financial problem for you Niki, because of course you've got a series of books and changing all the covers in one go is ... you know that's 500 bucks a cover, that adds up pretty quickly.

So what do you think you're going to do?

Niki Danforth: And that's not having Stuart, if you have Stuart it's probably more than double that.

James Blatch: No, I think you could Stuart for 500 bucks, I think you can get Stuart. I think I'm right, he's just nudged his prices, but not by very much, by about 50 dollars. But, he's worth every penny. I keep telling him he needs to double his fees.

Niki Danforth: Well James! Hold on there!

James Blatch: You get him first! But anyway, that's still, you know, it's four books in the series is that right?

Niki Danforth: Well, there are three and I've got two that I'm working on, so it'll be five.

James Blatch: So you are talking about over 1,000 dollars, most likely, to change the covers. Is that something you're going to do in the near future?

Niki Danforth: I have to process all of this, I have to think about it, there are moments when you do have large investments, right? It's very important, I need to sleep on that one a bit more and make the decision whether to take the big dive.

Again, those books are happening a little bit into 2019 so maybe that I can spread it out a bit. I don't have to have them all pop in at one time.

James Blatch: You need to ask Santa for money this year.



Niki Danforth: Exactly, that's a good idea!

James Blatch: Niki, it's been terrific talking to you, I'm so pleased that the feedback was useful to you and you seem to me like you've got a list of things you're going to take away from this process which is what we want the Book Lab to be.

Niki Danforth: I do James, thank you very much for selecting my book to be one of your Book Labs, you get so much out of these, I got a lot of watching the others, and I hope everybody who watches gets a lot out of this one, the experts are all amazing, and I have loads of things I can do to make my books better, thank you.

James Blatch: There we go, there's Niki who, once again, demonstrated why people in our community are so brilliant and so many of them are so successful, it's because they take that criticism on board, they understand the value of it, and they move forward.

Niki was nervous, I think she said in the interview she was nervous about it, she put some time aside and was dreading it a little bit but then was past them to hear some of the positive stuff and found it incredibly useful to hear some of the more critical stuff, particularly the covers. So, she's got three or four books in the series and she needs to redo the covers for all of them.

Mark Dawson: She just doesn't have to, of course it's up to her but I mean, I would recommend it. I thought the covers out of all the elements I looked at, were the weak link, and they're probably the most important part of the trifecta to get someone into the actual writing and fortunately I've mentioned this before, the actual writing itself, come somewhere down the line you've got to hook them first of all when the reader is assailed by lots of choice on Amazon. So, you got them to click onto the product page, it's probably the cover doing that, well it definitely is if you're using an Amazon ad.



Once they're on the page, you've got to hook them with the blurb and provided you can get through those two barriers, then you have the task of enticing them once they start reading to continue with the book, which becomes an investment of time at that point rather than an investment of money, and then to take them into the rest of the series.

So, it's extremely important and I didn't like those covers either, and I'm certainly not an expert as Stuart as is, but I am a reader, and I've also got a fairly good idea about covers now after doing this for such a long time, and yeah it's good that Stuart got so involved in that one.

James Blatch: There you go, okay, now you can download the PDFs to go along with this episode if you go to selfpublishingshow.com/booklab4 and included in that, not only the original cover and the original before and after blurbs, but of great value is what Jennie Nash has presented for us, the hierarchy of editorial concerns PDF and the one hour chapter audit.

James Blatch: And, if you would like to be inside the laboratory, being dissected by our experts, you have to become a Patreon supporter of this podcast, so you can Patreon.com/selfpublishingshow now note that is a new URL for our Patreon supporters, it is the same Patreon account, nothing changes there if you are a supporter already, don't panic.

But to see your account you'll need to go to Patreon.com/selfpublishingshow and you can support us for as little as a dollar an episode, and I think we're wearing our value! Now aren't we? With our new cameras, and sound, and fantastic new intro, so that's all being enabled by the support we receive from you, our dear listener.

Mark Dawson: We are, and also thanks to everyone who commented so nicely about the new look of the podcast for the 150th episode last week, so we've got plenty of YouTube love which was great.

I will just recommend actually, as my mother calls me, hello mom, on my phone request there, so I'll speak to you later mom. One of the things that I



would recommend is that you subscribe to the YouTube channel. So go over to Youtube, hit that bell icon beneath the video because as we move into 2019 we do have some interesting ideas for the YouTube channel, so a load of free content there.

We have actually recruited someone as our first full-time employee, kind of, and he'll be starting next year, we'll introduce you properly to him as we get going. But, we're going to have regular content with me, James, and maybe a few others, and it'll be useful stuff too.

I may do some stuff on craft that I don't normally talk about, we'll certainly have marketing, and promotion, and that kind of stuff. And that will be regular, probably three times a week we'll have something going up live on the channel. So, do go over there and hit subscribe if you want to be notified when we've got new stuff going live.

James Blatch: Good, and what's the last thing we need to say in this episode?

Mark Dawson: Oh god yes, it's a good point yeah. So, Happy Christmas I suppose, or Merry Christmas depending on where you are in the world and a happy and prosperous book selling 2019. How does that work? It sound alright?

James Blatch: Well we need to save our happy New Year to the next week's show.

Mark Dawson: We do, that's very true yes.

James Blatch: But yes Happy Christmas, I don't know where you say happy and where you say merry, where is that division?

Mark Dawson: I get confused, yeah sometimes I've had readers say, "Do you say Happy Christmas?" When I send out something saying Happy Christmas. I don't know whether it's an American thing to say Merry Christmas. My mom's calling again!



PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

James Blatch: Well okay she really wants to get ahold of you, well we better say goodbye then.

We will say a very Merry Christmas to you, thank you so much for being with us in 2018, it's going to be another exciting year for us in this fast developing, rapidly changing world of indie publishing, and we are in the right place, you and me. And, I can't wait to move on with that.

So, we'll see speak to you from the Self Publishing Show next week, buh-bye.

Mark Dawson: Bye-bye.

Voiceover: 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 and 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.