

INDIE AUTHOR MAGAZINE

BUILDING ON YOUR OWN LAND

*The Constructive Way
Authors Can Sustain
Audience Engagement*

NO MORE HIDING BEHIND YOUR BOOKS

*Guest Author Isabelle Knight
Shares What it Means to
Build an Author Brand*

PRICE LIKE A BADASS

*A Mindset Shift for Indie
Authors*

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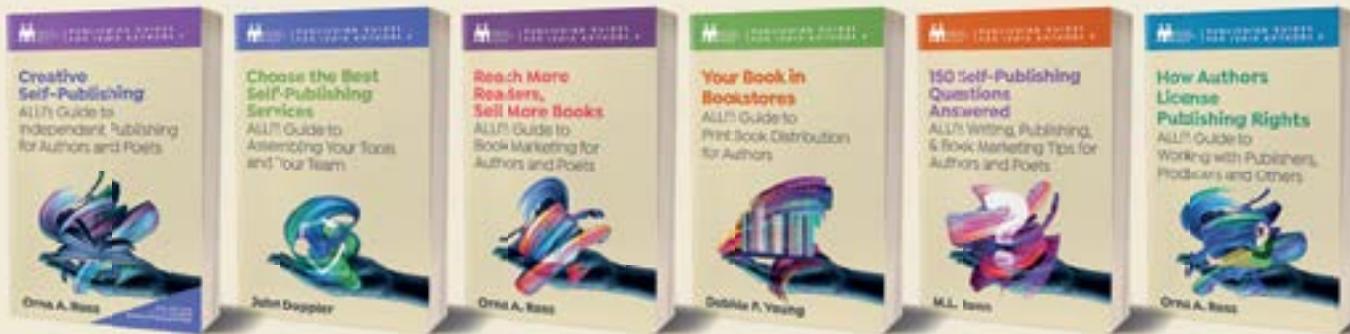
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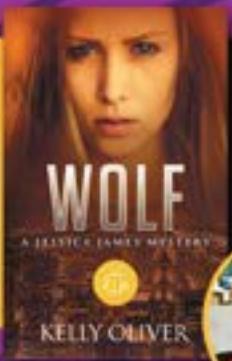
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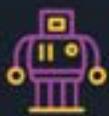
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With over 100 instructors and courses covering every corner of the indie publishing world, Indie Author Training is the largest learning platform built specifically for authorpreneurs. From business strategy to book club breakdowns, there's something here for every stage of the journey.





Nicole Schroeder
Editor in Chief

From the **EDITOR IN CHIEF**

At the start of March of this year, a weeklong boycott of Amazon and other large companies organized by The People's Union USA aimed to put pressure on businesses that had ended their diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, raise awareness for workers at the companies, and support small businesses.

The boycott didn't affect much; data from Momentum Commerce shows the company actually saw a nearly 6 percent increase in sales that week, and Kindle Unlimited rates from the month of March signal growth happened there, too. But the concern some authors felt leading up to the blackout week was real, and as you'll read in Samantha Margot's feature this month, it reflects a larger discussion happening in the indie author world today.

Many of us pride ourselves on being a one-man publishing band. We get to make our own business decisions, marketing campaigns, and artistic choices rather than waiting for the approval of a team at a traditional publishing company. But like it or not, so many parts of our businesses are still at the whims of third-party platforms. Social media platforms can change algorithms, software companies can shutter, and the closure of an author's account on a site like Kindle Direct Publishing can mean their livelihood disappears as well.

The focus of this month's issue is on "building on your own land," and in some ways, the concept feels more relevant than ever. Indie authors have always been able to adapt, and we'll find ways to share our stories no matter what happens to the third-party platforms we use—even if they're giants, like Amazon or Meta. But diversifying your business across platforms; owning your software and processes wherever possible; and ensuring your data is backed up, secure, and accessible means you aren't left scrambling when things inevitably shift.

In these pages, you'll find stories that talk about how you can own your own business, from finding paths to direct sales to managing your readership without social media. There's no one-size-fits-all answer, but that's exactly the point. When you build on your own land, you get to be in control. And isn't that what being independent is all about?

Nicole Schroeder

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Empowering Storytellers in a
Digital Landscape

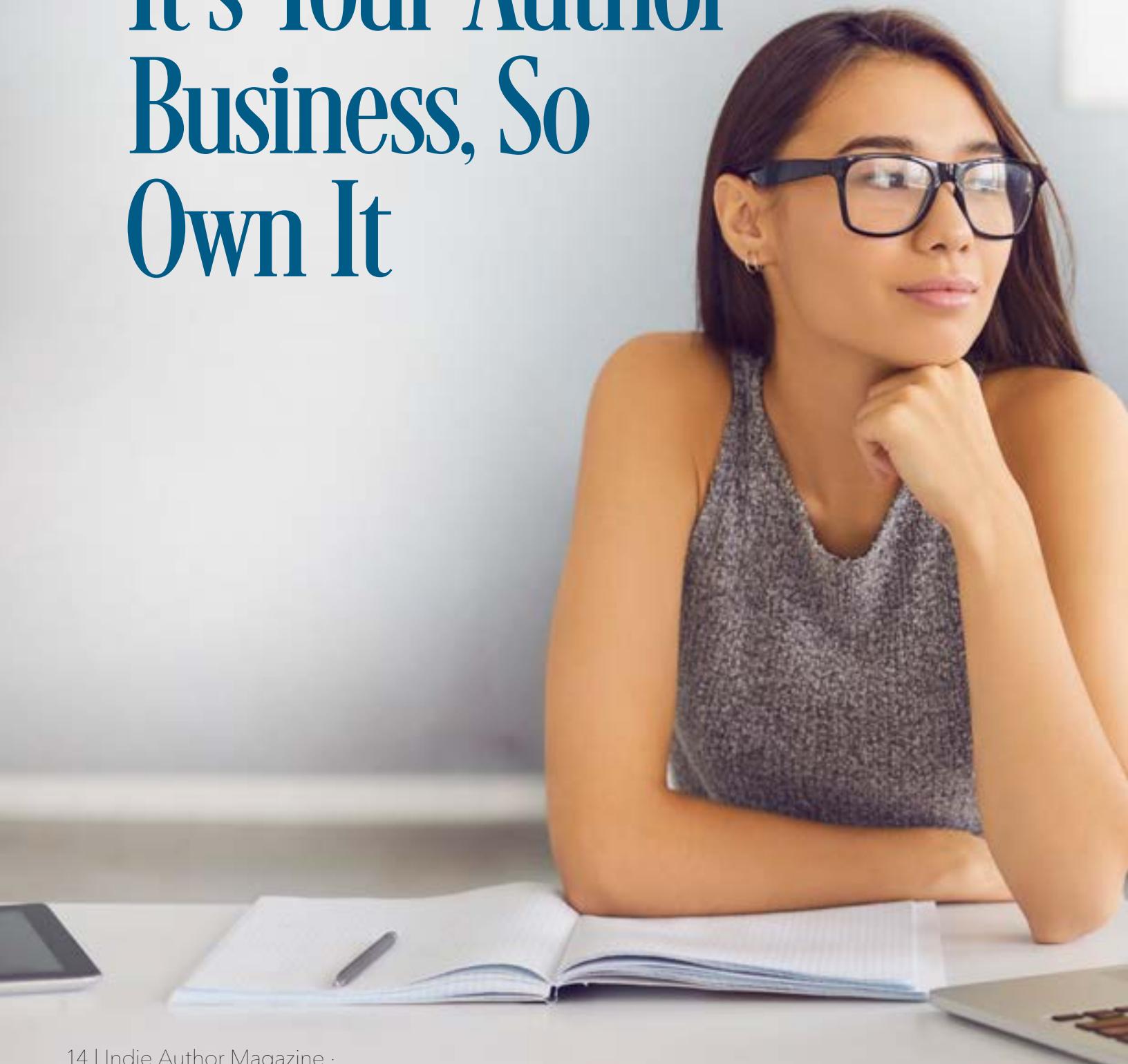
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ALLi Exclusive: It's Your Author Business, So Own It



Many authors choose the indie publishing route for its creative and commercial freedom and control, but this method of bringing books into print also has the allure of third-party platforms that bring us reach and discoverability, from publishing platforms like Amazon to social media platforms like Meta or TikTok.

Complete reliance on such third parties to reach your readers and build long-term relationships with them is fraught with peril, as anyone who has had their book taken down from a third-party retail site or their account shut down on social media can tell you.

Only by “building on our own land” can we ensure those connections will stay in our control. As ALLi advisor Russell Nohelty says: “If you’re not building your own media platforms in 2025, you are begging for algorithms to take your entire business away from you at any minute. Even if you own the entire chain of custody of your customer data from end to end, it’s getting harder and harder every year for the independent creator. Without building your own platform, it’s going to become impossible.”

In the April 2025 issue, we discussed direct sales, which is a key component of building on your own land. In this article, we’ll focus on how you can own the relationship with your readers.

For Beginning Authors: Build the Foundation

The single most important step you can take to reduce your reliance on third-party platforms is to establish an email list. (This is perhaps the only piece of indie author advice that has remained unchanged since the beginning of the self-publishing revolution.)

Having a way to contact your readers is the best way to protect yourself against the inevitable disruptions of changes to third-party algorithms or, less commonly but more devastatingly, a platform blocking you.

Building your email list on purpose-built email apps like Mailchimp, MailerLite, Kit, or MailPoet doesn't pose the same risks. Although these platforms own the functionality of the site, you own the data, and you can easily move that data to another platform if needed.

These tools provide attractive templates, analytics that can help you refine your communications, best practices that improve your emails' deliverability, and automated workflows that ease the process. They also help you comply with data and privacy regulations like the [European Union's General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#) and the United States's [CAN-SPAM Act](#) and provide a far more professional and enjoyable experience for your subscribers. For example, a segmented unsubscribe feature enables users to retain a relationship with a subscriber who is interested in one aspect of an author business, such as fiction works, but who is not interested in another aspect, such as author-centric courses.

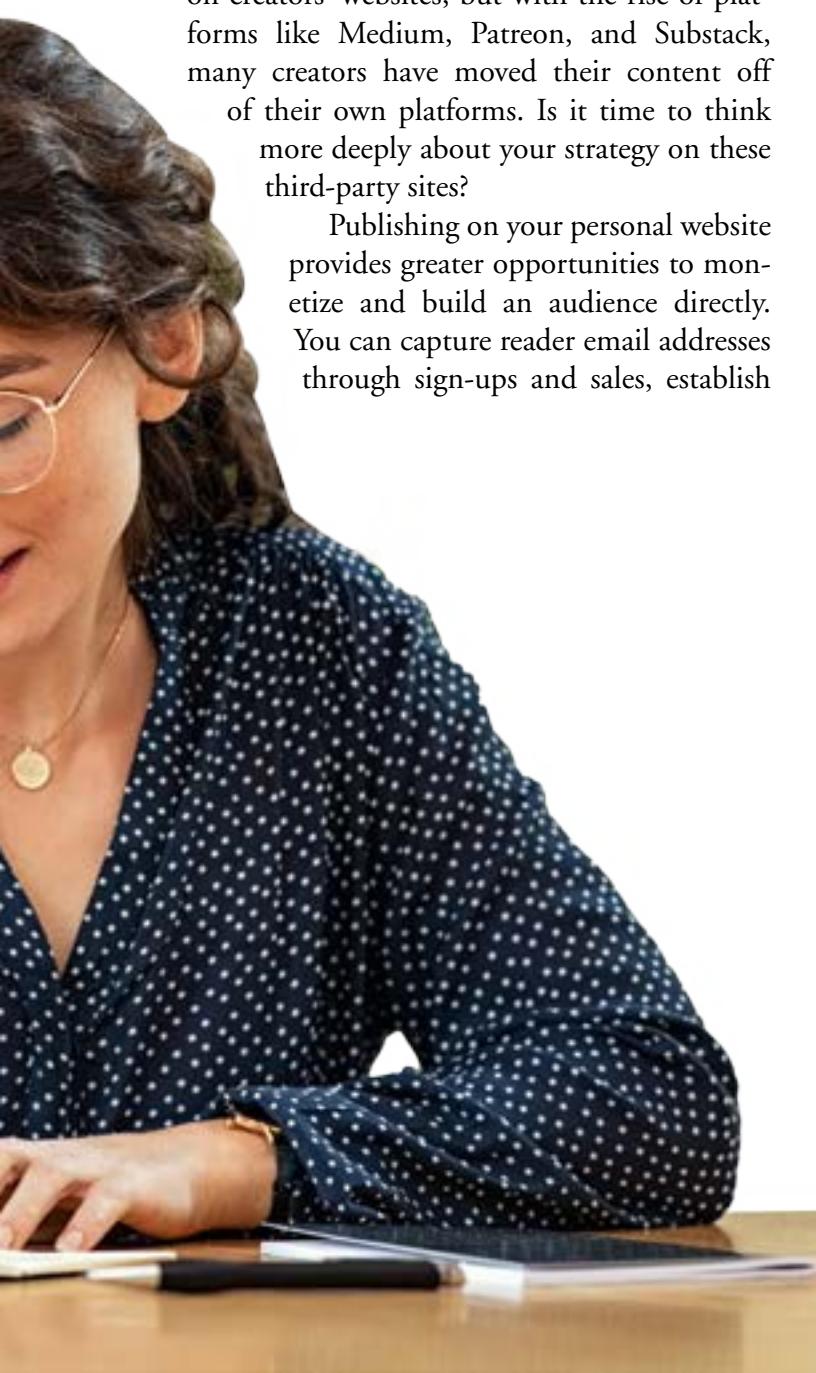
Another way to elevate your author brand and strengthen reader relationships is the other foundational aspect of building on your own land: an author website.

Creating a central hub for your online presence with a website can seem like a waste of time or money if you have an active Facebook or TikTok page and store, but owning your own website doesn't have to be onerous, and it has so many benefits for an indie author beyond its foundational value in providing a stable, lasting platform not subject to algorithms or social media trends, such as:

- **One-Stop Resource:** An author website enables readers to access information about your books, blog posts, news, and contact info in one place.
- **Audience Building:** A website provides an easy way for readers to subscribe to your newsletter.
- **Searchability:** Websites can improve discoverability through search engine optimization.
- **Professionalism:** A well-made website enhances your credibility and author brand.



For Emerging Authors: Think More Broadly



Once you have the foundational assets of an email list and website in place, consider what third-party platforms you should be on versus what might be better built on your own land. The benefits of selling books on your own site are clear: You keep more of the earnings and have access to data related to your customers and their purchases.

But what about content like articles, essays, or posts? Many of these were originally hosted on creators' websites, but with the rise of platforms like Medium, Patreon, and Substack, many creators have moved their content off of their own platforms. Is it time to think more deeply about your strategy on these third-party sites?

Publishing on your personal website provides greater opportunities to monetize and build an audience directly. You can capture reader email addresses through sign-ups and sales, establish

deeper connections, offer exclusive content or discounts, and drive traffic to other books or products without relying on a middleman.

Although third-party platforms might offer initial visibility, they generally retain a portion of the profits and, more significantly, can redirect audiences away from your broader offering.

Most website platforms, like WooCommerce, offer membership and subscription options. ALLi Director Orna Ross moved her reader-member offering from Patreon to her own website. "I did this as part of an overall move to selling direct last year, and it's so much better," she says. "Although I still host my Go Creative! planning program on Patreon, I felt constrained by its structure and limitations for my novels and poetry books. Moving to my own website allowed me to have more control and build a more direct relationship, without a third party in between. Plus, all the revenue, minus a small transaction fee, stays with me."

Pro Tip: Don't duplicate content on your website and elsewhere. Not only do you split your readership, but you may find yourself in trouble with search engines, as they tend to penalize duplicated content. This reduces visibility for both platforms.

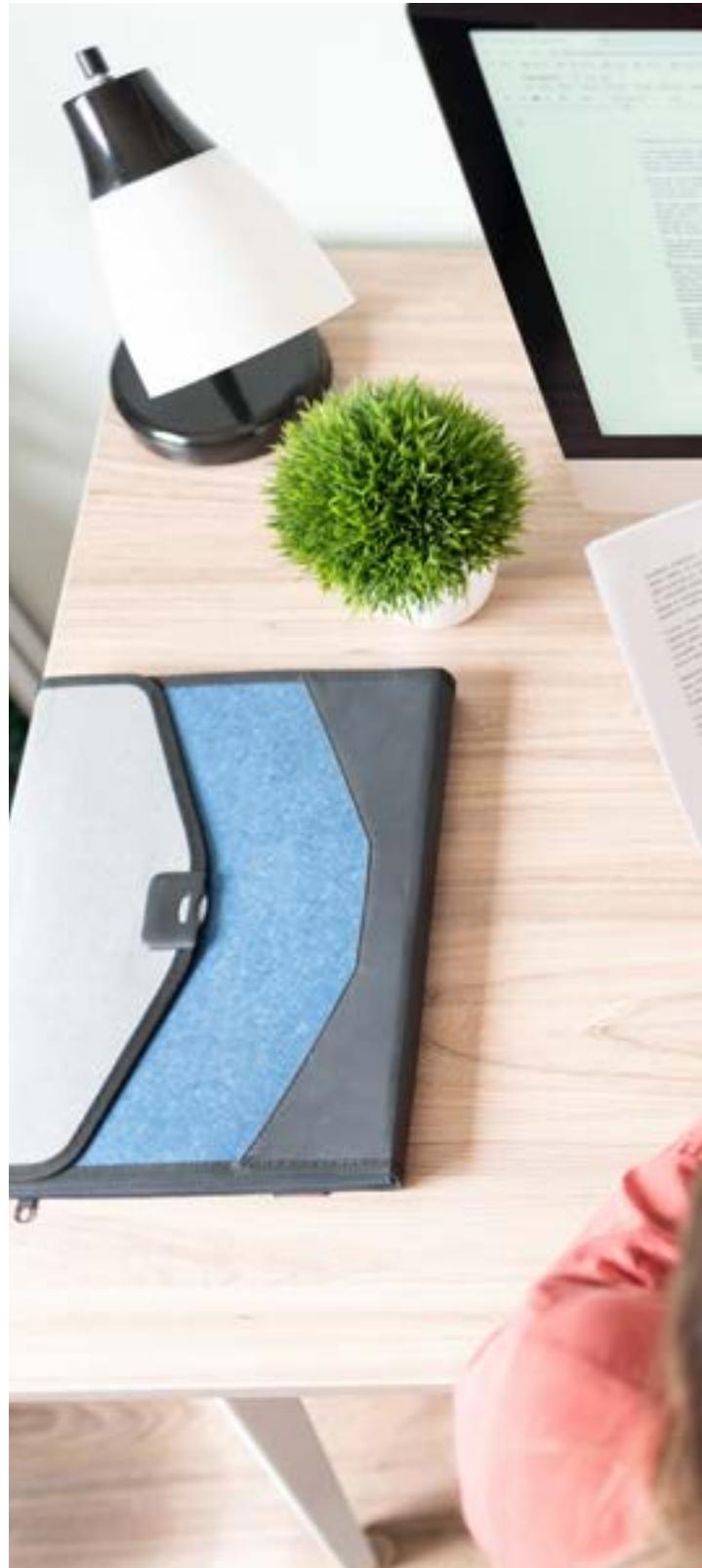
For Experienced Authors: Explore Discoverability

By prioritizing your own site as the home for your content and treating third parties as discovery platforms, you invest in a long-term strategy that fosters independence and sustainable growth. Ross says, “I now think of all third parties—Amazon, Kobo, Apple, Google, Patreon, Substack, and Kickstarter, to name just a handful—as discovery platforms, encouraging readers over to my own website for the sales action.”

As your experience with your publishing business grows, only your imagination limits the opportunities for finding ways to take back control from third-party platforms. Consider this out-of-the-box suggestion from ALLi advisor Anna Featherstone: “The concept of building on your own author land extends beyond the online world and into the real world. You can ‘build’ on your body with a T-shirt, earrings, or tote bag showcasing your book cover ... and for more mileage, how about your car?! Bedeck it in removable magnetic signage showcasing your book or author business.”

Building on your own land is a progressive journey that evolves as your publishing business grows. For beginning authors, it means establishing the foundation with a website and an email list. Emerging authors expand by having a content strategy for their own website. Experienced authors with a bigger backlist balance discoverability on third-party platforms—virtual or real-life—with own-platform sales from their wholly owned website.

It’s a strategy that takes time to set up or adapt, but it is the safest and most sustainable career path, with many creative and commercial rewards.





For more information from ALLi, check out these resources:

- Ross and ALLi Content and Communications Strategist Sacha Black discuss establishing digital author platforms in a Fiction & Nonfiction Self-Publishing Salon from July 2020 at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/establishing-your-author-platform>.
- The April 2024 episode of ALLi's Self-Publishing Advice & Inspirations Podcast showcases five reasons authors need an email list in their business. Listen to it at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/podcast-email-list>.
- An author and website designer shares why authors need an established web presence in an October 2024 episode of the Self-Publishing Advice & Inspirations Podcast, "Creating a Compelling Author Website with Pauline Wiles." Listen at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/podcast-author-website>. ■



**Matty Dalrymple,
ALLi Campaigns Manager**

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No More Hiding Behind Your Books

**Guest Author Isabelle
Knight Shares What
It Means to Build an
Author Brand**





How do you get readers to buy your books?

Almost every author I speak to wants to know the answer to the question—really, it's one every author has asked at some point in their career.

All the book marketing tips in the world can't offer a foolproof solution. But beginning with the right foundations will give your books the best chance of success: knowing what to say about yourself as the author, and by extension your books, to make you stand out from the rest of your genre, and knowing exactly the ideal readers you are speaking to as you're saying them.

These foundations create your author brand. The good news is that these two things are eminently possible to figure out, and getting the first one nailed down will help you untangle the second.

To define an author brand further and explain why you should need one, it's a good idea to first distinguish between a "brand" and "branding," which is normally used to talk about logos, images, graphics, colors, headshots, and book covers. Imagery helps to illustrate a story, but the words and messaging associated with that image are the most important way for a readership to get to know the author behind the books. The author brand is essentially an advertisement for what your books seek to do. It contains the messages, themes, and stories behind the books you are communicating to your readers, whether overtly or covertly. What do you want your books to stand for, and what do readers associate them with? Your author brand is a combination of both answers.

To answer these questions for yourself, it's useful to introduce the concept of the author brand story.

The Author Brand Story, or the Story Behind Your Story

The first thing marketers and publicists do before setting out to promote anything is to establish the answer to the question, “What’s the story?” The story, as writers know, is the driver—the thing that gives a book or an event or an action its reason for being there. Stories connect us as humans to other people, places, and things. Stories are how we interpret and make sense of the world around us.

The author brand story, once fully uncovered, tells the potential reader why you wrote your book, that you wrote it for them—that they are your ideal reader—and why they should care about it enough to read it. Your author brand story can then form the basis of your marketing and publicity efforts, drawing in whomever you are pitching yourself to as an author, be it agents, publishers, journalists, award judges, or others.

You may have heard marketers say before that people don’t buy objects but feelings. They buy stories; in other words, they buy what the things signify—the emotional attachment they have assigned to, or the story they believe about, the thing.

The same is true for books. Readers buy what they believe a book is going to give them emotionally. This might be a cozy warmth, as if they’ve been transported to a fantasy world, or a feeling that their mind has expanded and they have learned a new perspective into a part of the human experience with which they weren’t already familiar.



The author brand story, once fully uncovered, tells the potential reader why you wrote your book, that you wrote it for them ... and why they should care about it enough to read it.

Marketing and publicity for your book is not a simple paint-by-numbers game of review A going into publication B or website C. You want your marketing materials to understand the heart of your book and, from there, reach the heart of your readership. Authors can often go into minute detail on their social media accounts about plots, characters, viewpoints, arcs, and motives within their book. This, of course, is essential to have figured out when you’re writing the book. But in the marketing stage, you want to convey to your potential readers why you wrote your book and what it means to you more than anything else.

As with all cultural properties—movies, TV shows, or music, for example—the thing that will ultimately sell books is word of mouth. And in order to get people talking about your books, sharing recommendations with their friends, and reviewing them online, you as the author need to do the work in drawing potential readers’ attention to your books. Once you have uncovered and can articulate these elements of who you are as an author, you will be able to tell your reader why you wrote your book. This is what will compel them to pick up your book, to buy it, and to read it.



Rewriting an Established Brand

Authors who have already established, or who have begun to establish, their author brands may want to re-examine the foundations of that brand. Articulating your author brand story, or the unique drivers you have as a writer, will usually lead to further clarity on what attracts your readers to your work, allowing you to strengthen your relationship with them in your marketing.

Your author brand doesn't need to reveal every personal detail about you. Instead, it is a created and curated vehicle for you to reach your readers more effectively. As such, the author brand can act as an umbrella for various pen names—you may use different marketing methods and platforms to reach different readers of different genres, but your author brand story remains, at its core, the same.

Knowing whether you've hit gold with your author brand is something you can assess with the following questions:

1

Have you dug deep into the themes you explore in your writing? (This doesn't mean the surface level tropes but what your writing is really trying to say.)

2

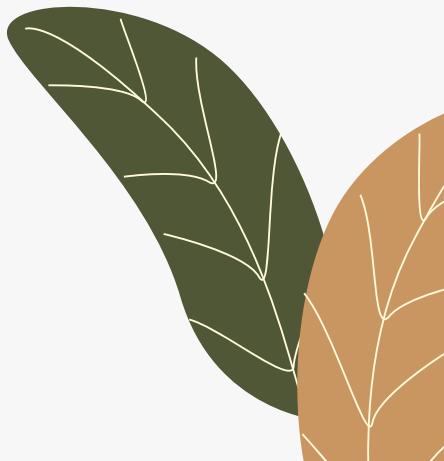
Are you able to talk about your books without falling back on recounting the plot if it's fiction or talking through the structure and key points if it's nonfiction?

3

Are you able to identify the type of reader who is going to love your book because they see a bit of themselves in your books and in your author brand?

4

Do you feel as though your marketing, content, and other ways in which you promote your books are landing with your ideal reader?



Making A Long Story Short

Building your author brand does not happen through one publicity or marketing campaign. It doesn't happen with a few Facebook or Instagram ads. It doesn't happen with Reels or TikTok videos. Building a brand takes several tools and pieces of the marketing and publicity jigsaw, working together over time to convey the same message. Your author brand story will underpin the messaging and can then lead you to further opportunities, greater visibility, and a bigger profile tailored to the ideal readers for the stories you want to tell. ■



Isabelle Knight

Isabelle Knight is a former top-tier publicist to the stars, of over 20 years. Having worked with giants of Entertainment and Publishing, including J. K. Rowling and the BBC, Isabelle is now an international Speaker and Brand Mentor to Authors, as the owner of Build Your Author Brand. She is also Adjunct Professor in MA, PR & Advertising at the American International University of London and a Book Award Judge of the Page Turner Awards.

Dear Indie Annie

Is it possible to run a successful indie author business without social media? Between turmoil on certain sites and the toll it can take on my mental health, I would love to step back—but I worry it'll be nearly impossible to connect with readers if I do.

Ready to Sign out of Socials

D

ear Ready to Sign out,

Pull up a chair, darling, and let's dip into this social media conundrum like we would a rich tea biscuit into a hot cup of tea—very carefully.

You see, running an author business is rather like managing a successful afternoon tea: You want a good variety of biscuits to satisfy different tastes. Still, you don't need every type ever baked. Social media is just one kind of biscuit in your marketing tin, and quite frankly, it can be as crumbly as a Garibaldi that disintegrates before it reaches your mouth.

If you are ready to ditch TikTok or dump Instagram, here's your beloved Indie Annie's recipe for success without social media:

1. Focus on one primary platform (your mailing list, for example).
2. Add two secondary platforms (perhaps your website and BookBub).
3. Mix in three methods of community engagement (such as Goodreads, reader forums, and author collaborations).
4. Sprinkle in occasional guest appearances on podcasts or blog posts.
5. Bake with consistency and genuine engagement.

We'll go through each in turn and savor their respective delights.

Your Mailing List

This is your plain digestive biscuit, or graham cracker for my American friends—reliable, direct, and essential. It's the foundation of your author-reader relationship. Here's how to make it scrumptious:

- Offer a tempting reader magnet—perhaps a prequel novella or an exclusive short story.
- Send regular newsletters. Monthly is lovely, but aim for weekly if you're prolific.
- Include personal updates, book recommendations, and behind-the-scenes peeks.
- Segment your list like a selection box, offering different treats for different readers.

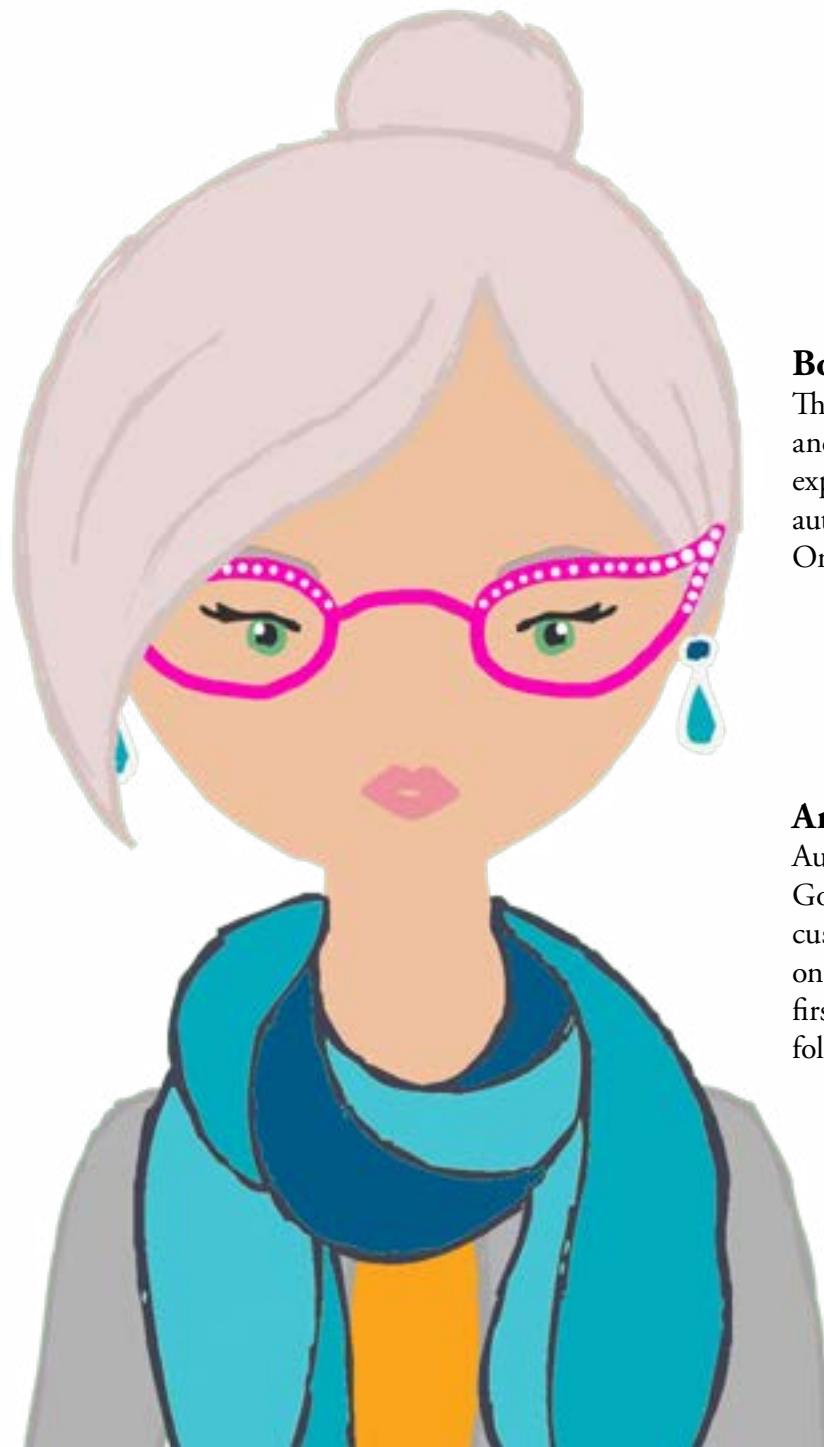
Your Website

Your website is the chocolate digestive of your platform: substantial and satisfying. Make it worth the visit.

- Create a blog with meaningful content, such as writing updates, research findings, and book recommendations.
- Add an FAQ page that's actually helpful. List your series in order of publication or a suggested reading order, or add a glossary for your



Got burning questions about the wibbly-wobbly world of indie authoring? Eager to unravel the mysteries of publishing, air your writing woes, or anything in between? Give your quizzical quills a whirl and shoot your musings over to indieannie@indieauthormagazine.com. Your inky quandaries are my cup of tea!



story world. Think about what questions readers are likely to ask you.

- Include clear links to your books on multiple retailers.
- Build a media kit for potential reviewers and podcasters to use when talking about you and your work.

BookBub

Think of this as your fancy shortbread. BookBub and other group promo sites are sometimes expensive but can be worth every penny for authors looking to connect with new readers. On the site, be sure to

- follow other authors in your genre,
- maintain your author profile,
- submit for featured deals regularly, and
- post honest reviews of books you've enjoyed.

Amazon Author Central

Author pages on distribution sites—Amazon, Google, or otherwise—are your dependable custard cream: basic but essential. If you're not on social media, this is where readers will go first to learn about you, so make sure you do the following:

- Keep your author profile updated.
- Post regular blog updates.
- Link all your books properly.

Reader Communities

These are your party rings: fun, engaging, and best enjoyed in company.

- Join Goodreads groups in your genre.
- Participate in reader forums, though don't just promote your work.
- If you fancy, create a Facebook reader group. Although this is technically on a social media platform, it is a group you curate and manage—there is no need to scroll, and you can choose to actively engage only with your fans.
- Engage in Reddit communities relevant to your genre.

Now, for some alternative marketing bourbon creams:

- Start a podcast, or be a guest on others.
- Write articles for writing and reading blogs.
- Create a YouTube channel sharing writing tips.
- Partner with other authors for newsletter swaps.
- Join forces with other authors for multi-author promotions.
- Contribute to boxed set collections.
- Create reading guides for book clubs who want to use your titles.

Remember, darling, just as every biscuit tin doesn't need a pink wafer (controversial, I know), every author platform doesn't need Twitter (or X, or whatever we now call it), or any other platform for that matter. The key is selecting the right mix for your particular taste—and sanity. Wherever you decide to set up your stall, make it as appealing as possible.

On that note, sometimes one has to move on. It's something I have been pondering for some time—how to make my excuses politely and exit leaving no crumbs. So here's my considered action plan, served on Indie Annie's best china:

1. Export your social media contacts—no point in throwing the broken bits at the bottom of your biscuit tin. Use these contacts to direct fans to your new places of engagement.
2. Set up a robust newsletter system.
3. Create a goodbye post with clear directions for where readers can find you elsewhere.
4. Establish your new routine of reader engagement.
5. Pour yourself a celebratory cuppa, and get back to writing.

Happy writing,
Indie Annie



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10 Tips for

Direct2Readers.com





Choosing to sell direct allows authors to keep more of their profits and build stronger relationships with their readers. But the price of building that community is often paid in time and money spent on marketing. A new reader-facing magazine and discoverability platform from the publishers of *Indie Author Magazine* aims to bridge that gap, acting as a directory of books available through authors' direct sales sites.

IAM publisher Chelle Honiker says Direct2Readers “is a reader-focused discovery hub and marketplace, built to connect readers with the storytellers they love.” The platform, which is associated with *IAM*’s sister magazine, *Storyteller Showcase Magazine*, allows all kinds of storytellers to direct readers to their preferred storefront. Authors, filmmakers, and creators can link to external retailers, including their own direct sales shops, or sell directly through the Direct2Readers platform, where they receive 80 percent of each sale.

Today’s 10 Tips will help you decide if the platform might work for you—as an author and as a reader.

Tips for Authors

01

Set up Separate Storefronts for Each Pen Name.

Authors who publish under multiple pen names often struggle with setting up a shop that differentiates the various audiences they draw. Direct2Readers allows you to set up multiple accounts on the same platform for \$100 per year, per pen name. After paying the flat fee, you can list an unlimited number of products under each name. Each product gets its own listing page with a cover image, description, social share links, and a sales link. Author bios, reviews, and book trailers can be added to help readers learn more about your books. Each book can also be tagged with corresponding categories, genres, and tropes to make them more searchable.

02

Use Affiliate Links to Drive Traffic to Retailers.

If your books are listed on other platforms like Amazon or Apple Books, you can list them on Direct2Readers as affiliate products. This way, you get the visibility of being on a reader-facing platform without having to handle direct sales. Honiker suggests it's a good option for authors who are transitioning into direct sales, or for those who have their books in Kindle Unlimited and want to get their books in front of more readers. You can list your work on the site with a direct link to the retailer or use a universal book link to give readers options about where they purchase it. There are no exclusivity requirements from Direct2Readers to limit how and where you choose to sell your work.

03

List a Variety of Products.

Unlike other storefronts, which may limit the formats you can sell, Direct2Readers is set up to support a range of mediums, including books, ebooks, audiobooks, serials, comics and graphic novels, movies and short films, LITRPG, and other interactive forms of storytelling. These categories are listed across the top of the site to make it easier for readers to search for a specific format.

Pro Tip:

Follow up with your readers after they purchase something. Honiker says authors “can send their own direct sequence of emails thanking them for the sale and asking if they would like to be on their newsletter list,” keeping you connected with readers who’ve proven they’re willing to purchase your books.

04

Deliver Ebooks Through BookFunnel.

Direct2Readers uses BookFunnel, a secure ebook delivery service, to fulfill ebook orders. BookFunnel’s team will handle any customer service inquiries, and readers can download your book to any compatible device. Although it’s encouraged that authors have a paid BookFunnel account to use this feature, a separate account is not required to use the service on Direct2Readers.

05

Fulfill Print Orders with Bookshop.org or Lulu.

Authors looking to move beyond digital sales but concerned about doing their own fulfillment for physical books can set up their print books to drop-ship through Bookshop.org or Lulu. Bookshop.org fulfills orders through Ingram Content Group, but a portion of all sales go to independent booksellers. Lulu can provide high-quality paperbacks and hardbacks with a variety of special features made available for print-on-demand. Both are integrated with the Direct2Readers site.

Tips for Readers

06

Get a Reader Account.

Users don't need an account at Direct2Readers in order to make a purchase on the platform or through any of its affiliate links. Checkout at the site uses Stripe to process payments securely with or without an account, and you can use Link to save payment methods and check out even faster. But even though you don't need an account to make a purchase, you should consider setting one up. A Direct2Readers account lets you save your preferences, track orders, and receive recommendations, making your reader experience even more personalized.

08

Search and Filter.

If you already know what kind of book you're looking for, you can use the shop's search bar and filter by author or genre/tropes to get a variety of listings. Open the listings for more information, or click directly on the sales link to find out how to buy. Some books will redirect you to retailers or authors' shops, and others will add the book to your cart and let you purchase from Direct2Readers.

07

Use the Librarian Chatbot to Find Exactly What You Want.

You can get personalized recommendations based on the genre and tropes you like to read when you chat with the Direct2Readers Librarian. Click the "Chat with a Librarian" link in the site's header or on the homepage to start a new chat or to view and continue previous chats, building on the prompts you've already given the librarian. The private AI model "only indexes publicly available book details provided by storytellers," according to the platform's FAQ.

Ask the librarian for book suggestions to receive results that include the book's title, author, description, purchase link, and a short "Why this Pick?" explanation of how the book meets the requirements you entered.

09

Sign up for the Newsletter.

When you sign up for the Direct2Readers newsletter, you get personalized deals on books, audiobooks, and subscriptions based on the categories you choose. Watch for discounts and news from your favorite authors in a weekly email.

Pro Tip:

Honiker says, “Authors can get their books featured in *Storyteller Showcase* by purchasing a listing, which will look similar to a classified ad, or they can purchase an upgraded ad: business card, half page, or full page.”

Alongside the reader magazine and Direct2Readers, new influencer channels for multimedia interviews and more interactive connections, like the Indie Author Spotlight Amazon channel, will also be available soon.

Direct2Readers.com provides a common marketplace for authors to sell their products directly, allowing authors to retain the benefits of selling direct while minimizing the challenges of building their own shop. Cooperative marketing benefits both readers and authors, and this platform puts those connections directly at your fingertips. ■

10

Read More in *Storyteller Showcase Magazine*.

Direct2Readers is a sister site to *Storyteller Showcase Magazine*, a publication designed specifically for readers. “The big idea behind *Storyteller Showcase* is that we only have the opportunity to have twelve covers per year with one subject in [*Indie Author Magazine*] as it is now, but there are hundreds of stories we could tell each month about fascinating authors,” says Honiker. *Storyteller Showcase Magazine* will be available on a quarterly schedule, distributed through worldwide events—including this year’s Reader Nation event in Las Vegas, Nevada. Inside, you’ll learn about new releases, read exclusive interviews, and find articles that get behind the scenes with authors.



Jenn Lessmann

Jenn Lessmann is the author of *Unmagical: a Witchy Mystery* and three stories on Kindle Vella. A former barista, stage manager, and high school English teacher with advanced degrees from impressive colleges, she continues to drink excessive amounts of caffeine, stay up later than is absolutely necessary, and read three or four books at a time. Jenn is currently studying witchcraft and the craft of writing, and giggling internally whenever they intersect. She writes snarky paranormal fantasy for new adults whenever her dog will allow it.

Signed. Sealed. Scares Delivered.

Launching an Epistolary Story Launched David Viergutz into Full-Time Authorship

Some of the most fascinating stories of authors are the ones who approach publishing, storytelling, reader retention, or other aspects of our business from a unique angle; who leave behind the well-trod paths and explore new roads to success. These sorts of people are interesting for a variety of reasons. How did they find something new that others missed? And perhaps just as important, is there something we can learn from their journeys and apply to our own?

One such author is David Viergutz, an *IAM* staff writer and the “Master of Malice.” David’s approach to storytelling has opened new doors for the rest of us to peer through. He’s developed and proven new paths for author revenue, using a uniquely fun business model that’s proven to thrill his fans—and David has a lot of fans. His epistolary story system has hooked enough readers to net more than \$1.3 million in sales in 2024. And David has already launched a second ScareMail, with a third set to release later this year.





The Born Entrepreneur

From an early age, David wanted to be an entrepreneur. In what, he wasn't sure, but the freedom of the "laptop lifestyle" appealed to him, and running a business came easily. His early businesses were focused on fitness training.

But his mind always had a way of drifting back to books.

"I'd always had a goal in mind. When I was really young, I was like, 'I want to write books,'" David says. As a teen, he was often dragging novels around with him, getting lost in the worlds of writers like Nix, Tolkien, and King. But he "lost that spark" somewhere along the way. Despite a successful career, he'd grown unhappy and knew it was time for a change. Before he could dive back into writing as an adult, he had to relearn the love of reading and writing.

Transferring that love of business toward writing turned out to be the easy part. Getting the new business off the ground? Not so simple. "I was so poor at the time that I was selling blood plasma to pay for my covers. That's how much I believed in this," he says. He published his first book, a Horror novel called *The Risen Prince*, in 2019, sold his gym and his contracts, and went "all in on writing."

That's not a level of risk most

early authors would be comfortable with—not after just releasing a single book, certainly. But it was David's focus, determination, and drive that enabled him to build the career he did as fast as he has.

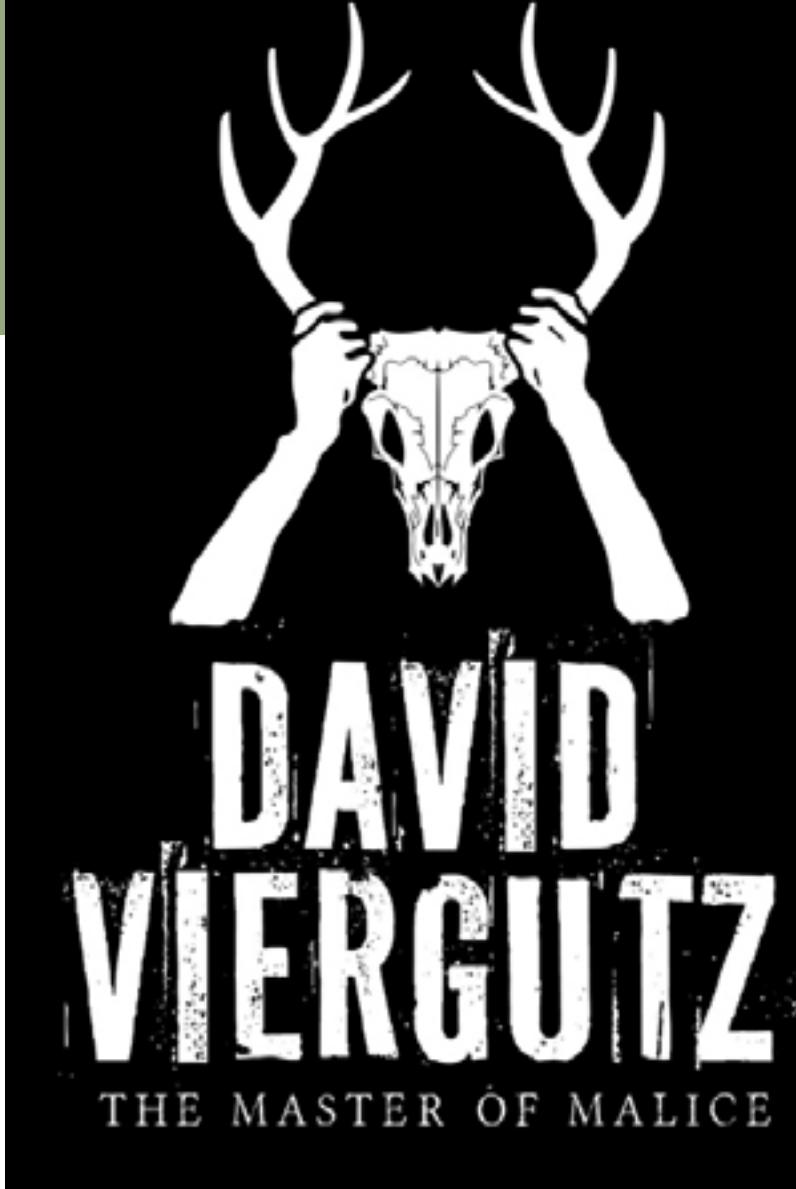
What Do You Want to Be Known for?

Even with more than twenty novels now under his belt, David doesn't care as much about being known as a writer. He prefers the title

"storyteller" and also enjoys the title of entrepreneur. That mindset difference is central to much of what he does in his work.

His first book made only \$250 worth of sales, but that small proof of concept was enough to convince David he had a product that people would pay for. After that, it was just a matter of getting the product in front of the right people. David approached this new business from the perspective of building relationships with his readers, focusing on specialty items like steel bookmarks and signed cards he sent to his core fans.

His second year saw \$5,000 in income. In his third year, David



earned \$30,000, and in his fourth year, he made \$50,000. By his fifth year, he'd cracked \$100,000. Then came ScareMail, which saw over \$1.3 million in sales. He's aiming for \$3 million from ScareMail in 2025.

This wasn't some sort of overnight success. It wasn't a lucky strike that hit once. This was a slow, steady build toward the extreme success David is enjoying today.

ScareMail

Even though he was beginning to see solid success as an indie author, David found that even with direct sales, he was still being forced to "pump out more new books" at a faster pace than he was comfortable with, he says. Acquiring new customers cost a lot more than retaining the old ones, so the simplest way to grow was the one most indie authors latch onto: writing more books. The more books he wrote, the more content his existing fans had to consume.

But David wanted another path, and he found one by inventing a new category of product for his work: ScareMail. ScareMail is a subscription novel, but it's not the sort seen on Patreon or Substack. Instead of reading new chapters as they are posted online, when readers sign up for David's ScareMail, they get physical letters mailed to their homes twice a month. Each letter contains thousands of words of the ongoing novel—the whole thing is about a hundred thousand words, delivered in twenty-four installments—along with special "artifacts" that enhance the storytelling experience.

David says one of his special talents has always been connecting with people, and he brought that

skill to bear on this project with his usual intensity. By building deep connections with his readers via their actual mailbox instead of just their email inbox, he was able to build a rabid fanbase for his new products.

Rather than writing many books to serve his customers each year, David managed to turn one novel into a special product that sold for about \$100. Being priced higher has substantial advantages. For one, it's easier to run ads on higher-priced products. Plus, stretching the story out over an entire year reaps powerful benefits: Twice each month, readers receive a unique storytelling experience specifically designed to turn them into fans.

"Why sell a hundred books for a dollar apiece when you can sell a hundred-dollar book?" David says.

Of course, these are not simple printed sheets of paper with a story on them. Rather, the ScareMail story is constructed in a manner that can only be delivered properly by letter, and each element is both carefully selected and prepared: burned paper edges, creepy photos, cryptic symbols, and more.

“**Why sell a hundred books for a dollar apiece when you can sell a hundred-dollar book?**

David Viergutz

Innovation First

Sitting still isn't something David does well. He's always on the move and looking for the next thing. What's coming up for him now? He intends to expand on the initial success of his ScareMail by launching another book, this one with major audiobook elements involved. Readers will get letters, audio, and interactive elements in each package. Beyond that, his plans involve expanding into augmented reality and amping up the interactive components of his letters to a game-like experience.

It's easy to see how innovation is at the core of David's success. He took a deep dive into writing stories for a living, burning his boats by selling his old business, then constantly sought new ways to reach readers. He's actively looked for the cutting edge, then placed himself there—and it's paid off. There are always lessons to be learned from the success of others, and nowhere is that more evident than in the storytelling adventure of David Viergutz, the Master of Malice. ■

Kevin McLaughlin

Kevin McLaughlin is the USA Today bestselling author of 83 books. He writes mostly science fiction and fantasy, and is also the author of *The Coffee Break Novelist* and *You Must Write*. He's enjoyed reading and writing serials for decades.



Building on Your Own

**The Constructive Way
Authors Can Sustain
Audience Engagement
(without Outsider Influence)**





Can you pivot from your solidified business plan when necessary? Can your business plan tackle uncertainty and thrive no matter which platform is down?

In an era of TikTok bans, Facebook freezes, and the potential shift at any moment toward or away from a distributor, company, or platform, there is no one way to build your author business, and authors often must drift with the internet and social media tides. We often wonder whether we should move our marketing to other platforms and support ourselves in another way. Some authors have moved to direct sales, but this is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

For those who can't rely solely on direct sales to support their careers, authors must look for a flexible and sustainable solution that combines third-party platforms and self-managed tools able to withstand change. Like with any aspect of the independent publishing industry, however, this can take several forms—it's up to you to determine which route is best for your business.

How Do Third-Party Platforms Serve You?

Third-party platforms act as a go-between for you and your readers—they exist in every part of the publishing process, from retail, such as Amazon; to publication and distribution, such as Draft2Digital and Lulu; production, such as Reedsy; and beyond. For many, they are the foundations of an indie author business.

Social media sites, also owned by third parties, can expand your reach to larger audiences and extend the value of your advertising. They allow you to post as often as you wish and to tell people about your books in a variety of ways. For many authors, they have proved to be a marvelous way to connect with readers.

However, the owners of these platforms are in control. They can change the rules whenever they wish. The platform knows how many clicks you receive, how many followers you have, and your reach, and more importantly, they own all the data about your audiences—and though some may offer to share it with you, the decision to do so is at their discretion. You can look at the overview, but you often can't have the nitty-gritty details that will best benefit your business.

So where does this leave the author? For the optimal sustainability of your business, and for added reassurance in case the internet space goes sideways, it is important to have a survival plan. And the strongest author survival plan is diversification, with a focus on building your business on your own land.

What Does 'Building on Your Own Land' Look Like?

We often hear the sentiment, "If we pay for it, it's ours." This can feel strange to hear on an internet containing the artifacts of our online exploration—an intangible sort of solidity.

Yet what you see when you purchase your domain name and email address highlights the true meaning behind the saying. You'll see there are no longer sponsored ads that look like you've received an email, but beyond that, the domain provider, host, and email now exist as a bubble of information within a space you have purchased. The emails you gather will not be utilized for the email provider to feed you ads or farmed out to third-party apps to help your business connect with other businesses. It will remain eerily quiet until you bring things in and decide how information moves within your business's information bubble. It is within this space that you can choose how your business interacts with audiences.

Customer data is the most valuable asset in the business world. Consider this when you are deciding which platform to use.

Who do you trust to be the middleman between your reader and your business? There are platforms that are free until you begin to make sales, so examine exactly what control you have over your customer data.

How Can You Maximize This Asset?

Your ownership of key aspects of your business is integral to sustaining it, but how do you then help it grow the way it would on larger platforms? First, create a digital footprint that expands your domain. This can be done through sales platforms like Shopify, eBay or WooCommerce. Third-party apps like Facebook, LinkedIn, TikTok, and Instagram can entice audiences to not only check out your website but also to linger there. Third-party apps should not entirely be discounted in your business plan; rather, they should guide readers to the space you control.

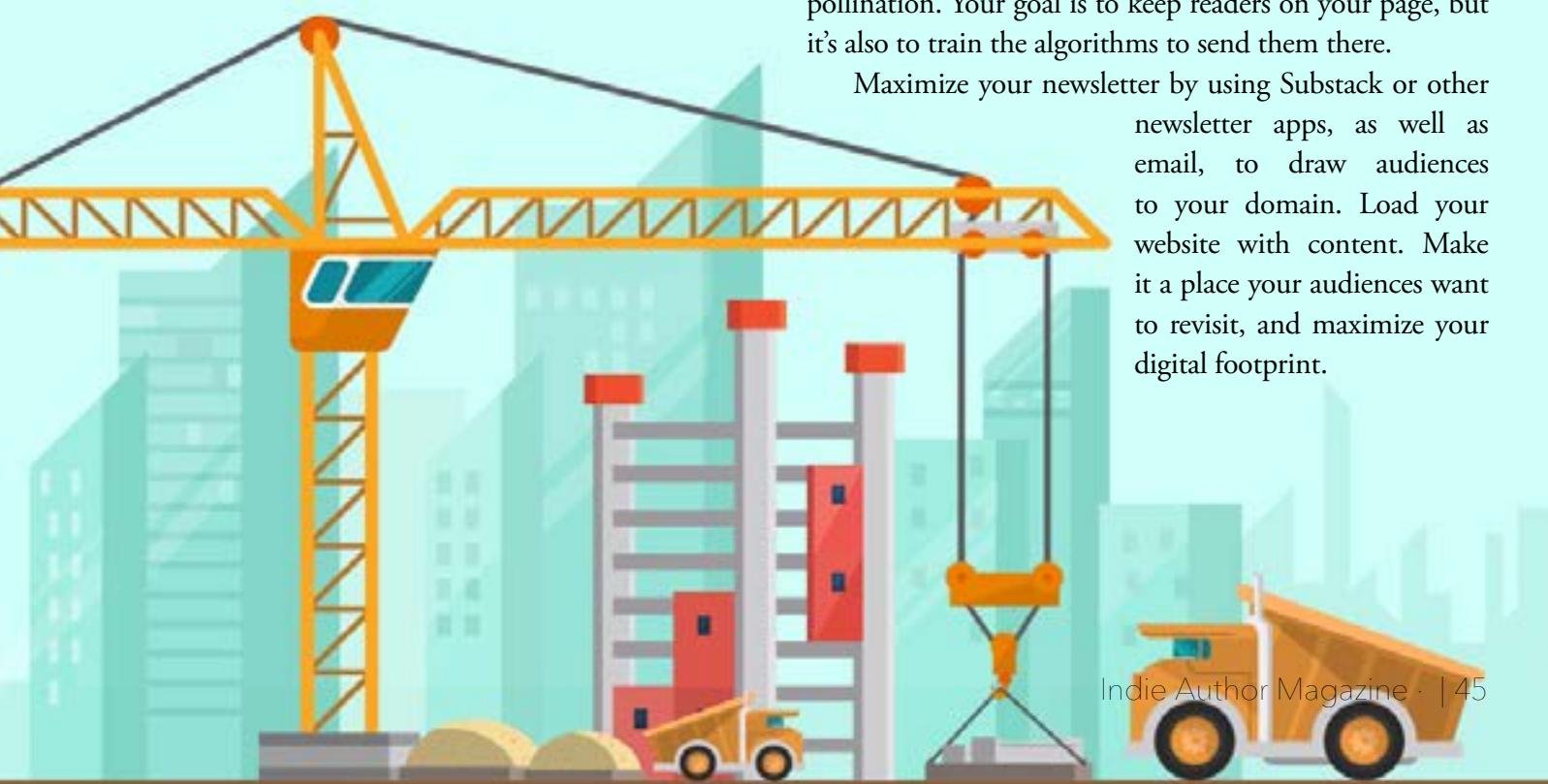
Consider that your website is the place where you want to focus on your user interface or user experience, also known as UI or UX, respectively. Consider the flow of your audience through your platforms, both owned and free. Where do you want them to linger? A well-crafted TikTok reel might draw them to your website, where you can create your call-to-action that will guide them to exactly where you want them to

find your books—whether that's on a third-party's retail site or your own direct sales storefront. On your website, you can offer games, book club pages full of ideas for your readers to explore, recipes, and more, and link authors to your newsletter and other community spaces you control. The longer they spend in your world, the more they get invested in your books and products, and the more they invest their time in you. Beyond customer data, customer time is the most valuable asset you can influence.

Pro Tip:
Check out IAM's July 2023 article on "10 Tips for: Website SEO" for more ideas.

quantities of data about what you offer assists the organic growth of your business. Linking social media not just with buttons but with reels embedded directly on your website page or on-page YouTube videos adds to this cross-pollination. Your goal is to keep readers on your page, but it's also to train the algorithms to send them there.

Maximize your newsletter by using Substack or other newsletter apps, as well as email, to draw audiences to your domain. Load your website with content. Make it a place your audiences want to revisit, and maximize your digital footprint.



Parting Thoughts: Remember Your Audience

As you go through the process of bringing readers into your owned space, you also need to make sure your website is user-friendly. Consider UX design elements, such as color, buttons, text, and images, to keep visitors engaged. You want your audience to linger, not wander off to another page.

Your goal is to maintain ownership of your customer data, as well as to create a network where readers want to linger. Their time is just as valuable as their data. Create an interesting environment touching on all the elements about your work that they love, and surprise them with elements they are not getting elsewhere. Create a space to play in, away from the outside world, one in which your books come alive in new ways. Give them reasons to invest in you and your stories. ■



Heather Clement Davis



Heather Clement Davis has twenty-six years' experience in museums, archaeology, art, counseling, art therapy, creative writing, and nonprofit management. She holds enough graduate work to make a Ph.D. cry as her neurodivergent brain

is hooked on learning everything. She's currently a masters candidate in Arts Management. Her paintings and pottery are in galleries and collections worldwide and her poetry and her nonfiction and fiction has found its way to literary journals around the U.S. When not writing or making art, Heather can be found playing Catan or watching Star Trek with her family.

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PASSWORD SAFE

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Clashing Desires in the Indie Author Ecosystem

Exploring Longevity Between Retailers and Indie Authors







Self-publishing platforms changed the face of the publishing industry in the early 2000s. Since their solidification, independent authors have taken advantage of their global reach to strengthen the indie author ecosystem.

The Center for Media Engagement at The University of Texas at Austin identified the intrusion on traditional publishing's market dominance as the democratization of publishing. Authors working outside of publishing houses, whether at the beginning of their journey or with solid readership, have historically relied on larger platforms, such as Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), IngramSpark, Draft2Digital, and Kickstarter, to reach their fanbase.

Jane Friedman, consultant and author, experienced this transformational period firsthand while working at *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. As the digital editor, she led the literary magazine in the development of

digital subscriptions.

Friedman says the development of online retail and social media left traditional publishing grappling with the evolving consumer interface. "It was clear that platforms, like at the time Twitter or Facebook, were very powerful in changing how people communicated and spread the word about anything, but obviously about books," Friedman says.

In the early years, an author's book might've appeared to a consumer if the right positive signals were used. As long as the correlating publishing date and relevance were keyed, algorithmic discoverability was a boon.

But since the big debut, the relationship between authors, consumers, and retailers has undergone major adjustments. The situation has degraded, Friedman says. "We're all now quite upset by how these companies, by making a minor tweak to these algorithms, can greatly dampen visibility," Friedman says. "They can make it that you have to advertise, or somehow



do something more artificial that has nothing to do with the quality of the book, in order for you to be seen appropriately.”

Rising Frustration Everywhere

Tension between consumers and large third-party platforms isn’t unique to the publishing world.

On February 18, The People’s Union USA founder John Schwarz asked Instagram users to boycott Amazon from March 7 to March 14. This movement follows two years of intensive boycotts against popular brands like Starbucks and Target for their refusal to divest from Israel, union busting, and the decision to end diversity, inclusion, and equity programs.

The call for action ignited debate in the author world. On author Jason Dorough’s TikTok, he claimed boycotting Kindle Unlimited hurt independent authors. His comment section was flooded with supporters. First-time self-publishers often find themselves

directed to the popular publishing platform KDP, drawn in by advertisements that boast a “free and simple” platform that will help indie authors “earn more.”

Authors are furthermore encouraged to join Kindle Select, a KDP program that enrolls select ebooks in Kindle Unlimited. In exchange for greater royalties, authors are required to grant Amazon exclusive rights to sell their ebooks for ninety days.

“That’s a very particular game that authors can choose to play; it’s never been the game that I recommend people play,” Friedman says. “I’m not saying it’s not important, but putting your focus on something you can’t control—to me, it’s a recipe for frustration.”

In response to the outpour of content creators calling for consumers to continue using Kindle Unlimited, however, other authors, like Petra Palerno and Lauren Sefchik, advocated in favor of the boycott. In their respective videos, Palerno and Sefchik encouraged viewers to

explore smaller, independent platforms to connect with their favorite indie authors.

Entertaining large platforms often leads to self-publishing burnout, Friedman says. She recommends authors avoid it by connecting directly to readers.

“When you talk about community building, platform building, it’s the other side of the coin here,” Friedman says. “They go hand in hand. It’s about developing a relationship with the reader that doesn’t depend on algorithmic functions.”

A Reader-First

Mindset

Romance author Ines Johnson rarely finds herself frustrated with third-party platforms. Johnson, who began self-publishing in 2014 and transitioned to full-time authorship in 2018, disagrees that indie authors are reliant on large platforms.

She acknowledges that beginning indie authors often turn to businesses with greater reach to kick-start their sales, but the forward-thinking behavior of the self-publishing community negates any perceived dependence.

“Let’s talk about the fourteen-hour TikTok disappearance,” Johnson says. “TikTok made it easier for us to find each other, absolutely. Facebook made it easier, Instagram made it easier, Goodreads made it easier, but if you take

Platforms can disappear; platforms can play tricky games, or games that are not fair. So I’m constantly thinking, “How can I spread my wealth out and make sure I am building on my land?”

Ines Johnson
Romance author



the platform away, we'll just go someplace else."

In late April 2024, the United States Senate passed legislation requiring TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, to divest from the social media platform or face a ban. In anticipation of the TikTok ban, BookTok viewers were directed to other social media outlets where they could continue interacting with their favorite content creators.

In the month leading up to the ban, media centering BookTok featured solemn goodbyes, panicked creators, and passionate advocates. The app received a seventy-five-day reprieve when President Donald Trump returned to office.

"There was a time when Facebook wasn't there, TikTok wasn't there, Instagram wasn't there. We still had community," Johnson says. "We'll move and shift, but the community is not going away."

Emphasizing her position as a consumer and independent author, Johnson believes boycotts have little effect on the indie author world. As entrepreneurs, she says, independent authors make themselves accessible to readership through a myriad of stores and websites.

"Platforms can disappear; platforms can play tricky games, or games that are not fair," Johnson says. "So I'm constantly thinking, 'How can I spread my wealth out and make sure I am building on my land?'"

Johnson explains that her priority is customer outreach. For BIPOC readers unable to access independent bookstores, she continues to feature her books in chain stores and with online retailers.

"That's the most important thing to me," Johnson says. "If I need to step on Jeff Bezos's head in order to get my book into that person's hand, it's that person that I'm thinking about."

Johnson's direct store offers exclusives to sweeten the initial deal. Sign up for her newsletter? Receive three free books. Exploring her Kindle Unlimited page?

Instead, buy a book box, including an extra surprise courtesy of the author.

"I have made the decision that I am still going to be here," Johnson says. "I have my feet planted firmly on the ground because I feel I have a deep understanding of my industry, my customer, and the platforms."



Tried-and-True Methods of Sustainability

According to author and [podcast host](#) Joanna Penn, choosing to build and nurture an email list is the best solution to becoming overly reliant on platforms.

In an email, she wrote that discoverability and scale remain key to the reader ecosystem. Indie authors would struggle to run creative businesses without the global reach of retailers. “Fortunately, direct-to-reader options are increasingly accessible,” Penn writes. “Many indie authors have been using them for years to supplement sales or even as primary income.”

Indie authors have been practicing methods of sustainability for a long time. Penn and Friedman highlight the growing list of tools facilitating the exchange.

“It means having them [readers] on your email list, or being able to reach them in ways that aren’t dependent, reliant, whatever, on these big companies,” Friedman says. “It’s been happening that way for a long time. Especially when you see, in the last couple years, the growing desirability of selling direct, doing Kickstarters, these other things that try to disintermediate big tech companies.”

A practitioner of direct sales, Johnson employs a newsletter, personal reader group, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to





develop authentic relationships with her readers and fellow authors.

Penn calls attention to direct-to-reader options Shopify and Payhip, the subscription service Patreon, and in-person events as methods of stability and an opportunity to connect with readers.

In line with Friedman and Johnson, her advice for independent author longevity remains tried and true.

“By growing a list of readers who want to hear from you directly, and who care about your work,” Penn writes, “you can weather changes—whether it’s a sudden algorithm shift, rising tariffs, or even potential platform ban—and continue to reach people who love your books.” ■

Samantha Margot



Curious by trade, Samantha Margot is a passionate people-person with experience in the newsroom and behind the microscope. If she's not writing her latest story, Samantha can be found tending to her plants or using any excuse to ride her bike.



Middle-Grade Fiction's Perfect Sundae

UNEXPECTED COMBINATIONS OF TRIED-AND-TRUE TROPES DELIGHT MIDDLE-GRADE READERS. WINNING OVER THOSE WHO DISCOVER BOOKS FOR THEM IS THE CHERRY ON TOP.

In 1969, Dario Fontanella Gregori invented a new ice cream sundae that is iconic today in cafés throughout Germany. He started with the standard tropes—vanilla ice cream, red berry syrup, whipped cream, and grated chocolate—and built something surprising yet inevitable: a sundae that looks like a plate of spaghetti.

The best middle-grade fiction uses the same approach as Gregori's sundae, relying on standard themes as the foundation but presenting them in new, eye-catching, and sometimes amusing ways.

Part of the magic of middle-grade readers, which are defined as ages nine to twelve, is their fluent reading ability, their loyalty to newly discovered authors, and their relative willingness to cross genres while they discover what genres exist. Exploration and discovery are

built-in tropes for these growing readers. Their lives are about growth of all kinds, so stories often cover a wide range of “firsts”: a first pet, a first best friend, or a first day of fifth grade, for example.

Developmental stages can suggest story elements that strongly appeal to a particular age. Readers have the opportunity at this stage to read both “mirror” and “window” stories—a metaphor to describe books where readers can read about characters who are similar to themselves and about characters whose lives and experiences are different, respectively.

Beyond these starting themes, however, authors looking to explore middle-grade fiction will find the genre is as varied as its adult fiction counterparts—possibly even more so. Readers will eat up practically anything, and success in the genre can be found six ways from “sundae.”

Copycat Sundaes

Like with any genre, the tropes of middle-grade fiction are not one-size-fits-all. Aside from the building-block tropes of these stories, other themes ebb and flow in popularity. Studying book retailers is a way to identify current tropes to include in a project or to highlight when marketing a finished book.

As popular series grow, new book categories are created so buyers can find them. Many retailers base their categories on the Book Industry Study Group's subject headings, called BISAC (Book Industry Standards and Communications) codes. Juvenile Fiction and Juvenile Nonfiction categories are excellent resources for reviewing current middle-grade tropes. There are broad categories for Adventure, Fantasy, and Mystery, as well as for holidays, seasons, social skills and self-esteem, humor, format, and more. Graphic novels have their own categories.

Pro Tip:

It's worth reading over the whole list of options before choosing a category for your work. For example, JUV002270 (Juvenile Fiction/Fantasy/ Dragons, Unicorns & Mythical Creatures) apparently doesn't include zombies, which now have their own category: JUV080000 (Juvenile Fiction/Zombies).

Flavors to Use, Avoid, or Subvert

Friendship, food, and world-rescuing teams of nine- to twelve-year-olds are central for many

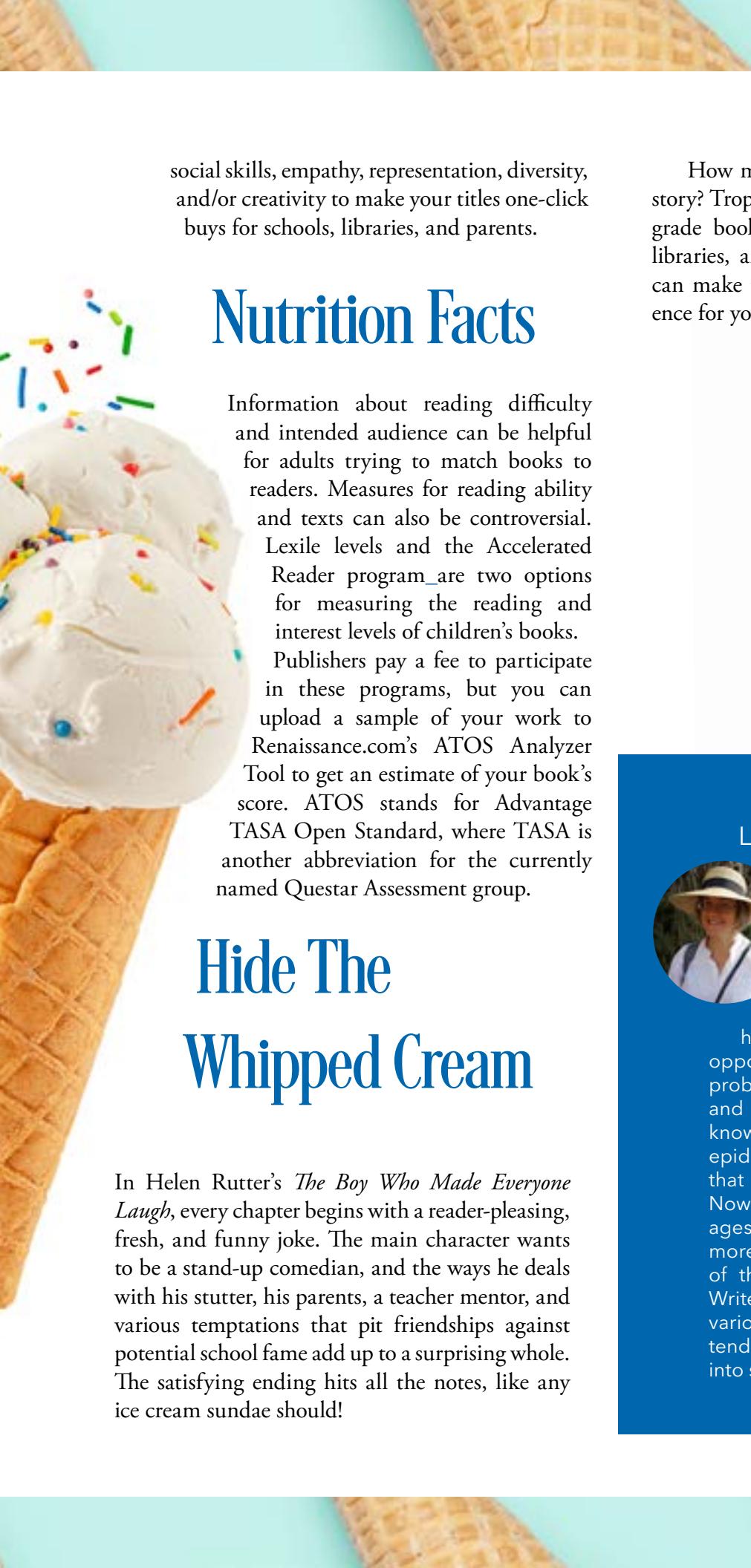
popular and classic series for a reason. Giving each member of the team a role creates a set of main characters with many talents and facets that cause and resolve story conflicts.

Avoiding tropes can also be a spur to creativity. Many authors of middle grade are passionate about avoiding dead parents, mean girls, gender stereotypes—robots, anyone?—pets that die, smoking, inappropriate language, drugs, and other risky behavior. Choosing to keep the parents alive, but finding other reasons for their middle-grade children to have time for adventures without adult interference, can lead to solutions like a portal fantasy, as in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series; parents as distant as the heavens, as in the *Percy Jackson* and the *Olympians* series; or Stuart Gibb's top-secret Spy School, hidden in and among national monuments in Washington, D.C.

Can I Have Two Scoops, Mom?

For most genres, pleasing the reader is the whole sundae. Middle-grade books, however, have secondary audiences, with expectations of their own: parents, teachers, and librarians. Curriculum tie-ins can help readers with their homework while entertaining them. Children's author and publisher Darcy Pattison writes about how to create curriculum tie-ins for US audiences at <https://indiekidsbooks.com/p/who-is-your-audience>. Curriculum Topic Booklists for the UK also give some examples for that market: <https://booksfortopics.com/booklists/topics>.

Once you've thought about obligatory scenes to satisfy your readers, you can tie in curriculum hooks that relate to science, history, engineering,



social skills, empathy, representation, diversity, and/or creativity to make your titles one-click buys for schools, libraries, and parents.

Nutrition Facts

Information about reading difficulty and intended audience can be helpful for adults trying to match books to readers. Measures for reading ability and texts can also be controversial. Lexile levels and the Accelerated Reader program are two options for measuring the reading and interest levels of children's books. Publishers pay a fee to participate in these programs, but you can upload a sample of your work to Renaissance.com's ATOS Analyzer Tool to get an estimate of your book's score. ATOS stands for Advantage TASA Open Standard, where TASA is another abbreviation for the currently named Questar Assessment group.

Hide The Whipped Cream

In Helen Rutter's *The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh*, every chapter begins with a reader-pleasing, fresh, and funny joke. The main character wants to be a stand-up comedian, and the ways he deals with his stutter, his parents, a teacher mentor, and various temptations that pit friendships against potential school fame add up to a surprising whole. The satisfying ending hits all the notes, like any ice cream sundae should!

How much value can you pack into your story? Tropes can help you make your middle-grade book a "must-have" title for schools, libraries, and families, but most of all, they can make the whole story a delicious experience for your young readers. ■



Laurel Decher



There might be no frigate like a book, but publishing can feel like a voyage on the H.M.S. Surprise. There's always a twist and there's never a moment to lose. Laurel's mission is to help you make the most of today's opportunities. She's a strategic problem-solver, tool collector, and co-inventor of the "you never know" theory of publishing. As an epidemiologist, she studied factors that help babies and toddlers thrive. Now she writes books for children ages nine to twelve about finding more magic in life. She's a member of the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), has various advanced degrees, and a tendency to smuggle vegetables into storylines.



Price Like a Badass:

A MINDSET SHIFT FOR INDIE AUTHORS

The moment you hover over that pricing field in your book publishing dashboard, doubt creeps in.

“Will anyone pay that much?”

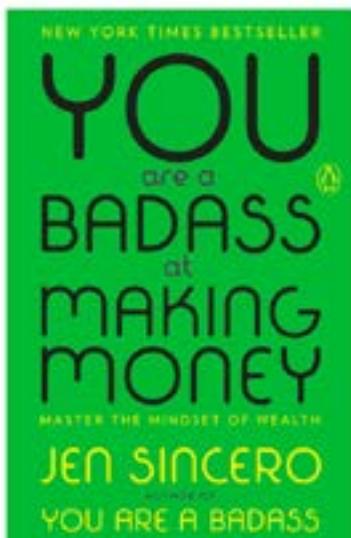
“Maybe I should price lower to get more sales.”

Like many indie authors, you might be caught in the trap of undervaluing your work.

Jen Sincero would tell you to stop doubting yourself. Sincero is the author of *You Are a Badass at Making Money*, a book designed to help readers move past the “fears and stumbling blocks that have kept financial success beyond your reach,” according to the book’s blurb. She uses examples from

her own experience of going from a woman living in a converted garage to a best-selling author to encourage her readers to the same level of success. According to an article on the media site *Popsugar*, “This book truly crystallizes the concept that financial abundance is an inside job—that it all begins with your mindset.”

As an indie author, that abundance begins with transforming your relationship with pricing. Success in the indie publishing world requires both internal mindset work and strategic market awareness. Sincero advises that you need to have the desire to create a new financial reality in order to make it happen.



Recognize Your Worth

The “starving artist” narrative has overstayed its welcome. Every hour you’ve spent crafting your story, developing your craft, and building your author platform represents real value. When you price your book at \$0.99 because you’re afraid to charge more, you’re not just undervaluing your work—you’re also sending a message to the market about its worth.

Sincero cautions that our society thrives on fear and wants you to limit yourself. Instead, she urges you to go for the “and” life—doing what you love and making money.

Traditional publishers routinely price ebooks at \$9.99 or higher, and readers happily pay these prices for authors they trust. Your work deserves the same consideration. Remember, every time you invest in professional editing, cover design, or marketing, you’re adding tangible value to your product.

Understand Your Reader’s Value Perception

Price is a psychological trigger. Higher prices often lead to higher engagement because readers have made a meaningful investment in your work. When someone pays \$14.99 for your book rather than downloading it for free, they’re more likely to read it, implement its lessons, and recommend it to others.

Consider successful indie authors like Joanna

If you’re serious about changing your life, you’ll find a way. If you’re not, you’ll find an excuse.

Jen Sincero
Author, You’re a Badass at Making Money

Penn, who have built their careers on premium pricing combined with exceptional value. Your readers’ perception of value extends beyond their immediate purchase to future books, courses, and services you might offer.

Strategic Pricing Steps

Transform your pricing strategy by creating multiple entry points for readers, such as:

- base-level ebooks priced competitively within your genre,
- premium paperbacks with high-quality printing and design,
- limited-edition hardcovers for collectors and superfans,
- boxed sets offering value for series readers, or
- audiobook versions commanding higher price points.

Then, expand your revenue streams by building value-added services, such as writing workshops for aspiring authors, speaking engagements in your area of expertise, coaching services, or exclusive reader events.

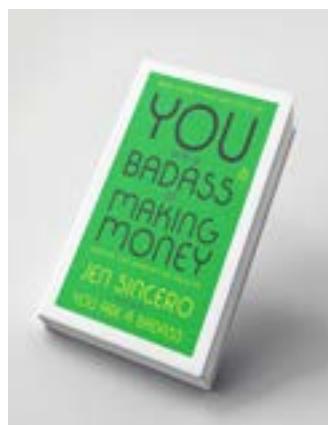
Set prices that allow for reinvestment in your business. If you’re pricing at rock bottom, you can’t afford professional covers, marketing, or platform

building. Price your book with the purpose of allocating a portion of your profits for marketing expenses.

Test different price points systematically. Launch at a higher price point and gather data on conversion rates. Use promotional pricing strategically to drive specific marketing objectives like launch momentum or series discovery.

Taking Action

Your pricing strategy reflects your professional self-image. As you step into the role of successful author-entrepreneur, let your prices reflect the value you provide. Start today by reviewing your current prices. Are they aligned with your worth? Do they allow for business growth? Make one bold pricing change this week, and watch how it transforms not just your income but your entire approach to your author career. ■



Gayle Leeson



Gayle Leeson is a USA TODAY best-selling, award-winning author who writes multiple cozy mystery series and a portal fantasy series under the pen name G. Leeson. Gayle has also written as Amanda Lee (the embroidery mystery series) and as Gayle Trent. Visit her online at gayleleeson.com.

If you hang out with people who think everything is possible and actually do the impossible on a regular basis, you will believe that, and you will be able to achieve that.

Jen Sincero
Author, You're a Badass at Making Money



From the Stacks

Book Club Summary

Daring Greatly

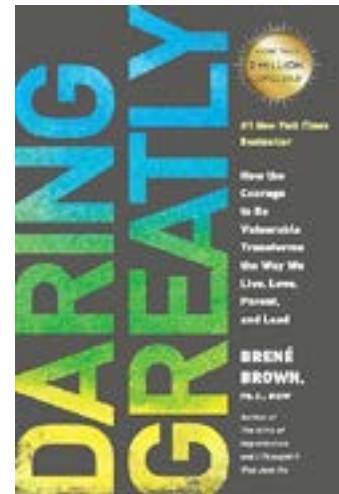
Brené Brown

<https://indieauthortraining.com/courses/daring-greatly-by-brene-brown>

As an indie author, vulnerability is a constant part of the process, from writing deeply personal stories to receiving criticism about those same books once they've published. But what if embracing vulnerability could be your greatest strength?

In *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown explains how vulnerability is not a weakness but a superpower that can transform your life and career. This summary will explore the key ideas of the book, offering insights tailored specifically for indie authors.

Plus, enjoy an exclusive deep dive audio discussion, where we break down how you can apply these lessons to your indie author journey and creative business.



Take a look at this book through Indie Author Training's Book Club Summaries to find

- an audio deep dive into the material,
- a synopsis geared toward indie authors,
- a discussion forum to connect with other readers, and
- questions to help you apply what you learn to your business.

Visit <https://indieauthortraining.com/course-category/book-club-summaries> to learn more and explore other titles.

Tool

Publishing Performance

<https://indieauthortraining.com/publishing-performance>

Watch this tech tool tour to discover how easy it is to set up and run Amazon ads using Publishing Performance. Publishing Performance's AI can tweak your live campaigns according to your advertising goals, providing you with data related to the results that can be easily understood.

Webinar

“Get to Grips with Direct Sales, Website, Newsletter and ARC teams”

<https://indieauthortraining.com/webinars/get-to-grips-with-direct-sales-website-newsletter-and-arc-team>

In this webinar, the founder of StoryOrigin takes you through the range of features the software offers to help you come to grips with the things you need to do as an indie author that often fall to the bottom of your to-do list. Direct sales, building and updating your website, getting the most out of your newsletter, and managing your ARC teams are all covered, with pro tips to set you up for success.



Podcast

<https://open.spotify.com/show/1MjZYaA5iClRL2JMtEiY12>

The *Indie Author Magazine* podcast has been refined and focused for bite-size listening, giving you just what you need to know about some of the biggest topics in the industry. Here are the latest episodes you may have missed:

“Style Guides Decoded: Tips for Indie Authors to Streamline Book Production”

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/0dyO8jDA59G18GBdROUO1m>

Style guides are a critical yet often overlooked component of indie publishing. In this episode, delve into the essential strategies and tools for mastering book formatting, enhancing readability, ensuring consistency, and saving you time and money.

“Unveiling Success: Overcoming Fear of Failure in Indie Publishing”

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/6Kt4zUfmwpwu9WKx0Apk5o>

In September 2024, guest author Joe Solari explained how authors can reshape their perception of failure to find new paths to success in the industry. Learn how your failure’s “sweet spot” may just be the turning point in your career—and beyond. ■

Karen Guyler

Karen Guyler

Always being the new girl at nine schools on two continents was no fun at all so books became the only constant in Karen Guyler’s life, even if they didn’t help her get out of sports days. Now settled in Milton Keynes, England, Britain’s best kept secret, she juggles reading with writing twisty thrilling stories, her children, husband and two grand-puppies – a much nicer mix! She also teaches Creative Writing for Adult Education with lots of laughter in amongst the word wrangling and discovery.

Laterpress Arrives Right on Time for the Direct Sales Revolution

New Direct Sales Platform Gives Authors the Chance to Publish on Their Own Terms

You want to get into direct sales, but you don't want to spend all your profit on fees. You're already paying for your website. Whoever handles your payments is going to charge a processing fee. Most e-commerce platforms charge a transaction fee. And then you have to pay another company to deliver the book.

For authors shying away from the sales route because of these added expenses, the direct sales platform Laterpress offers an alternative. [Laterpress](#) lets you publish books and serials to your own branded subdomain or custom domain, and you only pay Stripe's processing fees. Readers can access your work through Laterpress's web-native e-reader or download the EPUB. You choose how they access it, and you choose how they pay for it.

It sounds too good to be true, and it might be. Laterpress is a new platform, launched in 2022. But

founder Scott Kelly and Marketing and Community Lead Nate Gillick take pride in communicating their progress with the authors who use the platform. "A big part of our company ethics and values is maximum transparency," says Gillick. The company established a platform constitution voted on by user delegates and provides frequent updates via the site's Discord channel.

Many of Laterpress's early adopters came from Amazon's now-defunct Kindle Vella platform, and its serial-friendly features make it easy to see why. But Laterpress is also an alternative to Shopify and other e-commerce platforms for authors whose focus is on ebooks. "The idea is for authors to get their books online and sell directly to readers, making maximum royalties and having greater control and ownership over your audience," says Gillick.

Here's how it works.



Laterpress



Features

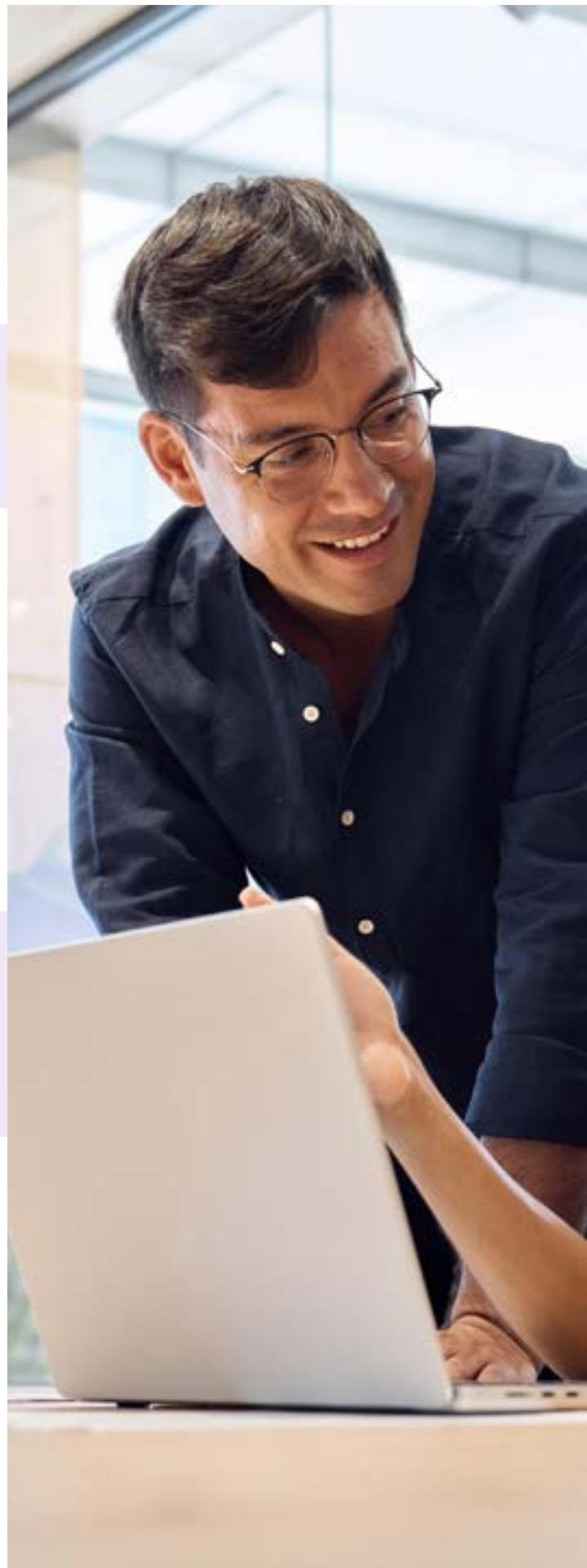
When you set up your Laterpress account, you will be prompted to create an account with Stripe as well. Stripe will handle payment processing for your sales, taking 2.9 percent to 3.4 percent, plus \$0.30, for each sale. Laterpress collects no fees from direct payments, though there are fees associated with some of their upgrades—more on that later.

Pro Tip: You may already have a Stripe account if you use Ream, Substack, WooCommerce, or other stores. Laterpress provides detailed instructions for linking them through its [Help Center](#).

From your dashboard, you can add books as stand-alones or as part of a collection. As with other publishing platforms, there's a place for your cover, title, genre, and blurb. Creating the book opens Laterpress's built-in editor, where you can upload your EPUB, copy and paste chapters one at a time, or write from scratch with limited formatting options. You can drag chapters into a different order, look at different versions, export to Word, and publish immediately or release chapters individually on a schedule. Should you need to make changes, you can delete individual chapters or the whole book.

Pro Tip: Authors who use an early access model may want to go in upon completion and swap the individual chapters with new, revised versions instead of deleting the whole book and uploading the new one. This will prevent readers from having to buy it again.

When you're ready to publish, each of your books will get its own URL. Users can choose between a branded subdomain, like <https://iliad.laterpress.com>, and a custom domain of their own, like <https://planargates.nategillick.com>, which they can link from their author website. Readers who click on it will be directed to a landing page with the cover, title, and blurb and prompted to either Read Now or Download. Depending on how many chapters you've set as previews, they may begin reading there, or they may





be prompted to create a Laterpress account and subscribe to your books.

You set your own pricing, and you can decide whether readers can purchase and download the whole book, buy a bundle of chapters at a time, or purchase an annual subscription to your work. This means you can target readers who normally purchase complete ebooks, who use serial platforms, or who prefer subscriptions like Patreon that allow them to binge your backlist.

Readers can opt into email notifications and get alerts when you update your books. Because they have to confirm their consent to receive email, authors can then add them to their mailing lists. Laterpress has no plans to integrate with a specific mailing list provider, so authors must export a CSV file with their readers' information and transfer it to their newsletter service themselves.

Pro Tip: The Reports tab, where you find your readers' consent and contact info, also provides you with details about how readers are behaving on your Laterpress page. You can see how many people are reading and which chapters they've opened. When you download the Reader Metrics document, you get access to information like the date a book was first read by a reader, the date the book was last read, and the total number of EPUB downloads.

If readers choose not to download your book, they may read it locally through Laterpress's web-native experience. The platform's built-in e-reader allows readers to navigate by turning pages with a slide bar or using a dropdown chapter list. Inside the book, readers can customize line spacing, font selection, font size, and color themes—options include light, gray, and dark. When they're finished, Laterpress saves the reader's place in your book at the account level, so they can pick it back up on any net-enabled device. They can leave a star rating, write a full review, or read other reviews of your book from the table of contents.

The reader's account not only keeps track of where the reader left off in their current read but also maintains a bookshelf stocked with any other Laterpress books they've previously read. Below that, readers will find a list of recommendations based on the genre of their current read. There is no search function to allow readers to find books that do not appear on the list, which is randomized daily.

Upgrades

Gillick emphasizes the fact that Laterpress was designed specifically for direct sales and is not a marketplace. As such, discovery is not a priority. That said, the platform offers two ways authors can help each other find new readers and possibly make a little money in the process.

Author Community features provide a backdoor from one Laterpress author to another. But as they come with fees, you must opt in to use them. First, if your reader clicks through any of the books on the site's recommendations list and purchases a story or subscription from that author within 365 days, you'll receive 5 percent of that sale. Laterpress takes 10 percent for brokering the referral. This means authors who opt into the community features agree to pay 15 percent of a sale—10 percent to Laterpress and 5 percent to the referring author—if readers find them through the recommendations list. The referring author cannot control which books appear on the recommendations list.

If you want to promote another author's work more directly or help readers find closer comp titles, you can. By collecting an affiliate link from the menu of another author's book and then sharing that story through social media, a review blog, or other website, you help drive traffic to that story. As with the recommendations list, the referring author earns a 5 percent

finder's fee, and Laterpress collects 10 percent. Readers also have access to affiliate links, so you can encourage your street team to share and collect their own finder's fee. Currently, these are the only fees Laterpress collects, though another monetization opportunity is on the horizon for when their AI writing assistant goes live, Gillick says.

A Storybook feature built into the dashboard allows authors to create notecards to track ideas, characters, and lore as they write. An AI assistant within this feature is currently being beta tested and will be available through a pay-as-you-go model. Laterpress AI is being designed to help writers plot, draft, and edit their stories on the platform. Authors will have access to several predesigned prompts, or they may choose to develop their own tools.

"The fee structure for those tools is our actual cost to process the prompt [through models like GPT-4o and Claude 3 Opus], plus 10 percent. You're paying as you go, and credit does not expire. There's no use-it-or-lose-it," explains Gillick. Using the AI assistant will require multiple opt-ins, and authors will select what to give the tools access to with each prompt. "Those requests do not provide data back to those companies for training," says Gillick.

The idea is for authors to get their books online and sell directly to readers, making maximum royalties and having greater control and ownership over your audience.

Nate Gillick
Marketing and Community Lead

Coming Soon ...

Laterpress AI is not the only new feature in development. The platform has plans to deliver audiobooks, provide a reader app, and offer monthly subscriptions, in addition to the annual plan now available to readers. They regularly announce their progress on these and other features in their newsletter and via Discord. Authors may also make requests, chat about business or craft, and share resources on the Discord server. "I would jokingly say we're kind of workshopping it in public," Gillick says of the platform. "We release features usually without fanfare. We'll tell our newsletter folks, you know. We make people aware of what we're doing. But we rarely make big public splashes about it. We're just kind of quietly doing our thing, continuing to build the platform."

Is It for You?

Laterpress is intended to be an improvement on platforms like Kindle Vella, with a beautiful reader experience and a lot of customization opportunities for both readers and writers. The founders' commitment to transparency and user governance is refreshing, especially after Amazon's treatment of Vella. However, some serial authors may find Laterpress lags behind other platforms in social features, having no way to leave comments, highlights, or bookmarks, and offering reviews only at the complete book level. The Author Community features may help drive traffic, but the bulk of that responsibility is still on the author.

Authors just starting out with direct sales, especially those with limited tech skills or those with smaller budgets, will appreciate the user-friendly interface and low fee scale. More experienced authors with larger backlists of books and physical products to sell may feel limited by the platform's focus on ebooks, serials, and subscriptions.

But Laterpress's limitations may ultimately be their strengths. With this new platform, authors have an opportunity to have their voices heard in a way that is not possible at more established companies. "We have no venture capital backing," Gillick says. "We have no external overlords mandating that we need to hit X size user base or achieve X amount of profits by Y date or anything. We are completely beholden to our own vision. So we can build things at our own pace."

As a platform, Laterpress is still very much in development, but it has the potential to grow into a viable competitor for much larger e-commerce platforms. And if you're thinking about building on your own land, you could do worse than to work with a platform that wants to build it side by side. ■



Jenn Lessmann

Jenn Lessmann is the author of *Unmagical: a Witchy Mystery* and three stories on Kindle Vella. A former barista, stage manager, and high school English teacher with advanced degrees from impressive colleges, she continues to drink excessive amounts of caffeine, stay up later than is absolutely necessary, and read three or four books at a time. Jenn is currently studying witchcraft and the craft of writing, and giggling internally whenever they intersect. She writes snarky paranormal fantasy for new adults whenever her dog will allow it.

Stories by Mail

Two *IAM* Authors Share the Love of Literature through Letters

For some decades now, it's fair to assume the vast majority of people have rarely received paper mail they look forward to opening. As the internet grew, paper mail declined, falling by 46 percent between 2008 and 2023, according to the United States Postal Service. These days, our mailboxes are most often filled with junk: fast food coupons, consult offers from local businesses, religious solicitations, and political mailers. Beyond the brown boxes we order, the crowdfunding campaign packages that arrive, and the occasional holiday greeting card, there seem to be few surprises waiting for us, and even fewer reasons to get excited about the march to the mailbox.

That might be about to change.

Standing on the horizon, a few authors and their companies are heralding a new dawn of storytelling. This new format hearkens back to times when people could be excited not only to check the mail but also to actually read the letters they received—and two authors with ties to *Indie Author Magazine* have seen firsthand how rapidly it's growing in popularity.





A Storytelling Revolution?

David Viergutz, an *IAM* staff writer, started brainstorming an idea over the course of two weeks in the summer of 2024. Inspired by the music industry and Taylor Swift tickets, he asked himself, “If she can sell a \$500 item, why can’t I?”

To this Horror author, the answer was buried within one critical, deeper question: “How can I cultivate an experience for my fans?” he asked.

After chewing on the question for a while and brainstorming ways to offer a more immersive experience for readers, Viergutz spotted his mailbox.

“There’s nothing in there for me,” he says. That’s when the final pieces of the idea for ScareMail clicked into place. “Well, how about I fix that problem?” he said to himself.

Whether you call it a revolution or a time warp, the epistolary movement—stories told through a series of physical letters sent directly to readers’ homes—goes against the grain of typical fiction publishing models. An epistolary is a story told in the medium of letters, and notable examples include *Frankenstein*

by Mary Shelley and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. But this format isn’t limited to Horror. Other famous examples include *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, and *The Martian* by Andy Weir. Rather than writing massive epic novels that can cost a fortune to print and ship, authors deliver short-form fiction to readers in an epistolary style.

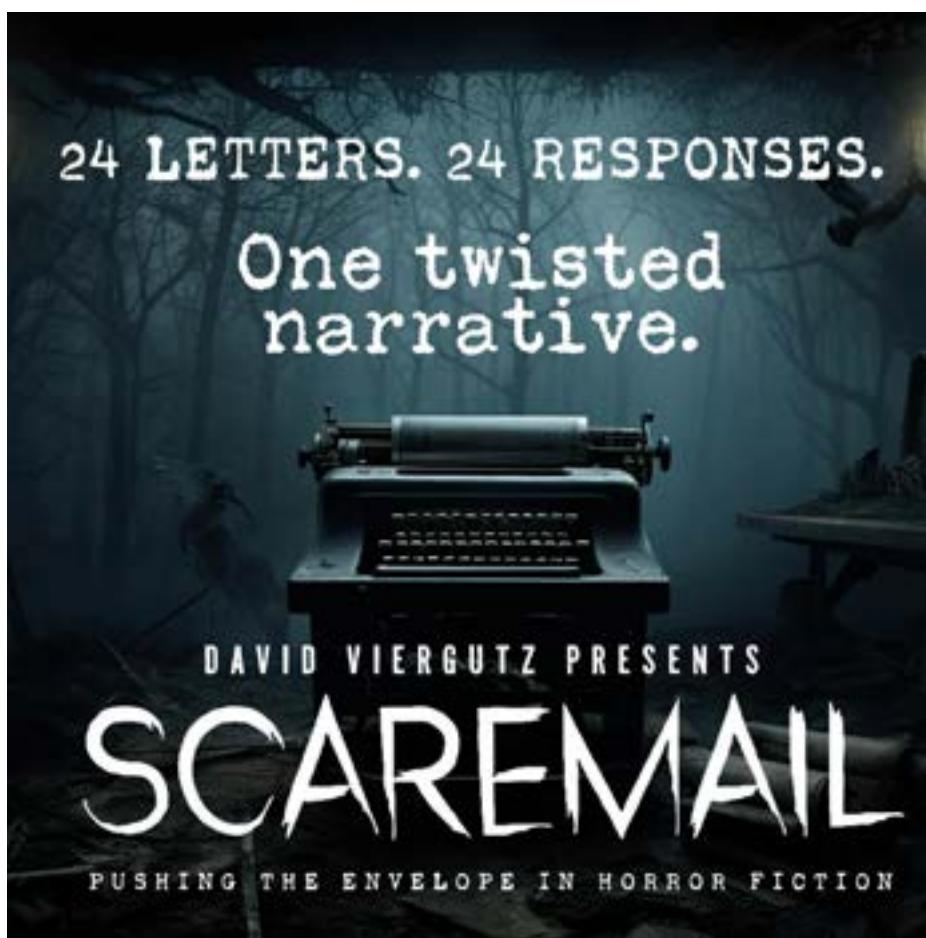
While the initial reaction might be to compare stories by mail to delivering books via crowdfunding campaign, it’s important to understand that

this isn’t the same thing.

“This is not a novel,” Viergutz insists. “This is an epistolary.”

For most writers, this may require stretching and exercising the creative brain in new ways. Viergutz emphasizes the critical importance of being able to tell a good story—especially in this format. “You have to be clever,” he says, and you have to be able to keep the readers hooked with good writing that makes it clear why this story has to be told through letters.

But for those willing to take the risk, like Viergutz, it might





The production process for epistolary series can be complex, Viergutz says. Beyond the planning that goes into creating a story that can be told in letter format and stretched over several months to a year, creating his letters involve themed paper and item cards, which he now prints using industrial printers. He's also expanding the experience with voice actors and artists playing a part in creating each installment.

prove life-changing.

Viergutz started preorders for ScareMail in August 2024 with a list of thirty-thousand-plus subscribers, but those subscribers were book readers, not letter readers, and he wasn't sure if they would be interested. Viergutz knew the numbers he needed to make his idea viable, and he built in a

backup plan. "If I don't get X amount of sales, I'm refunding everybody," he told himself.

But ScareMail proved to be a bigger hit than he ever could have expected. On the first day of the preorder period, two hundred people from his list submitted their orders to receive ScareMail season 1. Soon,

Viergutz was able to leave his day job and commit to ScareMail full time. He was even able to retire his wife to join the venture.

"And then, basically, within four months, I built the company to eleven employees, two assistants, a warehouse trailer, and [\$1.3 million] in revenue."

Mailing a Mystery

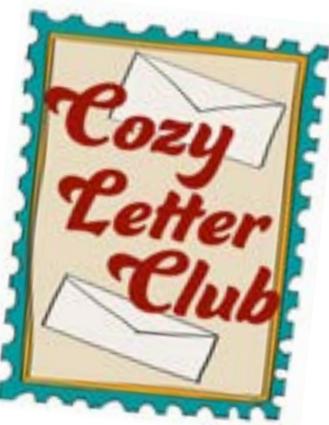
Alice Briggs, a co-founder of *IAM*, says the epistolary idea came to her years ago, but she initially dismissed it. Laughing, she says she thought, "That's kind of weird."

At the time, she was focused on a story that followed the cozy adventures of a woman traveling throughout the United Kingdom. In her mind, the best way to share the experiences of her main character was through a series of letters sent to the reader. Back then, however, she didn't have the bandwidth to explore the idea further, and she didn't know if it would even be worth pursuing.

Yet when Viergutz exploded into this brave new

world with flair and fanfare, she was excited to see that there could, in fact, be a market for her cozy paranormal traveler's letters. Briggs ran her first Kickstarter campaign to gauge potential reader interest, and it was a success.

Now, she's just finished fulfilling the six-month series *Annily's Letters* for those who backed her Kickstarter campaign, and she has it offered as an evergreen option through her Shopify store.



Briggs launched *Cozy Letter Club* with her epistolary series *Annily's Letters*. Although she has just finished fulfilling the initial series of letters for those who backed the project's Kickstarter campaign, the story is also available as an evergreen item in her Shopify store.

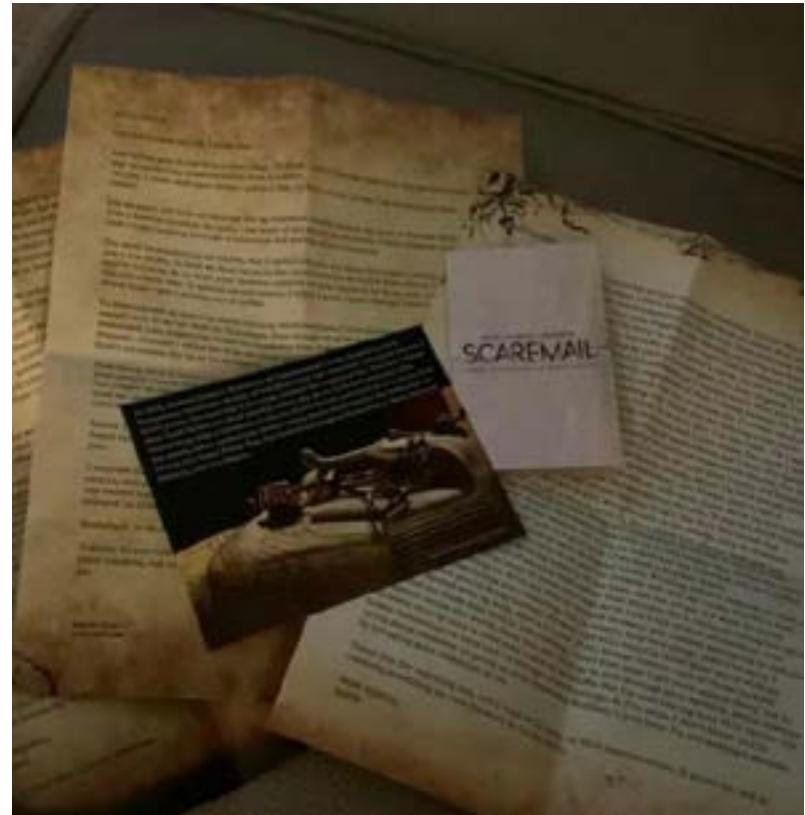
Handling with Care

From idea to fulfillment, delivering an epistolary story requires meticulous attention and careful, dedicated work. Outlining is key, both authors emphasize; this is not a “write into the dark” endeavor. In addition to ensuring the story arc is satisfying and that each letter deepens the intrigue and enjoyment of the reader, copywriting skills can also come in handy. This foundational marketing skill can enhance the readers’ enjoyment of the letters and develop superb hooks that keep them eagerly waiting by the mailbox for the next branded envelope.

With larger operations like ScareMail, Viergutz says, even small-budget items can have massive effects on the bottom line. Sourcing paper and envelopes is not a mere office supply store task, and neither is printing. Viergutz started on a good-quality small printer, but as operations grew, he was able to invest in industrial printers to improve quality, speed, and cost efficiency. He also hires artists and voice actors to enhance the overall experience for his readers.

For Briggs’s smaller-scale operation, things are a little easier, though budget considerations still require special care and attention. She handles the printing, folding, and even the artwork that goes into each letter. As a visual artist as well as a writer, this is an opportunity to pair two mediums of her work and deliver them to eager readers.

Briggs handles her own printing and production for *Annily's Letters*, including the folding and packaging of each. She also creates the artwork included with each installment.



A few pages of one episode of Viergutz's ScareMail series are displayed. His second epistolary story launches later this year.



Stick Like a Stamp

Regardless of the size of the operation, undertaking a stories-by-mail endeavor is not for everyone.

"If you don't like long-term commitments, then definitely don't do this," Briggs advises. "Every time someone purchases something, I'm stuck doing this for six more months. There's a high commitment on your part to providing the thing that people have purchased from you."

Beyond the fulfillment, she also emphasizes the importance of being able to juggle many moving parts and handle complex, ongoing projects.

Unsurprisingly, her comments mirror Viergutz's thoughts on who should and who shouldn't pursue this format.

"Remember your commitments," he says. He makes it clear this business is not for the faint of heart or for those looking to make easy cash. Brand perception is critical to sustainability, and to make readers feel really good, the story and the letters need to be well packaged, well written, and thoughtfully designed.

Anyone can print some pages, buy stamps, and send cool letters to their fans, but Viergutz wants to make a





distinction for those who really want to do this well: Approach it as an entrepreneur, not simply as a novelist. "How long are you willing to read business books and study the market, and try new things and devote yourself to something for so long that it consumes you?" he says. "Are you willing to do that?"

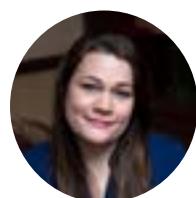
He acknowledges some people don't want to do that; they simply want to sit at their desks and write their next story. This epistolary combination of writing and reaching readers is not for those who aren't willing to pursue the business side obsessively.

It's clear that any stories-by-mail venture involves a lot of moving pieces, long-term commitments, and at least intermediate marketing skills. If you simply want to write and sell books, consider this an interesting blip on your radar, but don't be distracted.

But for those intrigued by the idea of providing deeper, more immersive experiences to readers and who are comfortable building complex systems and managing long-term fulfillment operations, this might be the next best move for you and your stories.

Until we chat again ...

Yours truly, ■



Audrey Hughey

Audrey Hughey designs planners, writes fiction, and works diligently to help her fellow authors. Although she currently writes horror and thrillers, she's as eclectic in her writing tastes as in her reading. When she's not submerged in the worlds of fiction and nonfiction, she's caring for her family, enjoying nature, or finding more ways to bring a little more light into the world.

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