



FINDING YOUR VOICE:
Options for DIY
Audiobooks

FEATURED
AUTHORS:

*Adam Beswick and
Jeanette Strode and
James Hunter*

MARK YOUR
CALENDARS

*Can't-Miss Author
Events in 2026*

HOW TO MAKE
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MORE ACCESSIBLE

REGISTERING FOR
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WHAT YOU NEED
TO KNOW

MYNOISE.NET
SOUNDSCAPES
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INDIE AUTHOR
MAGAZINE



FOR
SELF-PUBLISHING
**NOVELISTS,
POETS AND
NON-FICTION
AUTHORS**

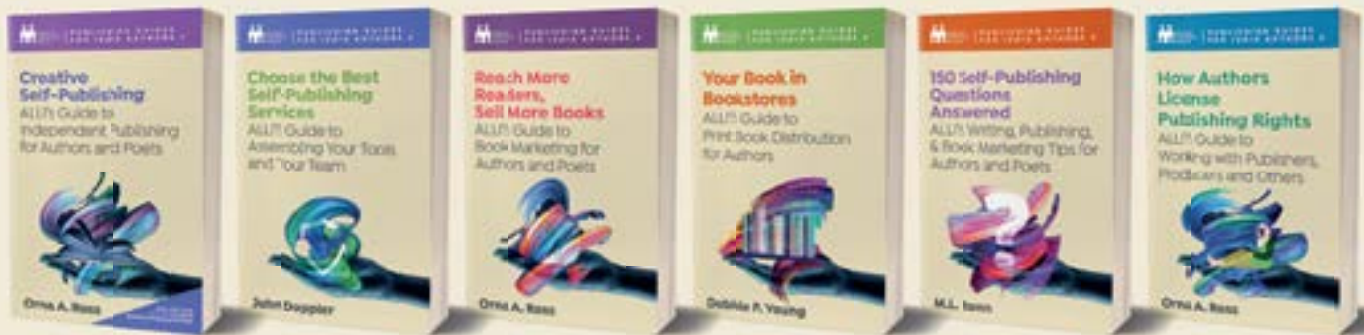
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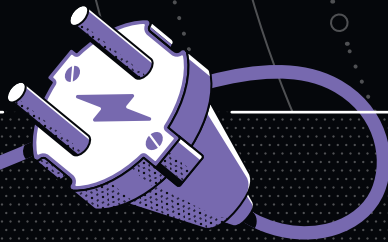
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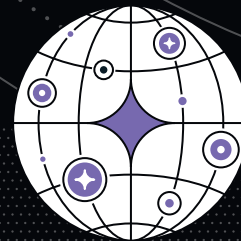
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“

By integrating Lulu's API with platforms like Ghost and Zapier, the magazine reduced its internal production time **from two weeks to just two hours**. Lulu's **high-quality printing** ensured that the magazine stood out as a professional, legitimate publication.

Chellie Honiker

Co-Founder & Publisher, Indie Author Magazine

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FINDING YOUR VOICE: DO-IT-YOURSELF AUDIOBOOK PRODUCTION



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Nicole Schroeder
Editor in Chief

From the EDITOR IN CHIEF

This issue marks a big shift at *IAM*—our first three months of publishing articles online weekly instead of in our monthly print issue. As we’ve kicked off the year, we’ve focused our energy on sharing more nuanced stories from well-known authors and publishers in the industry. We’ve dived deeper into topics and tools important to growing your business and shaping it the way you want. And we’ve spread those stories across more channels—our website, social media, Substack, Wide for the Win, Indie Author Training, and several author events and conferences—to better connect with you and hear what you have to say. It’s been wonderful.

It hasn’t felt like as much of a departure, either. As much as our process for producing articles has changed behind the scenes, putting this print issue together has reminded me of what inspired this shift. Our articles this month cover conversations and questions that we’ve known for a while are important to our community—how to make audiobook creation more affordable, what we can do to make ebooks more accessible, and how AI is affecting publishing and distribution sites like Draft2Digital. They also explore the journeys of industry leaders; this quarter, we spoke to author Adam Beswick and author-publisher duo James Hunter and Jeanette Strode. Each of these stories is one that we’ve wanted to write for a while, but we haven’t felt like we had the time or the pages to do them justice.

This new publishing schedule has changed that.

If you’ve read any of our previous monthly editions or conference special issues, you’ll notice that many articles in this issue are longer. You may notice that the issue itself is longer, too. That’s by design. These are also only some of the pieces we’ve published in the past three months; there are even more in-depth features and informational articles online, with more publishing each week.

As we sign off on this first print issue of 2026, we want to thank you for continuing to read our work and share your stories with us. We hope this new format allows us to report on more meaningful conversations as they happen, and we hope, with our new channels, that we’ll be able to answer more of your questions in our reporting too. Here’s to a new year, new strategies, new stories, and continuing to do the work that we love in the best way we know how.

As indie authors and publishers, it’s what we all strive to do.

Nicole Schroeder



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START YOUR PUBLISHING JOURNEY TODAY!

ALLi Exclusive: Advisors Share Their Thoughts on What's Coming for Authors in 2026

As we kick off 2026, independent authors continue to face both unprecedented opportunities and new challenges. The Alliance of Independent Authors's (ALLi's) Advisors share their insights into what's coming, and the trends that are shaping and will continue to shape how indie authors create, publish, and reach readers. Whether you are just starting out as an indie author-publisher, are expanding your author business, or are looking to refine advanced strategies, these perspectives will help you navigate the year ahead with confidence and creativity.





For Beginning Authors: Think Like a Publisher from Day 1

It's never too early to bring the mindset of a publisher as well as a creator to your work. As Publishing Advisor Jane Friedman says, "The most successful indie authors of 2026 will be those who truly think like publishers. That means focusing less on small, prestige-driven wins—like paid reviews or isolated publicity efforts—and more on scalable, strategic actions.

"Study your genre's bestsellers, position your books with professional covers, and plan publication schedules a year in advance," Friedman says. "Publishers obsess over comps, metadata, and timing; indie authors should too. Treat each book as an intellectual property asset, not only a creative expression. This business mindset is what transforms a writing career from a passion project into a sustainable enterprise."

Advisor Russell Nohelty also recommends that authors think about crowdfunding from the start of their careers. "Crowdfunding is not only on pace to become the standardized first stop in an indie author's release strategy but is also getting a lot easier to coordinate between disparate creators, platforms, and companies," he says. "Crowdfunding is entering an era where it is no longer only for the experienced author."

ALLi Director Orna Ross says more independent authors are starting out with a “direct sales first” mindset.

“It used to be that first-time authors thought only about Amazon, but now some are coming in with a view of ‘direct’ as the center of their publishing business, understanding that an owned storefront and mailing list turns each book into a relationship engine—insulated from platform volatility and algorithm shocks,” Ross says. “If you’re publishing your very first book, that doesn’t mean building a huge store on day 1. It means doing the basics that let you sell direct—a simple website, an email list, and tools that allow a reader to purchase a book from you—and seeing retailers, crowdfunding, audio, libraries—everyone else—[as] the spokes of your business, leading back to your owned, central hub.”



The most successful indie authors of 2026 will be those who truly think like publishers. That means focusing less on small, prestige-driven wins—like paid reviews or isolated publicity efforts—and more on scalable, strategic actions.

*– Jane Friedman
ALLi Publishing Advisor*

For Emerging Authors: Build Visibility and Voice

As the indie publishing world becomes more crowded, discoverability remains a defining challenge for emerging authors. In 2026, visibility will depend less on luck and more on intentional strategy: how well you tell your story, engage your audience, and adapt to new technologies that shape how readers find books.

Hannah Jacobson, an ALLi advisor with a focus on awards and story marketing, emphasizes the vital role awards can play to bring your work to the attention of readers.

“Awards will become more integrated into authors’ overall marketing narratives,” Jacobson says. “Instead of treating awards as standalone achievements, indie authors will increasingly weave accolades into their authentic story marketing, sharing not just the win but the journey, the craft, and the why behind their work.”

Her suggestion? “Start building your awards strategy now,” she says. “Research opportunities that align with your book’s genre and values. When you submit or win, share the story behind it with your readers. What made you choose this award? What does recognition mean for your book’s mission? This authentic approach turns awards from credentials into connection points with your audience.”

“YouTube is going to shift dramatically in 2026, especially for authors who use video to reach readers,” says Video Content Advisor Dale L. Roberts. He highlights how authors can establish both their books and themselves as creators within a target audience.

“With Google’s new Gemini-powered tools, creators can brainstorm video ideas, edit rough cuts, and even turn snippets of dialogue into Shorts in minutes. For authors, that means less tech hassle and more reader connection. You can analyze what your audience wants with Ask Studio, create instant book trailers, and sell directly from your channel through merch shelves or affiliate links.

My advice: Start experimenting now. The authors who embrace video early will own discoverability.”

Orna Ross says AI use will also keep accelerating, and smart independent authors will enter the conversation through their work—pairing creativity with rights literacy—and through collaborative action to protect copyright and author rights.

“ALLi’s policy around ethical AI is consent, compensation, clarity, curiosity, and creativity, and in 2026, indie authors will continue to educate themselves around opt-in/opt-out training policies, provenance features, and clear data handling—using AI where it’s author-advancing, not author-erasing,” she says. “As more indie authors understand that they can get the upside of AI—speed, convenience, testing, discoverability—while protecting their IP, their own voice, and their readers’ trust, we will see them take their part in industry moves toward transparent AI training disclosures and collective licensing.”

Book Marketing Advisor Ricardo Fayet also emphasizes ways authors can use emerging technologies, such as large language models (LLMs) to connect with the right readers. “The biggest trend for 2026 will be the rise of AI-first discoverability,” he says. “As search engines and reading platforms integrate LLMs, more readers will find books through conversational AI rather than keywords. These systems recommend titles the way a friend would—based on context, mood, and themes.

“Indie authors should start optimizing for AI search now,” Fayet continues. “Experiment with ChatGPT, Perplexity, or Google’s AI Overviews to see which books are recommended for prompts like yours. Study their positioning—themes, language, tone—and align your own metadata and marketing language accordingly. The authors who learn generative engine optimization early will lead the next wave of book visibility.”

For Experienced Authors: Lean into Strategic Partnerships

For the most experienced authors, strategic partnerships can lead to the next level of success. Non-Fiction Advisor Anna Featherstone sees opportunities for experienced authors in expanding their focus beyond the page and beyond solo efforts.

“My radar is emitting signals that 2026 will herald more multimedia and more collaborations,” she says. “Joint projects mean a pooling of insights, talent, and energy to amplify creativity and marketing reach, while multimedia storytelling including video, interactive links, and augmented reality will turn thoughtful and rich non-fiction content into many experiences.”

She suggests authors, especially those with an established brand and business, capitalize on the opportunities other mediums provide. “Try adding just one multimedia creation around your book’s content, or collaborate by co-creating something with an aligned author, whether it be a chapter, a book, joint real-world event, online appearance, or marketing material,” she says. “Be curious, act creatively, and resolve to give things a go!”

Partnerships mean not only connecting with other creators but also connecting with reputable publishing

organizations that can bring your work to an ever-widening audience. “We continue to counsel almost all authors to sustain an indie career while selectively exploiting licensing opportunities,” ALLi’s Rights and Contracts Advisor Ethan Ellenberg says. “The taboo against print-only licenses with traditional publishers continues to shrink, albeit slowly, and mainly for authors at the top of the market. Interest in audio rights continues to grow, and we are seeing some interesting variations, like print plus audio, plus a robust translation market. There is no one-size-fits-all—authors need to evaluate their skill set across all the processes of publishing—production, distribution, marketing, promotion, et cetera—and stay on top of what’s happening in a rapidly evolving industry to make sure they are pursuing the right options for their own creative and business goals.”

Across every stage of the indie author career, the message from ALLi’s advisors is clear: Success in 2026 will come to those who combine creativity with strategy. By thinking like publishers, embracing new technologies, and seeking authentic ways to connect with readers, indie authors can build careers that are resilient and rewarding in a rapidly changing landscape.



For more on the areas advisors identified as trends in the coming year, check out these ALLi resources:

1

ALLi Advisor Hannah Jacobson dives into what indie authors should really expect from book awards and contests in a six-part series on book awards. Read the fourth article, “The Biggest Book Award Myth That’s Keeping Indie Authors from Winning,” on how to build a successful strategy around which competitions you enter, at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/book-award-myth>.

2

“The Ultimate Guide to Author Collaboration in Writing and Publishing” explores the various forms of collaboration that can benefit authors throughout the writing and publishing process and provides advice for making those relationships run smoothly: <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/author-collaboration-writing-publishing>.

3

On the October 31, 2025, episode of The Self-Publishing with ALLi Podcast, Dan Holloway explores how changing algorithms at Amazon and platforms like Substack are shaping authors careers heading into the new year. Listen at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/podcast-amazons-new-algorithm>.

4

From the Self-Publishing Advice Conference, or SelfPubCon, a free online event hosted twice yearly in association with ALLi, executives at DropCap Agency discuss with Outreach Manager Michael La Ronn how translations can boost an authors’ profits and how authors can explore building connections with foreign rights buyers. Listen to the highlight on The Self-Publishing with ALLi Podcast at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/podcast-translation-sales>. ■



Matty Dalrymple, ALLi Campaigns Manager

The Alliance of Independent Authors (ALLi) is a global membership association for self-publishing authors. A non-profit, our mission is ethics and excellence in self-publishing. Everyone on our team is a working indie author and we offer advice and advocacy for self-publishing authors within the literary, publishing and creative industries around the world. www.allianceindependentauthors.org

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Get Your Calendar Ready

Stand-Out Indie Author Conferences Scheduled for 2026

From Superstars Writing Seminars in February to Author Nation in November, 2025 was filled with author conferences that invited indie authors to elevate their careers. Direct sales dominated the conversation, audiobook narration led the AI discussions, and crowdfunding and special editions continued to catch the attention of many authors.

The 2026 conference lineup holds the promise of even more opportunities for advancement, networking, and education. With a blend of virtual and in-person events that will appeal to every author and budget, as well as a few local and genre-specific events, you can find one that is just right for you. *IAM* has gathered a list of readers' most anticipated author events for 2026. Read on to find out when they'll take place, how much they cost, and how you can register.

Note: The list in this edition only includes events scheduled in April 2026 and beyond. For a complete list of events, visit <https://indieauthormagazine.com>.



The BookFest Spring 2026

When: April 11 and 12, 2026

Where: Virtual

Cost: Free

Visit <https://www.thebookfest.com> for updates leading up to the event and to access the live stream.

Toronto Indie Author Conference

When: April 18 and 19, 2026

Where: Toronto, Ontario

Cost: \$150 CAD

For more information and to purchase tickets, visit <https://torontoindieauthorcon.com>.



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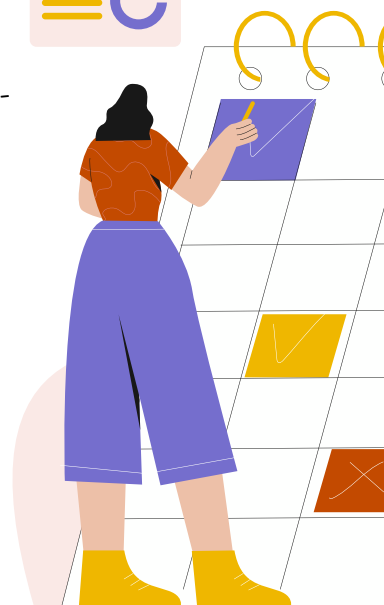
IBPA Publishing University

When: May 14–16, 2026

Where: Portland, Oregon

Cost: \$434 for single-day tickets or \$934 for three-day tickets. Early bird pricing available for a limited time.

Run by the International Book Publishers Association, this is one of the biggest and longest-running indie author conferences. You can find out more at <https://www.publishinguniversity.org>.



Self Publishing Show Live

When: June 11 and 12, 2026

Where: London, UK

Cost: £349 plus VAT to attend both days. Includes food and drink.

Registration is for both the digital and in-person events. Find out more at <https://www.learnselfpublishing.com/spslive>.



LitRPG Con

When: July 10–12, 2026

Where: Denver, Colorado

Cost: \$125 plus fees. Single-day tickets are also available.

Visit <https://litrpgcon.com> for more information and to sign up to be notified when tickets are available.



Novelists, Inc. (NINC) Conference

When: September 23–26, 2026

Where: St. Pete Beach, Florida

Cost: \$625, though tickets are open to Novelists, Inc. members only. Annual membership dues are \$95.

Watch <https://ninc.com/conference-registration> for more information and to register when tickets become available. Space is generally limited.





SelfPubCon

When: October 2026 (final dates to be announced)

Where: Virtual

Cost: Free

Learn more and register at <https://selfpublishingadvice.org/conference>.



The BookFest Fall 2026

When: October 2026 (final dates to be announced)

Where: Virtual

Cost: Free

Visit <https://www.thebookfest.com> for updates leading up to the event and to access the live stream.



Colorado Gold Writers Con

When: October 1–4, 2026

Where: Denver, Colorado

Watch <https://rmfw.org> for more information on the event as it becomes available.



Author Nation

When: November 10–13, 2026

Where: Las Vegas, Nevada

Cost: \$550, with prices increasing closer to the event based on registration date

Learn more and register at <https://www.authornation.live>. ■



Robyn Sarty

Robyn Sarty is an author and publisher who loves helping writers craft stories. She is a former project coordinator, a current book enthusiast, a frequent cuddler of two Bernese mountain dogs, a lifelong lover of fairy tales, and a loyal supporter of the Oxford comma.

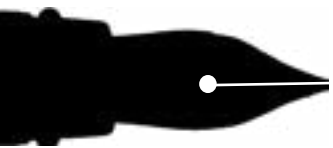
WHY YOUR AI TRANSLATION SUCKS — AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

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Author Inklings: *New Year, New Beginnings*

Hello, my pretties!

The start of a new year has a very particular energy for writers. It's hopeful. Slightly wobbly. And often accompanied by a half-finished manuscript glaring accusingly at us from a folder labeled "FINAL_FINAL_v3_REALLY_THIS_TIME."

Many of you will have arrived at this moment on the back of a writing challenge. Perhaps you participated in ProWritingAid's NovNov, or one of the other new incarnations of National Novel Writing Month, this past year. Or perhaps your writing journey started with something quieter and more personal. Maybe you've finished a draft. Maybe you stalled halfway through. Maybe you surprised yourself just by starting. Or maybe you're an experienced writer wanting to start something new, or to restart if you have lost momentum.

These all count.

That's where I want to begin this year's conversation—not with productivity targets



Read more of Susan's yearlong endeavor to launch a new pen name at:
indieauthormagazine.com/tag/author-inklings.



This year, I'm returning too, in a way that feels oddly vulnerable for someone who has been around the indie block a few times. I'm starting again.

or publishing jargon but with a gentler and more foundational question.

What Kind of Author Are You?

Writing challenges are wonderful. They give us permission to prioritize creativity and to write badly without apology. Looking back at half-forgotten manuscripts allows us to reinvent. To start again. What I plan to explore in this new series is how to move from wannabe to writer. From projects to published. From hobbyist to professional.

Over the years, I've learned that an author isn't someone who writes flawlessly or even consistently. An author is someone who returns. Returns after doubt. Returns after distraction. Returns after telling themselves they've failed.

If you're reading this, you're already returning.

This year, I'm returning too, in a way that feels oddly vulnerable for someone who has been around the indie block a few times. I'm starting

again. I'm setting up a brand-new pen name and re-walking many of the early paths that new writers face. Genre research. Positioning. Drafting. Second-guessing. Quiet excitement. Mild terror.

Many authors have multiple pen names. A pen name allows one to write in a different genre without confusing our readers. It allows us to experiment, take chances, and be creative. For me, I want to reignite my passion for writing and try out a different genre. I currently work in Cozy Mysteries, and I love them, but I want to explore other Cozy genres, like Small Town Romance.

Think of this series as a shared notebook rather than a rulebook. I'm not here to tell you what to do, and I won't be sharing my pen name or locking anything in publicly. But I will be sharing my thinking. My reasoning. The mistakes I avoid and the ones I make anyway. Each time we meet, I will also take a few lines to provide you with a few reflection questions and my "reality check-in," where I'll come clean and tell you how this journey has been going for me.

I'll of course run into challenges along the way—and so will you. But that is part of the beauty of it. Over the next year, I'll show you how decisions get made in the real world: imperfectly and iteratively.

The Start of the Journey

Often, at the start of a new or unfamiliar journey, we



push ourselves to have all the answers. Should I use a pen name? What genre am I really in? Is this commercially viable? Am I already behind?

We'll get to all of that. I promise. But for now, resist the urge to decide everything at once. What you need this month is not a brand or a strategy.

You need intention.

Then, as we move through this year together and work toward our respective goals, I invite you to make one simple commitment: I will stay curious and kind with myself as I learn.

That alone will carry you further than you think.

Reality Check-In

I spent a lot of time over the festive season this past year playing with new pen names. My aim is to launch a Romance series, so it's going to be very different from my Cozy Mystery work so far. To get myself in the mood, I have also been binge-reading books that align with my new genre. We will get to all that in future articles, but I have been having a lot of fun! And, that's what writing should always be.

Happy writing,

Susan



Reflection Exercise

What do you want your writing year to be about? With my new pen name I want to fire up my creativity and challenge myself in a new genre.

I said earlier this series will be like a shared notebook. And what good is a notebook without some space for further reflection?

Take ten quiet minutes and answer these honestly:

- What did attempting or finishing a draft teach me about how I write?
- What part of the process felt energizing?
- What part felt draining?
- What would "staying on the path" look like for me this year?

Put your answers somewhere safe. We'll come back to them.



Susan Odev

Susan Odev is the co-author of the Mike Atwell Cozy Mystery series and several other successful whodunnits involving vicars, Shakespeare, and suspicious cake. A lifelong list-maker, deadline-dodger, and one-woman writing retreat (complete with dog), she wrote her first best-selling nonfiction book in 2010. She lives in Kent, England, dreams of the Portuguese hills, occasionally tidies her desk, and is always five minutes late for her own ideas. Susan has written for numerous magazines, spoken at international conferences, and contributed to workshops on a range of personal development topics, and yet can still get lost in her own bathroom.

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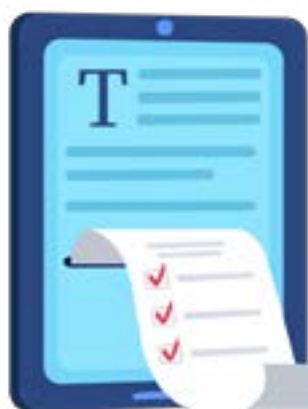


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This webinar is perfect for writers at any stage, across all genres. Come for the science-backed strategies and leave with a writing life that finally feels like yours, so you'll be excited and enthused to get back to it.

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<https://open.spotify.com/episode/5fQX9gGI1zm9aP803msAom>



When Copyright Isn't Enough

Why Authors Should Consider Registering Their Work with the US Copyright Office

In August 2025, Anthropic AI agreed to one of the largest copyright settlements around generative artificial intelligence to date, according to the Associated Press—and a group of authors is at the center. The lawsuit alleges that the AI company violated the Copyright Act by illegally downloading pirated books to train its database. If courts agree to the settlement, the company will owe authors up to \$3,000 per title for the estimated half a million books included in the settlement—around \$1.5 billion in total.

But in order to receive that money—or to be involved in any federal court case for copyright infringement—those authors' books must

be registered with the US Copyright Office.

Whether you're a newbie or seasoned author, you likely have some understanding of copyright. Regardless of registration, authors in the US are granted a level of copyright protection automatically under federal law. But in cases like the Anthropic settlement, that may not be enough to protect your work in court. So what does copyright protection mean for you as an author, and what extra steps should you take to ensure that others can't take advantage of the work that is rightfully yours?

Let's walk through some basics to understanding copyright protection.

The Basics of Copyright

Copyright is protected under federal law in the US; the first copyright law was established in 1790. As part of the Library of Congress, the US Copyright Office manages copyright, stating this as its mission: “The US Copyright Office promotes creativity and free expression by administering the nation’s copyright laws and by providing impartial, expert advice on copyright law and policy for the benefit of all.”

When someone has a claim for a copyright violation, it’s the Copyright Office that registers the claim. The office also records copyrights for creative works.

Copyright Registration

Copyright is granted when someone creates a work, as long as it is the author’s original work and in a fixed form—not still floating in the author’s head. So why bother registering for copyright protections through the Copyright Office?

Legal experts, such as intellectual property attorneys, highly recommend officially registering your creative work. Registration of a copyrighted work enters your work into the public record, which establishes dates and other key information about your work. This means, in a case of copyright infringement, you would be able to sue in federal court, and if the claim were found in your favor, you would be entitled to statutory damages, which can mean a higher monetary recompense than the actual damages you would receive otherwise.

For More Information

If you want to investigate copyrights for your works further, visit the US Copyright Office website at <https://www.copyright.gov>. Learn more about copyright for literary works specifically at <https://www.copyright.gov/registration/literary-works>.



How the Process Works

Although copyright exists automatically for works at the time of creation, registration for copyright with the US Copyright Office requires that authors and publishers fill out an application and pay a fee. Before you investigate copyrighting your work, here are some additional things to know.

How do I do it?

Visit <https://www.copyright.gov/registration> to find the portal to submit an application and walk-through videos detailing the process for different types of works. You must fill out an application and submit it along with a fee and a copy of the work.

What information must I provide?

You must submit an application form and a non-returnable copy of the work you want to register. You may register one work per application, though there are exceptions, such as multiple works that are bundled as a single unit of publication.

How long does the process take?

Copyright registration applications are processed as they are received, and processing varies depending on how many applications the office receives at the same time. Timing varies between less than a month to multiple months, depending on how the application is received—online or via mail—its difficulty, and whether any correspondence is required.

What does it cost?

Fees vary. The fee for a solo author of one work is \$45. However, special circumstances and scenarios can cost more. View the breakdown of fees according to the work being copyrighted at <https://www.copyright.gov/about/fees.html>.

How does this work for authors outside the US?

You do not need to be born in the US to register your work with the Copyright Office. Any work protected by copyright law may be registered with the US Copyright Office—that includes all unpublished works, those that are first published in the US or in a country with which the US has a copyright treaty, or works created by a citizen or domiciliary of a country with which the US has a copyright treaty.

Are US-based authors' works protected in other countries?

For the most part, yes. Authors based in the US have copyright protections in those countries with which the US has a copyright treaty, in the same way authors from those countries have protections for their work in the US.

What about mailing a copy of my work to myself—doesn't that count?

The trick of self-addressing an envelope, inserting your work, and letting it go through US mail—sometimes referred to as “the poor man’s copyright”—is not something the courts recognize as legal protection. The best way to ensure your creative work is protected legally is through official registration. ■



Desiree Smith-Daughety

Desiree Smith-Daughety lives just a short paddle away from the Chesapeake Bay. She has been published in multiple publications, including Up.St.ART Annapolis magazine. Her home is in words and in the beauty and mystery of the natural world. She has published two nonfiction books.

How Adam Beswick Turned Six Figures into More than a Fantasy

The author's focus on social media marketing and direct sales paid off early in his career.

Now, it pays for a warehouse to keep up with demand.





In 2017, Adam Beswick, who publishes under the pen name A.P Beswick, published his first novel after writing his own Fantasy bedtime stories for his young children. Like many authors, he was hooked on the process of creating worlds through words on the page and started out by publishing his books on Amazon.

Fast forward to June 2023, and a conversation with a fellow indie author who had found traction outside the traditional retail model convinced Adam to explore a rising publishing model: selling direct. Adam implemented a reader-first model of speaking to fans directly via social media, but instead of directing them to retailers, he sent them to his direct store.

Fast forward again to a live stream Adam hosted right before Christmas, in which he sold £3,500 in books on a single stream. That night convinced Adam he was on to something real—something sustainable. He learned he didn't need the retailers to find his customers, and he loved the idea of controlling the customer journey; he was reaching out to them on social media, after all.

Today, the Fantasy author runs a six-figure publishing business where his audience regularly comes from organic social media encounters to buy his books directly from him. "I heard the horror stories of Amazon accounts getting shut down, and I hated the idea of having all my eggs in one basket," he says. Over the years, Adam has learned what it takes to reach, communicate with, and grow a rabid social media following. In turn, he has traded in his once-Amazon-dependent business for a thriving direct store and publishing company large enough for his own warehouse. "I chose to start direct selling because of the much bigger margin."

“ I heard the horror stories of Amazon accounts getting shut down, and I hated the idea of having all my eggs in one basket.

– Adam Beswick

When authors choose to sell directly to readers instead of through a third-party bookseller, they keep the majority of their income minus taxes and small payment processing fees. Adam even noticed over time that his sales picked up and matched what he was selling on Amazon. Readers were not only finding Adam, but they also were going where they needed to go to find his work if they didn't want to buy directly from him.

Paid Advertising Versus Organic Marketing

When he decided to go direct, Adam considered how he'd get the word out about his books being on his website. Unlike Amazon, there's little to no organic discovery for an author's direct store unless someone is searching for a particular book. With Amazon, an algorithm fuels recommendations and sends emails to suggest books for readers based on their interests and purchase behavior. Adam didn't like the idea of paying for ads and consistently worrying about the conversion rate of readers who clicked on them. He also didn't like the idea of losing money on paid advertising and found managing ads to be a full-time job in itself. Instead, he leaned into the side of his platform he enjoyed more, creating content on social media,



which led to constant engagement from both new and existing community members on his social channels.

“My organic approach keeps me grounded with my readers and potential readers, and replying to comments across the platforms feels like less work than managing a load of paid ads,” he says.

Adam emphasizes the importance of consistently publishing content—he suggests posting something daily, if possible. It sounds like a bold commitment, especially on days he may not feel like posting or when something else gets in the way, but Adam has found ways to make it manageable. “I've got a backlog of content, well over one thousand videos, ready to go,” he says. “And I know other videos can be reused and still convert to sales every single day. It's been years since I've had a day without sales.”



Left: A display showcases various titles published by A.P. Beswick, the pen name used by Adam Beswick.

Top right: A shelf of books in Adam's warehouse.

Bottom right: Adam packs an order for a customer. When Adam started selling direct at the beginning of his career, he was packaging orders while sitting at his dining room table. Now, he does the same from his warehouse, hosting a weekly live stream to engage with fans as he fulfills orders.



Holding Steady Amid Shifting Algorithms

Adam hosts his own direct storefront, but he has also taken back more of his margin by fulfilling orders directly. Rather than send copies to readers from a distributor, he orders books in bulk and processes orders through his store,

shipping to customers directly. The operation started small, with four titles that Adam would package while sitting at his dining room table. He used funds from Kickstarter, another opportunity to sell direct to readers, to reinvest in his business and build stock for selling through social media.

Now, his sales are big enough to require a warehouse.

“I see myself as very high on adaptability, and I’m not fazed when something stops working,” he says. His approach is to focus on the

things he can control, and sometimes that means doing a deep dive to understand current trends and adapting them to his books and brand. Of course, he knows how to run paid ads and manage sales through third-party sites if he needs to, but he says while he can, he prefers organic sales, where “everything’s profit.”

This vision of success has allowed Adam to turn from author to publisher. The same year he became a full-time author, in 2023, Adam also founded an independent publishing house, A.P. Beswick Publications, to help other Fantasy authors publish and sell their books. The publishing house also includes an imprint for Dark Romance and Spicy Fantasy titles, Arcane Passion Press, according to his website.

Adam’s perspective is to be “author first,” providing mentorship to authors who publish with him on his organic marketing strategies and offering competitive royalty rates. “There’s no pressure for authors to use my methods,” he says. “The goal is to get their work published and in the hands of readers.”



A.P. BESWICK PUBLICATIONS

The logo for Adam Beswick's publishing company. Along with Adam's books, the company also publishes works by other Fantasy authors. Dark Romance and Spicy Fantasy titles are published under an imprint, Arcane Passion Press.

The Future of Direct Sales

Any author can learn to identify opportunities in writing and publishing. For Adam and other authors like him, their success has come from identifying trends and tendencies of readers and authors alike, figuring out what works to sell books, and learning how to apply that knowledge to their own business models.

Adam sees the future of direct selling not only in selling direct but in selling live—combining product sales with organic reach through platforms like TikTok Shop and Whatnot, which allow creators to live-stream and connect with customers while they sell. The sales method requires effort and planning, he stresses; organic reach is limited, and just because you're live doesn't mean your stream will get pushed to new viewers. He encourages authors who take up live selling to build a viewership through consistency. Adam goes live on TikTok every Friday for an hour, and though getting started is slow, he emphasizes that he's building a community and that

sales pick up over time. The live streams aren't complicated; Adam simply packs orders live, which is enough to keep readers invested as they watch him sign and package his books.

Adam also clarified that you don't need a direct storefront to get started on TikTok Live or Whatnot, as both platforms allow a user to build a storefront there. Pre-established audiences are helpful but not required to sell live; the platforms will help you somewhat by bringing in an audience based on reactions, purchases, and interactions, allowing for a snowball effect often seen with viral sensations. For the average author with one book, no audience, and no money to advertise, Adam reassures that a camera and a copy of the book are all that's needed.

“People are fed up with “perfect.” During my first [live] stream, I was shaking. Just rip the plaster off and start filming.”

— Adam Beswick

“The more organic and unedited the content looks, the better, as people are fed up with ‘perfect,’” Adam says. “During my first stream, I was shaking. Just rip the plaster off and start filming.”

Hopes for Indies

Adam is at the forefront of social media trends and has become an expert at adapting what's popular and turning it into something that sells books. He studies what other creators in a genre are doing, adapts it, and posts it to feel organic and human. He's still selling his own books—but in the meantime, he wants to lead other authors to the same success he's found. Alongside his publishing ventures, he hosts the "Novel Gains" Facebook Group and Instagram account, which offer authors advice and encouragement on marketing with social media.

The piece of advice he shares most readily, however, is just to start.

"All an author needs is a phone to start creating content for marketing or live-streaming and selling some books," he says. "The key is to learn, develop, and grow by reflecting on what works and what doesn't. Organic marketing is free and just requires your time." ■



David Viergutz

David Viergutz is a disabled Army Veteran, Law Enforcement Veteran, husband and proud father. He is an author of stories from every flavor of horror and dark fiction. One day, David's wife sat him down and gave him the confidence to start putting his imagination on paper. From then on out his creativity has no longer been stifled by self-doubt and he continues to write with a smile on his face in a dark, candle-lit room.





Finding Your Voice

Options for Do-It-Yourself Audiobook Production

Audiobooks are no longer a niche format or a side experiment. According to Edison Research, the number of Americans who listen to audiobooks has increased by 167 percent over the past ten years. Libro.fm predicts that by 2030, audiobook sales will account for 21 percent of the global publishing sales revenue. Interest continues to rise across all demographics, with the most dramatic growth coming from younger listeners, particularly Gen Z. Whether you believe audiobooks “count” as reading, their place in the publishing ecosystem is now firmly established.

For indie authors, that growth presents both an opportunity and a dilemma. Today’s authors can hire professional narrators, record their own audiobooks, or turn to digital narration tools—options that barely existed a few years ago. The rapid advancement of AI has reshaped how accessible audiobook production can be while also introducing new ethical and creative considerations. According to the Audio Publishers Association, 77 percent of readers were willing to try AI-narrated audiobooks in 2023; although that number dipped to 70 percent in 2024, the overall number of AI-narrated titles and listens has continued to grow.

The takeaway for authors is clear: Audiobooks are no longer an experimental add-on. More than half of Americans—an estimated 134 million people—have already listened to an audiobook, according to Edison Research. The real question facing indie authors today isn’t whether to enter the audiobook market but how to do it in a way that aligns with their goals, values, and resources.

Three Paths to Audiobook Publishing

Authors preparing to step into the audiobook market have more options than ever in the development process. The industry standard for audiobook production today is still to hire a professional narrator to bring a book to life. But indie authors have always tended toward do-it-yourself methods, whether out of necessity or a preference for creative control. So it should come as no surprise that many indie authors choose to develop their speaking voice and narrate their own books or embrace emerging technology to create digitally narrated audiobooks, especially as these methods become more accessible and affordable to indie authors with smaller audiences and production budgets.

1 Professional Audiobook Narration

The least controversial and potentially most expensive route to publishing an audiobook is hiring a professional narrator. Companies such as Authors Republic, ACX, and INAudiO—formerly Findaway Voices—serve as marketplaces to connect narrators and authors. Boutique publishing companies, such as Pink Flamingo Productions, also provide audiobook production and marketing services while emphasizing the author/producer relationship. In most cases, authors choose between per-finished-hour and royalty-split, usually 50 percent, or hybrid payment plans. Authors simply deliver their manuscript and let the pros bring their stories to life. But not all authors will see a return on their investment, and hiring a narrator with SAG-AFTRA credits may be out of reach for authors with smaller platforms.

Depending on the narrator's experience, the cost per finished hour is often between \$200 and \$300, making a 100,000-word manuscript fall between \$1,500 and \$3,000. Narrators who produce audiobooks with higher production

quality may cost significantly more, with top-tier narrators charging up to \$1,000 per finished hour. The growing popularity of dual and full-cast narration can also add to the cost.

When considering professional narration, the most pressing question for most authors is whether the investment makes sense for their book. Professionally produced audiobooks tend to perform best in genres where listeners expect a polished, immersive experience or where narration quality directly affects credibility. Genres like Dramatic Fiction, Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and Romance benefit from the nuance of a human performance, as do Biographies and Memoirs—though memoirists may want to consider self-narration to build a more personal connection with their readers.

Authors should also consider the timing of an audiobook's release and their backlist when deciding whether to hire professional narrators, as those with an established audience are more likely to recoup the expenses of professional narration.



2 Digital Audiobook Narration

For authors whose books—or budgets—aren't well suited to professional narration, digital audiobook production offers a lower-risk alternative with fewer upfront costs and a much faster path to market. Digital audiobook narration, like human narration, exists on a broad scale in terms of both quality and pricing. Google Play and Amazon KDP both offer free AI narration. Authors who use Google Play to create their audiobooks keep 52 percent of their royalties, and those who use Amazon's Virtual Voice program, still in beta at the time of this article's publication, retain a 40 percent royalty share. In both cases, users upload their manuscript; choose a narrative voice from a selection of genders, ages, and accents; and let the software speak.

Spoken Press uses the AI voice-generating and voice-cloning software developed by ElevenLabs to produce digitally narrated audiobooks. According to the company's Ethical AI Statement, Spoken Press "utilizes ElevenLabs and Hume.ai for their industry-leading commitment to 'Consent-Based' synthetic speech." This allows them to produce realistic multi-character narration that authors can tune and revise within the platform. You can even clone your own voice and use it to narrate your book. Spoken Press allows you to create and edit your audiobook on their platform for \$20 per five thousand finished words on a per-project basis, or \$10 per five thousand finished words with a \$50 per-month subscription. The price is fixed and paid when the project is complete.

Authors can also use ElevenLabs separately to clone their own voice if they feel comfortable editing their audio off the platform. This might be a good compromise for authors who are interested in learning to do their own narration but feel self-conscious about their performance or don't have the equipment and studio space to record themselves. Monthly billing with a commercial license starts at \$5, but ElevenLabs has levels for creatives and businesses that range up to \$1,320 per month.

Nonfiction, Self-Help, and Technical writing may also be a better fit for this form of AI-generated narration, as informational content tends to be narrated at a more neutral, steady pace.

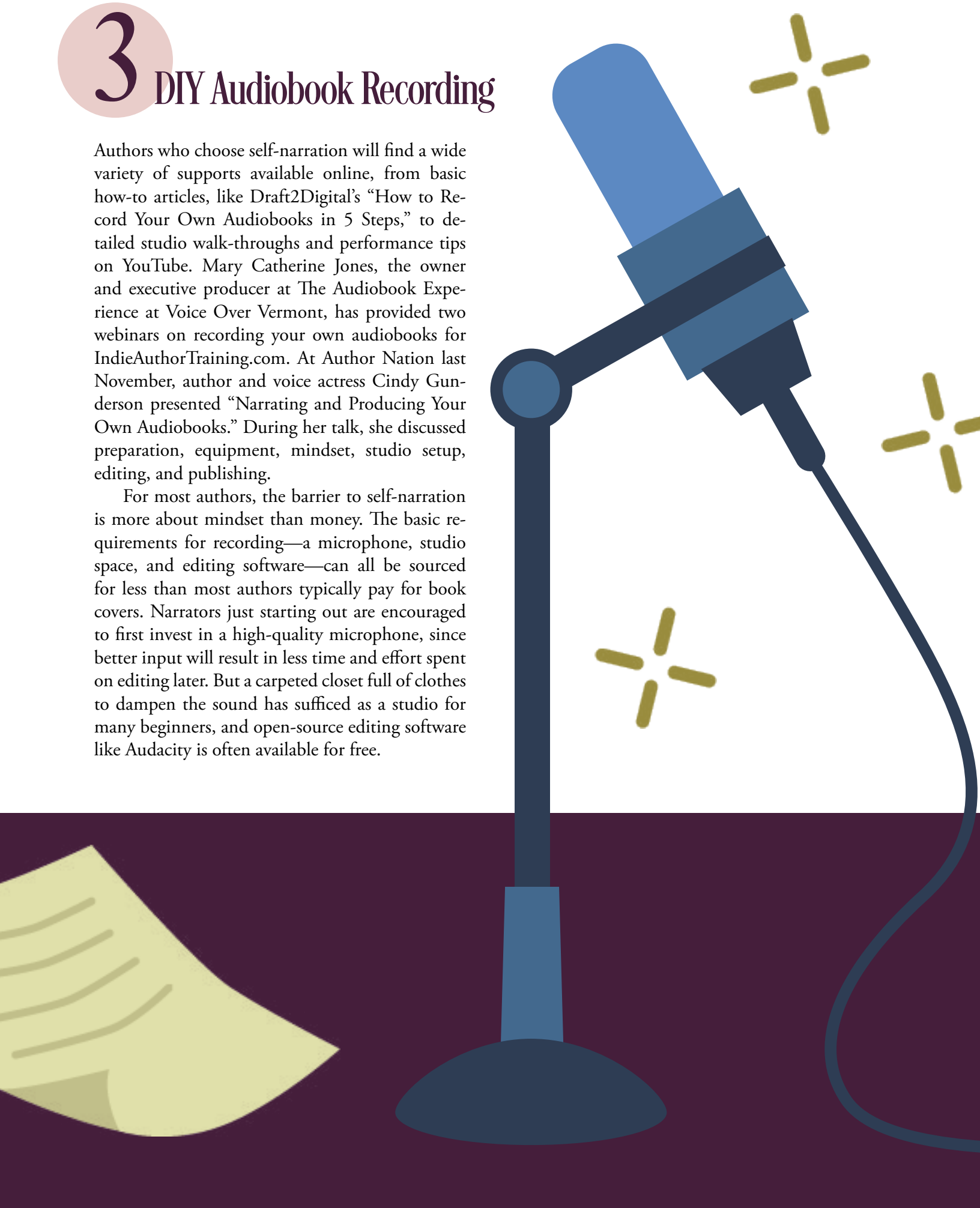
Pro Tip:

Authors who choose this option should listen to the results carefully, as some AI voice struggles with the pronunciation of certain words—particularly exclamations or onomatopoeia. It may also read years as numbers or create unusual pacing, depending on the punctuation. In most cases, you can get around these problems by changing the spelling in the transcript or creating special rules for the AI to follow.

3 DIY Audiobook Recording

Authors who choose self-narration will find a wide variety of supports available online, from basic how-to articles, like Draft2Digital’s “How to Record Your Own Audiobooks in 5 Steps,” to detailed studio walk-throughs and performance tips on YouTube. Mary Catherine Jones, the owner and executive producer at The Audiobook Experience at Voice Over Vermont, has provided two webinars on recording your own audiobooks for IndieAuthorTraining.com. At Author Nation last November, author and voice actress Cindy Gunderson presented “Narrating and Producing Your Own Audiobooks.” During her talk, she discussed preparation, equipment, mindset, studio setup, editing, and publishing.

For most authors, the barrier to self-narration is more about mindset than money. The basic requirements for recording—a microphone, studio space, and editing software—can all be sourced for less than most authors typically pay for book covers. Narrators just starting out are encouraged to first invest in a high-quality microphone, since better input will result in less time and effort spent on editing later. But a carpeted closet full of clothes to dampen the sound has sufficed as a studio for many beginners, and open-source editing software like Audacity is often available for free.





How to Get Started Recording Your Own Audiobooks

Choosing to record your own audiobooks may have a smaller barrier to entry than some realize, with free audio editing programs and creative strategies allowing authors to produce quality recordings without professional equipment. Here are a few strategies to try and lessons to keep in mind if you're considering the do-it-yourself route.

Mindset and Expectations

In preparation to record, authors should start by managing expectations—for both themselves and their readers. Unless you have prior experience in performance, your initial attempts are unlikely to provide the nuanced characterization and consistent flow of seasoned professional narrators. And that's okay. "There has never been a better time to be an imperfect narrator," Gunderson writes in an email interview. "With the influx of AI narration, people are beyond grateful for human-read audiobooks. They're forgiving of your learning curve, so be honest about your journey. Our failures and mistakes help us connect with readers and build them into super fans."

That learning curve often discourages new author-narrators, who hope to master the format quickly. But like any new skill, choosing the DIY route may take significantly more time than expected until you develop it. In Draft2Digital's "How to Record Your Own Audiobooks

in 5 Steps," author Sarah Kuiken suggests this calculation to predict the time you will need: "Divide the total word count by 9,000 (the average number of words narrated per hour) and then multiply that number by three." Most recommendations suggest budgeting around three work hours for every finished hour of recorded audio. With practice, that time should decrease, as you make fewer mistakes and learn what works for you in the recording studio and the editing suite.

Gunderson cautions that some authors get too hung up on their mistakes and struggle to release their first audiobook. She encourages them not to hesitate. "It will be bad compared to what you're able to accomplish later, so just accept and embrace that fact now," she writes. "The faster you do, the faster you'll get to the really excellent work you're about to do!"

Manuscript Prep

To give yourself a head start and decrease the post-performance checklist, start by preparing your manuscript. During Gunderson's presentation, she shared that narrating her own books has improved her writing. Reading her words aloud showed her where she could improve her craft, from characterization and

dialogue to better story structure and pacing. When you prepare your manuscript for narration, you may take note of things you want to change for next time, but you can also choose to make some changes explicitly for that audiobook, whether you choose to update your ebooks and paperbacks or not. For example, you could drop a few dialogue tags if the action and rhythm of the dialogue—or your own voicing—makes it clear which character is speaking. Or you might move a character's description and read it before that character's dialogue, if doing so helps a listener visualize the speaker. Gunderson also recommends updating your book bible during this step to remind yourself of how you voiced the characters in case you need to return to them later.

Once your manuscript is ready to record and you've practiced your characters' voices out loud until they sound natural, or until you stop judging yourself, choose a quiet space to record. You'll want to

“There has never been a better time to be an imperfect narrator.

– Cindy Gunderson,
author and voice actress

consider background noises that you usually tune out, like passing cars and humming appliances, and remove anything that might create electrical interference. Smaller spaces are easier to soundproof, whether you hang blankets around you or choose a more permanent sound treatment. This is why carpeted closets remain a common choice for in-home sound booths. From there, authors have plenty of options to scale up, from building their own outbuildings to renting space in a professional recording studio.

Recording and Editing

The recording software you choose can streamline the editing process, but selection mostly comes down to your comfort and style. The softwares listed here have low to no cost at the entry level and allow you to create the file types needed to edit and upload your audiobook once finished.

Distribution

The most common audiobook distributors are ACX, Voices by INAudio—formerly Findaway Voices—and Spotify, but many authors also release their audiobooks through YouTube and BookFunnel. Posting your audiobook on YouTube allows you to use the popular streamer as a magnet, giving readers a space to interact in the comments and the opportunity to listen to your book before they consider purchasing print copies. BookFunnel integrates with many ecommerce platforms, like Shopify, to allow authors to sell audiobooks directly to readers.

GarageBand (Mac)

Cost: Free

Often the easiest entry point for Mac users, the pre-installed software offers enough features to produce high-quality results for beginner and intermediate narrators.

Logic Pro (Mac)

Cost: \$12.99 per month

Part of the Apple Creator Studio, Logic Pro provides a broader and more advanced set of tools suited to experienced editors or authors who want greater control over their audio.

Audacity (Mac and PC)

Cost: Free

A free, user-friendly option with basic editing tools, Audacity is widely used by beginners and remains a reliable choice for straightforward audiobook production.

Source-Connect

Cost: \$35 per month to \$105 per month

Source-Connect is a professional-grade platform commonly used in the voice acting and audiobook industry and is likely best suited for authors collaborating with editors or studios.

Riverside

Cost: \$24 per month to \$79 per month

This is a cloud-based, subscription recording platform that simplifies remote recording and file management, particularly for authors working outside a traditional studio setup.

Zoom and similar video-conferencing tools

Cost: Varies

Basic recording options on video-conferencing or voice-recording apps may be sufficient for rough drafts or practice sessions but typically require additional processing to meet audiobook distribution standards.

Pro Tip:

Editing your audiobook can be challenging, especially if you intend to meet the standards of distributors like Audible, so understand the requirements of your chosen platform before taking the next step. Realistically, though, anything you create to Audible's requirements should be accepted elsewhere.



Audiobook creation isn't just about adding another format to your catalog—it's an extension of your author brand. The choices you make about narration, technology, and distribution all signal something to your readers about what you value, how you work, and the kind of experience you want to offer. For some authors, that means investing in professional narration; for others, it means embracing digital tools or lending their own voice to the story. There is

no single "right" path, only the one that best aligns with your goals, resources, and relationship with your audience. The most successful audiobooks aren't defined by the method used to create them but instead by the confidence behind the choice. The right audiobook is the one you can stand behind—creatively, ethically, and sustainably—and the one that allows you to meet listeners where they are without losing sight of who you are as an author. ■



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.



The Middle Ground on AI

Draft2Digital CEO Kris Austin Reassures Authors with How Large Language Models Are Actually Affecting the Industry

Note: Indie Author Magazine, Indie Author Training, and our other sister sites maintain a neutral stance on artificial intelligence. In our coverage, we seek to provide an objective, informative take on the technology, and we encourage authors to make decisions about whether to use AI platforms based on their personal values and what's best for their business.

Draft2Digital rejects between 40 percent and 75 percent of all book submissions—and it's almost entirely AI-generated nonfiction, CEO of the company, Kris Austin, says. Meanwhile, fiction authors using AI tools as creative assistants are doing just fine. That split gives authors important context in the ongoing debate about whether AI will disrupt the independent publishing industry.

Austin has a thirty-thousand-foot view of this landscape. His company distributes books from roughly 330,000 authors—approaching 1.2 million titles—to retailers worldwide. He's watched the AI flood firsthand,

and his assessment cuts against both the doomsayers and the utopians: People consistently overestimate what large language models, such as ChatGPT, can do.

"I would just recommend people take a bit more of a middle-ground approach to how they think about these tools," Austin says. "This technology is really cool. It does really neat stuff. But it has limitations."

Those limitations matter more than most people realize, and they cut in directions that should reassure fiction authors—but should warrant caution in situations where information quality matters.



The Real Crisis: Nonfiction Flooding the Market

The nonfiction side of publishing is fighting an active war against AI-generated content, and the scale is staggering. Thousands of AI-generated books arrive at Draft2Digital every single day, Austin says, and the company turns most of them away.

This problem predates AI. A decade ago, Draft2Digital was fighting off literally thousands of smoothie recipe books uploaded by people chasing quick money, Austin says. Whenever something gets popular—keto diets, spirituality, cryptocurrency—the opportunists swarm in with low-quality content designed to ride the trend. The difference now is speed: What used to require at least some human effort can now be produced in minutes.

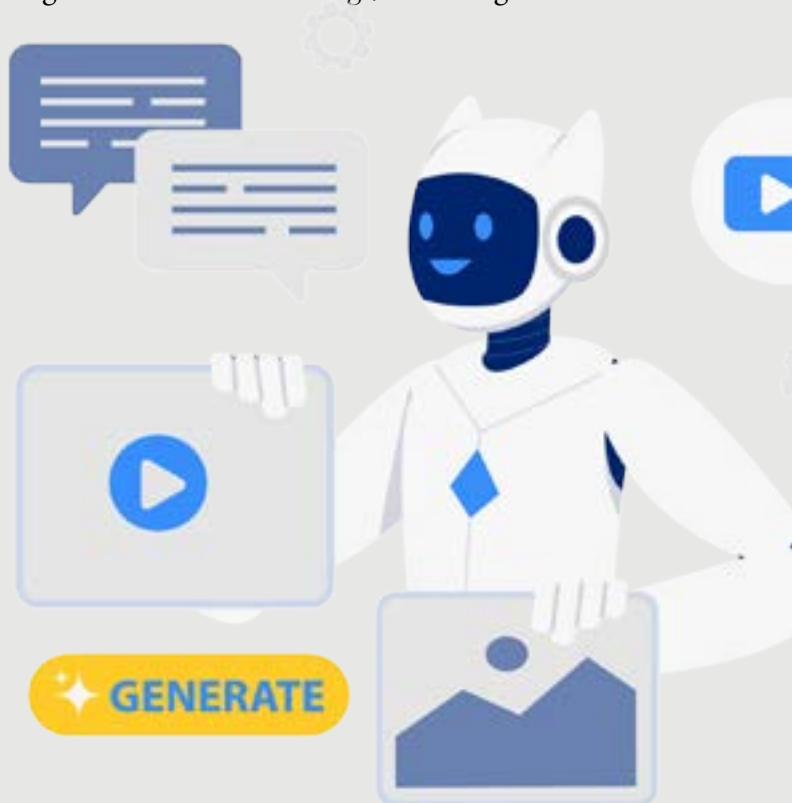
“This is not a new problem,” Austin says. “However, AI tool sets can create these sorts of nonfiction books in mere minutes.”

Some of this content poses genuine danger to readers. Austin points to the mushroom-foraging books that made news recently, in which AI-generated guides confidently declared certain mushrooms safe to eat when they were actually poisonous.

“There’s a lot of dangerous content that can be generated by these LLMs,” Austin says. “You’re going to continue to see retailers push back on that sort of content one way or another, because it’s going to risk liability.”

Draft2Digital watches for certain telltale signs in the accounts it flags, including when an account publishes across dozens of unrelated nonfiction topics. When someone puts out books on nutrition, spirituality, business strategy, gardening, and cryptocurrency all at once, red flags start waving.

“We’re kind of like, do you know anything about any of these topics?” Austin says. The answer is almost always no. Publishers used to pay ghostwriters to produce content they knew nothing about; now, some have cut out the ghostwriter and let the LLM handle it directly.



What Retailers Are Actually Worried About



Fiction Authors Can Relax (Mostly)

When Amazon introduced their checkbox asking whether content was AI-assisted, speculation ran wild about what it meant for fiction authors. Austin offers a clarifying perspective: Retailers aren't primarily worried about fiction authors using AI tools to brainstorm Romances or clean up Thrillers. Their concern is the nonfiction flood.

"They're more interested in filtering out the nonfiction work because it's just completely flooding their interfaces, their websites," Austin explains. "It's the nonfiction that is a real challenge for the industry."

This reframing matters for indie fiction authors who've been anxious about AI disclosure requirements. The target isn't the Romance author who uses ChatGPT to brainstorm character backstories—it's the account churning out fifty dubious self-help books a month.

Austin expects more verification processes around expertise and credentials for nonfiction in the coming years. If you're publishing a book about medical advice, financial planning, or which mushrooms are safe to eat, retailers and distributors increasingly want assurance that you actually know what you're talking about.

On a more positive note, Austin sees retailers potentially using AI to improve discoverability—helping readers find books they're actually looking for amid the ocean of available content. Traditional algorithms might give way to more sophisticated AI-powered recommendation systems, meaning the same technology creating the problem could help solve the challenge of connecting readers with quality books.

Austin doesn't believe AI-generated novels will steal readers; something essential disappears when a machine writes a story, he says.

"Some authors have attempted to write full stories using AI tools. They tend not to do very well in the market," Austin observes. "That humanity seems to be missing. It's kind of one of those things you can't directly define, but it doesn't appear that readers are connecting with that content."

Most indie fiction authors are using AI the way they've used other tools for decades—as assistance rather than replacement. They brainstorm plot points, research historical details, clean up grammar, and smooth rough edges. AI has become another tool on the belt, sitting alongside other helpers authors have embraced over the years.

"Where they [some authors] may not be able to afford copy editors or line editors, I think these tools can kind of help them smooth out or recognize some of the rough edges they otherwise couldn't have solved," Austin says.

Austin predicts that fully AI-generated fiction will crash and recede as a trend on its own. Readers want connection, and they want to know a human being wrestled with those words, made choices about which scenes to include, and decided how the story should end. He believes readers will, at first, be “excited they [AI models] can create fiction. They might read one or two of them that way, and the next thing they know, they’re just buying human-authored books again,” Austin says. “Readers would feel betrayed if a book was sold as human-authored and turned out being AI-authored. They’re going to be pretty much furious.”

That fury will act as a natural market correction, he predicts. Readers themselves will drive what works and what doesn’t, and authors will fall along a spectrum—some avoiding AI entirely, others using it to the maximum—while the market sorts out which approaches resonate.

Draft2Digital’s Role

Draft2Digital has positioned itself as a gatekeeper for indie content—a role that generates friction but one that Austin sees as essential for the long-term health of indie publishing.

“We want to help retailers have the best indie books available, and we don’t want them to be worried that indie content is going to destroy their storefronts,” Austin says. “We think it’s part of our job to help keep the indie author reputations at a high level because there’s just so many good books.”

The work is unglamorous, and it makes people angry when they disagree with rejection decisions. Austin argues the industry doesn’t have much choice, though—if thousands of low-quality books flood the market and overwhelm retailer storefronts, the damage extends to every legitimate indie author trying to reach readers.

Beyond filtering, Draft2Digital actively works with retailers on how author content gets used, particularly around AI training. When retailers want to do something with content that makes Draft2Digital uncomfortable, they push back and try to find ground that accomplishes business goals without compromising author rights.

“We want to protect authors’ rights when it comes to how their content is used, that it’s not trained by LLMs without their consent,” Austin says. “We’re working with the retailers to help find that balance.”

The Long View from Someone Who's Seen It Before

Draft2Digital exists because technology opened doors that were previously closed. Ebooks made publishing accessible, and print-on-demand eliminated the need for warehouse investments. The company was founded in 2012 specifically to help authors navigate the technical complexity of digital publishing—taking a thirty-page style guide and turning it into a two-paragraph process.

Austin's journey to CEO wasn't exactly planned, either. A friend who was an author needed help getting his books formatted for distribution, and a mutual friend wrote software to handle the technical parts. By 2012, Austin was being asked to run the resulting company. He talked to his wife; quit his job with four months of runway, a three-year-old son, and a six-month-old daughter; and hoped it would work out.

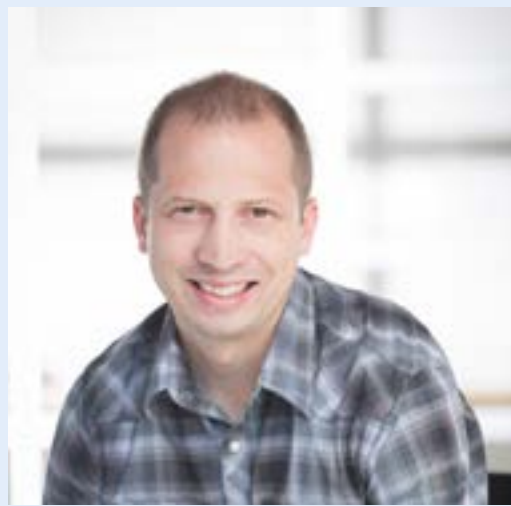
"If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't do it," Austin admits with a laugh. "Being naive about running a business back then is the reason why I was willing to do it. The risk that we took—I didn't fully recognize how risky it was."

That naivete paid off. The company grew rapidly, acquired Smashwords in 2022, and became the dominant player in wide distribution for indie titles. They've expanded into print-on-demand, making it easy for authors to convert ebooks into print books with automated tools, and more formats are coming in 2026.

Throughout it all, Austin has watched technology transform publishing while keeping perspective on what technology can and cannot do. He's seen the smoothie book floods and the keto book floods and now the AI book floods, and he's watched authors adapt to ebooks, to algorithms, to social media marketing, and now to AI tools.

One thing he keeps coming back to: Indie authors are remarkably good at adapting. They respond quickly to changing trends, find creative solutions, and tell stories that serve specific niches traditional publishing won't address. That adaptability has always been indie publishing's defining advantage, and Austin doesn't expect AI to change that fundamental dynamic.

"I think it just helps indie authors be a bit more responsive and to kind of craft some better works from an end product," Austin says of AI tools in fiction. Authors who use these tools thoughtfully, as assistance rather than replacement, will find them valuable, he says. Those who try to outsource their creativity entirely will discover that readers notice and care.



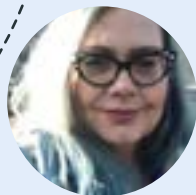
The Bottom Line

A peek behind the curtain at Draft2Digital shows both the apocalyptic predictions and utopian promises about AI in publishing made at the inception of the technology were wrong. The technology is hitting limitations—the rapid improvements of the early years have slowed. Readers still want human connection, and the market still rewards authenticity. The nonfiction flood is a serious problem requiring serious responses, but it’s ultimately a problem of scale and speed rather than a fundamental transformation of the industry.

“We’ve all seen it. They’re not getting better and better as they were the first few years. They’re slowly getting better now,” Austin says.

For indie authors, the practical takeaway is straightforward: Keep doing what you’ve always done. Tell your stories and use the tools that help you tell them better. Trust that readers want what you’re offering, not because AI can’t generate words—it obviously can—but because those words aren’t the same as yours.

The “middle-ground approach” Austin recommends isn’t the most exciting position to take, and it may not generate breathless headlines or viral social media threads. It might, however, be the most accurate assessment of where the industry actually stands and where it’s headed. ■



Chelle Honiker

Chelle Honiker is an advocate for the empowerment of authorpreneurs, recognizing the importance of authors taking charge of both their craft and careers. In response to this need, she has founded a media and training company dedicated to supporting these creative professionals. As the co-founder and publisher of Indie Author Magazine, IndieAuthorTraining, Indie Author Tools, and Direct2Readers.com, Chelle’s team of more than 80 writers, editors, trainers, and support staff provides resources and insights that help authors navigate the complexities of self-publishing. Her role as the programming director for Author Nation, an annual conference in Las Vegas, further exemplifies her commitment to fostering a community where authors can grow and succeed. With a career spanning over two decades in executive operations and leadership, Chelle has honed her skills in managing complex projects and delivering impactful training programs. Her experience as a speaker and TEDx Organizer has taken her to many countries, where she has shared her insights with diverse audiences.

Beyond Alt Text

Why Your Ebooks Should Be Made Accessible—and How to Do It



What Accessibility Really Means for Book Readers

Accessibility is often misunderstood as something that applies only to a small group of readers. In reality, it's about flexibility and ensuring that all readers can engage with content in ways that work for them.

A few facts to consider:

- The World Health Organization estimates that over one billion people worldwide live with some form of disability.
- In the United States, the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimated that in 2023, 44.7 million people—or 13.6 percent of the population—had some form of a disability.
- And according to the Accessible Books Consortium, about 10 percent to 15 percent of people have some sort of print disability, meaning blindness, low vision, or a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia, that affects the individual's ability to read printed material.
- At the same time, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) notes that fewer than 10 percent of publications globally are available in accessible formats, highlighting a significant gap in accessible reading materials.

Readers with print disabilities often rely on screen reading software and devices. Others need larger fonts or specific spacing to reduce eye strain. Readers with dyslexia may benefit from adjustable fonts and clean layouts. Those with motor impairments may navigate ebooks differently than expected. Even readers without disabilities may encounter temporary barriers: a cracked screen, poor lighting, aging eyesight, or trouble reading on a small device.

Accessible ebooks don't look special or different. They simply remove obstacles that prevent readers from controlling how they consume text. When authors prioritize accessibility, they're not changing their stories, but they are ensuring those stories can reach more people.

In an August 6, 2025, post on her website, publishing expert Jane Friedman announced to her readers one of the latest updates to the Kindle Direct Publishing setup page. “Amazon KDP now asks author-publishers to answer questions about ebook accessibility, mainly for the benefit of visually impaired readers,” she wrote to her readers.

The accessibility feature was rolled out May 28, according to the KDP forum. The new question presented during the ebook upload process asks authors whether their books include images and whether those images contain alt text. Alt text, short for alternative text, is a short description of an image to be used when the image doesn't load on certain devices or to be read by those using screen readers. The change created a small ripple of discussion among author groups. Some asked what counted as alt text, and others asked how the new questions would affect their published works. Still others asked why the change was important at all.

Although alt text became the focal point of many discussions, it's only a small piece of a much larger subject. Ebook accessibility encompasses everything from formatting choices and file structure to how text interacts with assistive technology like screen readers. These considerations affect not only readers with disabilities but also readers navigating ebooks on different devices, in different environments, and with different reading preferences. Beyond ebooks, other corners of your author business—your physical books, website, and marketing materials—can also benefit from being made more accessible.

As indie authors take on more responsibility for the full publishing process, accessibility is becoming part of professional best practice and not just a niche concern or optional upgrade. Thankfully, there are a range of practical, actionable ways authors can make their ebooks more accessible and take part in a broader shift in how we think about inclusion in digital publishing.

Alt Text: Small Detail, Big Impact

Alt text provides a written description of an image so that screen reader software can convey visual information to readers who cannot see it.

In ebooks, alt text is especially important because images often replace or supplement written content. Without alt text, a screen reader may announce only that an image exists, leaving your reader without critical context if you need readers to be able to refer to the image while they read.

When Alt Text Is Necessary

Alt text should be included for images that

- convey information, such as maps, diagrams, and charts;
- add story-relevant context;
- include embedded text; and
- replace written explanation.

Decorative images that don't add meaning can be marked as decorative so screen readers skip them entirely.

Found in the Accessibility Features section of the Kindle eBook Content tab on the KDP Bookshelf, the new question asks, "Are your images accessible?" Authors are then presented with the following options:

- I don't know if my informative images include alternative text and/or extended description.
- None of my informative images include alternative text and/or extended description.
- Some informative images include alternative text and/or extended description.
- All informative images include alternative text and/or extended description.

Based on the selection made during this step of the upload process, applicable alt text details will pass through to the Accessibility section of the Book Detail page on Amazon.

Writing Alt Text That Actually Helps

Effective alt text focuses on purpose, not exhaustive description. Alt text is not meant to replace prose, nor is it meant to describe every detail within an image.

Pro Tip:

Alt text is not the same as an image description, which can be much longer and more detail oriented, nor should it be treated as a caption. Alt text is typically embedded in an image's metadata and has a strict character limit; image descriptions are often included in an image's caption and have more room to provide additional description beyond the most necessary details.

Instead, it should describe only the most important pieces of an image a reader would need to understand.

When creating alt text, ask yourself:

- What does the reader need to understand here?
- What information would be lost if the image weren't available?

Try to avoid:

- using text like "image of" or "picture of," which takes up valuable characters in your description;
- overly detailed visual inventories; and
- repeating nearby text verbatim.

For example, instead of using: "An image of a fantasy map with mountains, rivers, and cities," try using: "A fantasy map showing three kingdoms separated by a central mountain range, with the capital city marked near the eastern coast."



Images of Text: A Common Accessibility Misstep

Beyond images included alongside story text, modern ebooks often include screenshots or stylized images of things like text messages, emails, social media posts, and chat conversations. Some authors also create chapter headers with the chapter number or title included in the image rather than as separate text.

Although visually engaging, these images present a major accessibility issue: Screen readers cannot interpret text embedded in images without alt text. Even when alt text is added, long strings of these images can become cumbersome for software to navigate.

Why This Matters

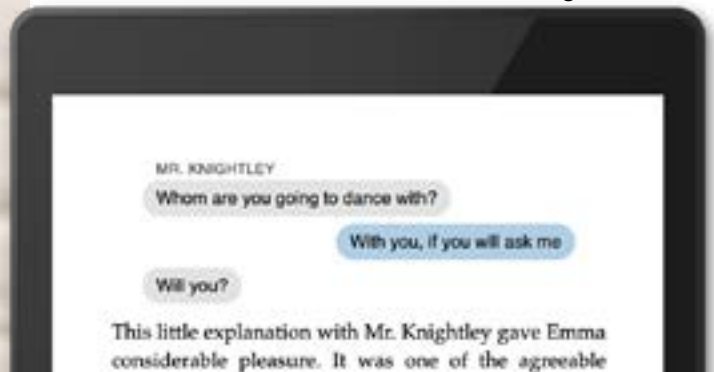
When text exists only as an image, your readers cannot adjust font size. They also cannot search or highlight text, and any screen reader software must rely on lengthy alt text descriptions, which can be challenging to create and may have character limits depending on the software the reader is using.

A More Accessible Alternative

Instead of inserting images of text in your book, use real, selectable text, and apply simple formatting to distinguish it from narrative prose—labels, line breaks, or italics or indentation.

This approach preserves readability while ensuring compatibility with assistive tools. It also improves usability for readers who prefer larger fonts or different spacing even if they're not using a screen reader. As a bonus, it avoids formatting headaches for you during the production process.

Text message formatting in Vellum formatting software



Reflowable EPUBs: Accessibility Starts at the File Level

Choosing a flexible-layout file format, like a reflowable EPUB, rather than a fixed-layout file, such as a PDF, allows you to make one of the most impactful accessibility decisions before formatting ever begins. Reflowable ebooks allow readers to change font size, adjust line spacing and margins, select preferred fonts, and use device-specific reading features. Fixed-layout ebooks, by contrast, lock text into rigid positions, which can present a potential barrier for those with low vision or reading disorders.

When Reflowability Matters Most

For most fiction and narrative nonfiction, reflowable EPUBs should be the default. Fixed layouts may be appropriate for heavily visual books, such as children's picture books or complex textbooks, but they should be used intentionally and with accessibility accommodations where possible.

Structural Formatting that Supports Screen Readers

Screen readers rely on an ebook's underlying structure, not its visual appearance. This makes clean, semantic formatting essential.

Chapter titles and section headers should use true heading styles, not just bolded text. This allows screen reader users to navigate by chapter, jump between sections, and understand the book's hierarchy and logical reading order. Avoid manual spacing using repeated line breaks, decorative formatting that disrupts text flow, and inconsistent paragraph styles.

What looks fine visually can become confusing when read aloud by assistive technology. Clean formatting helps ensure accessibility, cross-device consistency, and ebook conversion reliability.

It's also important to remember that using embedded fonts in your ebook limits reader choice and may reduce legibility. Whenever possible, allow devices to use system fonts selected by the reader.

Other Steps to Take Toward Accessibility

Write with Clarity:

Clear sentence structure and straightforward language benefits readers with cognitive disabilities, non-native speakers, and readers using text-to-speech software. Don't feel like you need to simplify your voice, but when possible, prioritize clarity over unnecessary complexity.

Navigation, Links and Reader Orientation:

Accessible ebooks help readers understand where they are and where they can go. Avoid vague link text like "click here." Instead, use descriptive language that makes sense when read aloud, such as "Visit the author's website" or "See the full bibliography here."

Functional Tables of Contents:

Ensure your table of contents is properly linked and navigable. For those who use screen readers, this is often the primary way to move through a book efficiently.

Accessibility Isn't Just for Ebooks

Although this article focuses primarily on ebooks, accessibility can and should extend across an author's entire ecosystem. That can include things like

- large-print editions of physical books;
- dyslexia-friendly layouts;
- audiobooks and AI narration;
- high-contrast covers and websites; and
- accessible newsletters and marketing emails that include alt text, readable fonts, and high-contrast colors and graphics.

Don't feel the need to do everything at once. Instead, focus on building your awareness, and improve incrementally. Ebooks are an ideal starting point because many accessibility improvements are low-cost, invisible to most readers, and easy to incorporate into existing workflows.

Understanding Accessibility Regulations

Accessibility regulations are important for digital content to be accessible to all users, including those with disabilities. Navigating these rules is crucial for publishing professionals to ensure compliance and inclusiveness. Here are the particular guidelines that define accessibility in digital publications.

Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act

Publications and other digital information must be available to people with disabilities, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For a director of publishing, that means ensuring digital formats work with assistive technology like screen readers and visual displays.

Maintaining compliance with the ADA rules improves diversity and reduces legal risks related to accessibility regulation, which have surged in recent years.

You can read the full text of the ADA's design standards at <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/design-standards>.

Section 508 Standards

Federal agencies should make their electronic and data tech accessible to people with disabilities by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. This standard applies to any digital material that these organizations produce. However, it also acts as a manual for publish-

ers in the private sector. Digital material should be made accessible to all users, regardless of their ability levels. Compliance with Section 508, which supports fair access to information and services across platforms and devices, makes this easier.

Read the full text at <https://www.section508.gov>.

WCAG Standards

A complete collection of rules for improving the accessibility of web content is provided by the Web Content Accessibility Rules (WCAG), a globally recognized organization whose standards offer a strong foundation for document accessibility in the publishing sector. Following WCAG standards improves overall user experience, search engine optimization, compliance with international accessibility requirements, and suitability for those with disabilities.

Read the complete list of WCAG standards at <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21>.

Publisher or Platform Requirements

Major platforms like KDP provide guidelines and tools for authors to declare their ebook's accessibility features during the publishing process. Although you can proceed with publication by selecting the default "I don't know" option, creating accessible ebooks is highly encouraged to reach a wider audience and ensure compliance.





Accessibility Compliance

Accessibility is a rapidly changing landscape, so it can be hard to know what does and doesn't apply to publishing. However, according to an April 2025 article from Hurix.com, some current and forthcoming accessibility regulations do apply to self-published books, particularly their digital versions—ebooks. The extent to which they apply depends on the jurisdiction where the books are sold and the platform used for sales.

Key Regulations to Know

European Accessibility Act (EAA): This is the most significant regulation directly impacting self-published authors selling in the European Union.

- **Scope:** The EAA applies to ebooks and e-reader devices and services sold in the EU market.
- **Deadlines:** New ebooks must comply with EAA standards by June 28, 2025. A more generous deadline, which isn't until 2030, exists for backlist content.
- **Impact on Self-Publishers:** Publishers and distributors, including online platforms such as Amazon's KDP, are responsible for ensuring compliance. There is an exemption for titles published by microenterprises, but sales platforms still have a responsibility for the accessibility of their own services.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): In the US, the ADA ensures digital accessibility.

- **Scope:** Although the ADA doesn't have specific, detailed technical standards for all private sector websites, courts and the Department of Justice have consistently interpreted it to require that web content be accessible. WCAG 2.1 Level AA is the de facto standard expected in most cases.
- **Impact on Self-Publishers:** If a self-published author sells directly from their own website, that site may be subject to ADA requirements, depending on its nature—for example, if it's a business site versus a purely personal blog. Publicly funded institutions like libraries and universities, which may acquire and distribute self-published works, are legally obligated to ensure the materials they provide are accessible.

Tools for Authors

With all the many parts and pieces that go into writing, editing, publishing, and marketing your work, incorporating accessibility into your production process can seem overwhelming. Thankfully there are many tools available to help authors tackle accessibility.

When selecting tools or software, keep these key accessibility features in mind:

- Screen reader support with proper tagging and structure allow for voice output.
- Alt text description generators can create alt text for images so screen readers can utilize it.
- Proper use of heading and paragraph styles when formatting can aid in navigation.
- Some programs have text-to-speech and transcripts built in or are made compatible with third-party programs that do the same.
- Reflowable content in EPUBs adapts to different screen sizes and allows users to adjust fonts and sizing as needed for legibility.

Adobe InDesign, with plugins like Circular Software, offers deep control, and platforms like Kotobee, Kitaboo, and Atticus build in accessibility with features like alt text, screen reader support, and proper heading structures. These tools focus on WCAG compliance, allowing for reflowable EPUBs, image descriptions, and text-to-speech compatibility, making content usable for readers with disabilities.

Professional Design and Publishing

Adobe InDesign: The industry standard for complex layouts, it provides fine control for adding accessibility tags, alt text, and ensuring proper reading order, especially with plugins like Circular Software.

Circular Software: The InDesign plug-in offers dedicated tools for setting reading order, section labels, image descriptions, and metadata for accessible fixed-layout ebooks.

Author-Focused and All-in-One Platforms

Atticus: An author-friendly tool that helps create accessible ebooks with cloud backup and features to build inclusive formats.

Kotobee: Excellent for interactive and multimedia ebooks, allowing you to add alt text, captions, transcripts, and ensure keyboard accessibility for interactive elements.

Kitaboo: A platform for creating accessible digital textbooks with WCAG compliance, text-to-speech, screen reader compatibility, and reflowable EPUB support.

Free and Open-Source Options

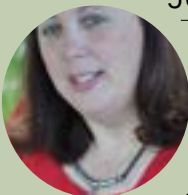
Calibre: A powerful, free library manager that converts documents to various formats, offering customization and basic accessibility features.

Sigil: A free EPUB editor that allows manual adjustments for accessibility.

Accessibility as a Publishing Mindset

KDP's alt text question may seem minor to some, but it reflects a broader shift in publishing expectations. Accessibility is no longer a fringe concern; it's a key consideration in professional digital publishing.

Thinking about accessibility early leads to better reader experiences, fewer formatting headaches, and wider potential reach. It ensures fewer readers are excluded by design choices that can be easily avoided and conveys to your readers that your books are created for them. Most importantly, it reinforces a simple truth: Stories are meant to be shared. ■



Jenn Mitchell

Jenn Mitchell writes Urban Fantasy and Weird West, as well as culinary cozy mysteries under the pen name, J Lee Mitchell. She writes, cooks, and gardens in the heart of South Central Pennsylvania's Amish Country. When she's not doing these things, she dreams of training llama riding ninjas. She enjoys traveling, quilting, hoarding cookbooks, Sanntangling, and spending time with the World's most patient and loving significant other.



Lady Shadow and the Pirate Hunter:

Jeanette Strode and James Hunter on Defining Their Roles and Publishing LitRPG

Jeanette Strode and James Hunter's publishing journey reads like a real-life Progression Fantasy.

As a subgenre, Progression Fantasy emphasizes structured systems of growth, in which characters can reach clear milestones through hard work, experience, and training. Many of these characteristics overlap with LitRPG, which uses explicit game mechanics, like those found in online role-playing games, to give readers the experience of living inside a computer game. What sets Progression Fantasy apart from other hero's journey tales is an emphasis on how and why their skills improve over their ultimate success.

Strode and Hunter began their publishing journey with a single Urban Fantasy novel written as a hobby in 2014. But since then they have leveled up several times, in ways they never expected. Today, the two are the founders of Shadow Alley Press, an industry leader in publishing GameLit, LitRPG, Fantasy, and Science Fiction. They've shepherded more than thirty authors through the process of publication. And their relationship extends far beyond their responsibilities as COO and CEO, respectively; after all, outside of their publishing work, the two have been married since 2006 and share two children.

James Hunter, Author

Books: 40+

Series: 13

Genres: Urban Fantasy, LitRPG

Years in Indie Publishing: 11

Jeanette Strode, Publisher

Authors: 32

Titles: 300+

Genres: Sci-Fi, Military Science Fiction, High Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, LitRPG, Cultivation Novels

Years Publishing Other Authors: 9

Stats and Attributes

A former Marine Corps sergeant and combat veteran, Hunter served with a multinational task force to counter piracy—literally hunting pirates off the coast of Somalia. He started writing in 2014 while he and his wife were doing international aid work in Thailand. His first book, an Urban Fantasy titled *Strange Magic*, immediately sold more than either of them thought it would. Hunter had not intended to write more, but reader interest swayed him to continue.

In 2015, the couple returned to the United States to care for Strode's father. Facing unemployment and a growing family after the move, the couple decided to focus on the early success of Hunter's books. Hunter began writing full time and quickly brought Strode in to run their author business. "I do all of the business and marketing and finance and operations," Strode says.

Hunter explained their roles differently: "She's the smart one who makes money. I'm the word monkey who dances for his dinner."

Strode's educational background is in chemistry, which may not seem related to their business on the surface, but her scientific approach helped to balance out their partnership. "She's much more analytical than I am," Hunter says. So when she took over the business "she very quickly optimized it, and sort of blew me out of the water in terms of what she was accomplishing," he says.

Handing over the reins freed him up "to write more, to focus on the creative aspect while she really spearheaded the marketing efforts," he says. He attributes much of their growth early on in their business to Strode's work. As their careers have grown since then, Strode has taken on responsibility for "helping others find their path and begin to walk it," per her LinkedIn bio.

With so much of the business falling under her domain, it's no wonder people at Shadow Alley Press call her Lady Shadow.



Leveling up

Although publishing had never been an intended career for either of them, following the accidental success of Hunter's Urban Fantasy books, the couple began looking for new opportunities.

"I sort of ran across LitRPG really early on, when it was mostly Russian translated novels and a handful of American authors," Hunter says. "And I quickly fell in love and thought, 'Wow, this is super in my wheelhouse. I could do this. I love video games. I love fantasy.'"

Strode attributes much of their later success to "watching the market and seeing this LitRPG trend emerge and kind of being first movers into that arena," she says. In 2015, Hunter started writing his first LitRPG series, *Viridian Gate Online*, which they published in 2016. When the series outperformed his previous work, he switched his focus from Urban Fantasy to LitRPG—"and we haven't looked back since," he says.

A year later, the two began publishing other authors. They describe the transition from solo author to publisher in much the same way they described Hunter's initial success: "It kind of happened randomly," Strode explains. It started when a friend and alpha reader for Hunter's books asked for publishing advice on a book she'd written. "She had a series that she had written, but didn't have the resources to publish yet. We're like, 'You know that? Why don't we help you out? We really believe in your work, and we kind of know what we're doing. So why don't we take that on for you?'" Strode says.

The experience opened their eyes to the opportunity to help other writers they knew who were good writers but not as skilled at the business side. Shadow Alley Press grew organically from there.

"The initial intention was never 'We're going to be a publishing company,'" Hunter says. "It was just a way to help our friends succeed."

Base Building

From a starting goal of having five to ten authors publishing at the same level as Hunter, Shadow Alley Press has grown to a roster of more than thirty authors in seven genres. The company now employs a direct operations team of six, though Strode wishes they had started hiring sooner. Looking back, she says, "I would have hired someone immediately. I would have had an administrative assistant right away." Though she acknowledges that hiring out can be expensive for new authors, she maintains that having that help could be "life-changing ... because of the tasks that they can offload."

The expansion of their publishing company has allowed Strode and Hunter to provide their authors with support that goes well beyond basic office management. The team helps guide authors through every phase of the publishing process, including cover design, editing, proofreading, and marketing. "We have lots of connections to reach out [to] and contacts within the broader publishing community to get deals for our authors that they might not be able to get for themselves," Hunter says. Strode meets with their authors regularly to run projections and plan for the future.

They also invite their authors to attend conventions with them, where they can sell their books, and host an annual retreat at a luxury cabin in Kentucky, where they play D&D.

They're interested in building a community that supports all their authors in growing their brands and going full time. But they have to be pretty selective about who they choose to publish. They no longer take open submissions because of the increased popularity of LitRPG and related genres. Instead, they tend to find people through conventions and other connections.

"I quickly fell in love and thought, 'Wow, this is super in my wheelhouse. I could do this. I love video games. I love fantasy.'"

—James Hunter

These authors then are vetted by the company's acquisitions editor to make sure their work is "appropriate for our marketplace, appropriate for our audience," Hunter says.

Because of the significant investment they make in terms of time, money, and relationships, Strode says the company asks its authors to follow a few rules. "One, you can't be a jerk because we like to spend time with people. It's like a second family, so it needs to be someone that we don't mind spending a lot of time with," she says. "Two, you have to be coachable. And three, you have to be able to write fairly quickly and hit deadlines."

Game Mechanics

Strode and Hunter hold themselves to the same rules of engagement: communicating their needs, staying open to learning new things, and sticking to their schedule as much as possible. Finding balance in their work relationship, as well as between their work and home lives, has required the development of clear boundaries and defined roles.

Prior to starting their publishing business, their careers were very different. So while "it felt natural for us to be building something together," Strode says, there were times in the beginning where the two would get frustrated, often from miscommunication on their roles and expectations.

A business mentor recommended a book that changed the way they approached their partnership: *The E-Myth* by Michael Gerber. "The book really walks you through this process of looking at your business and parceling it out so that you can have more rapid growth and [are] being careful in how you're building it," says Strode.

The book helped them define their roles within the company and identify places where they could hire people to take on some of the work. Once they had clear job descriptions, it became easier for them to curtail any overlap. "We were just tired all the time. And it helped us figure out, okay, these are areas where we can immediately offload this stuff to somebody else,

create those job positions," says Hunter.

Over the next two years, Hunter and Strode reorganized their growing publishing business in order to scale more efficiently. Strode explains that many authors considering hiring start by looking for "another me," someone who can also do all the random things an author needs and work forty hours to take off some of the pressure. "But what you really need is, like, five people, each doing 20 percent of what you were doing in very specific areas," she says.

Hiring five people to join the team at Shadow Alley Press removed most of the non-writing responsibilities from Hunter's job description. He's now the creative director of the company, overseeing "big picture stuff: looking at where the market's going, working with my acquisition editor to find books that are going to fit the space and hit our audience in a way that's going to be meaningful to them," he says.

These clearly defined boundaries at work are mirrored in their personal lives. "One of the things about indie publishing is it's basically a black hole that will eat as much time as you're willing to give it, and I think a lot of people fall into that hole of 'I can always do more,'" Hunter says. To combat the overflow of work life into their home, Strode says they create a clear line between work hours and family time. At five o'clock, they switch over to "family mode," taking care of the kids and including a weekly date night to ensure they have time for themselves as a couple apart from work.

Hunter agrees they need that time "where we're not talking about business, where we're not talking about work things or other things, where it's just us doing fun things together." He says at one time, when he was producing eight or nine books in a year, he would often work overnight. As a result, his health suffered. "I was grumpy. I was really out of shape, had terrible sleep," he says. Now, they have designated times where they agree not to work, to maintain normal work hours, and to reconnect and be present for their kids. "That takes a lot of intentionality, but it's worth it and makes for a long-term career," he says.



They admit there are periods where that intentionality requires more effort. They approach these periods as deployment cycles, modeling their planning after Hunter's time in the Marines and rebalancing their household responsibilities around what needs to get done. "We have very hard boundary lines of when these deployment cycles end," says Hunter. "When that comes, it's over. And we usually try to take a long weekend or several days off, where we can kind of recharge and reset before going back into the more normal rhythms of life."

Loot

The couple's work has paid off for them in ways they never imagined when they started the business. "There's a monetary component, but money was never really the end-all, be-all for us. It was really about giving us access to the time and the lifestyle choices that we want, and being an author has allowed me to do that while also doing something that I love," Hunter says.

"It's been a real privilege and a blessing for us that we have always been able to be present with our kids, which is not a lot of things that most parents get to say," he continues. "We have never, since the kids have been born, had to have a normal job where one of us is outside the home."

In the early days, the parents often traded work and childcare responsibilities for a few hours every day, but now that their kids are in school, they have a more defined work time. The kids have grown up alongside the business, even helping with packing things or selling books at cons. But their perception of their parents' jobs may not be completely accurate. Strode described a moment when their son was younger. "Our son would put on his bathrobe, get in his [Little Tikes] car and say, 'Oh, I'm going to work,'" she says, laughing. "So they might have a little bit of a misconstrued idea of what work is like."

Although there is definitely more work to publishing than their kids see, both Strode and Hunter are grateful for the opportunities their careers create. "I get to tell stories and play with my imaginary friends all day, and that pays all of my bills," Hunter says. "The fact that we get to be at home with our kids, the fact that we get to make our own schedules, the fact that we have the freedom to be at soccer games and to be at rehearsals and to do all of those things—for me, that's success."



It felt natural for us to be building something together.

—Jeanette Strode

Game Mechanics

Building a company together was not without its challenges. Strode and Hunter admit they've made a lot of mistakes, from not optimizing a mailing list early on to spending "tens of thousands of dollars ... trying to figure out a way to get into physical bookstores," says Hunter.

But those kinds of mistakes come with the job, they agreed.

"You're going to fail a bunch," Hunter says. "And that's okay. A lot of the new authors overthink things. And there's this decision paralysis where [the new authors say], 'Well, if I can't do it perfect, I'm not gonna do it at all.'" He argues that it's better to have something done, even with an imperfect solution, because then you can iterate and learn from it. This ability to try new things, make mistakes, and change course quickly sets indie publishers apart from traditional publishing houses.

And failures aren't always caused by mistakes. Hunter recognizes the role luck has played in his success, but he emphasized the aphorism that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. "I absolutely got lucky. I also capitalized on that luck and turned it into momentum, but there's a factor of luck, of hitting the market in the right place at the right time, that is a little bit outside of your control," Hunter says.

Instead of letting the market's sometimes mysterious behavior discourage them, he recommends new authors keep taking chances and trying new things. "Success in indie publishing is mostly about persevering," he says.

Taking those risks has opened doors Strode and Hunter never would have considered ten years

ago. Audible Studios is producing a new series for them. An agent is shopping one of his backlist titles with traditional publishers. They have plans to expand Shadow Alley Press's listings.

"There's just a lot of possibilities that just weren't on the table for us before," Hunter says.

From solo-authoring an Urban Fantasy novel to becoming a LitRPG bestseller and founding a thriving publishing company, Strode and Hunter have evolved like the heroes of a Progression Fantasy. And like those heroes, their skills continue to grow with each story arc. "We set new goals as we go, but in terms of when we first set out, we surpassed what we ever thought we would be able to do," Strode says.

Their next adventure will be in the translation market. As with everything else, they are preparing to take advantage of any opportunities luck brings their way. "We're excited to be exploring that more and adding that to our repertoire," Strode says. "We have a lot of big, big dreams." ■

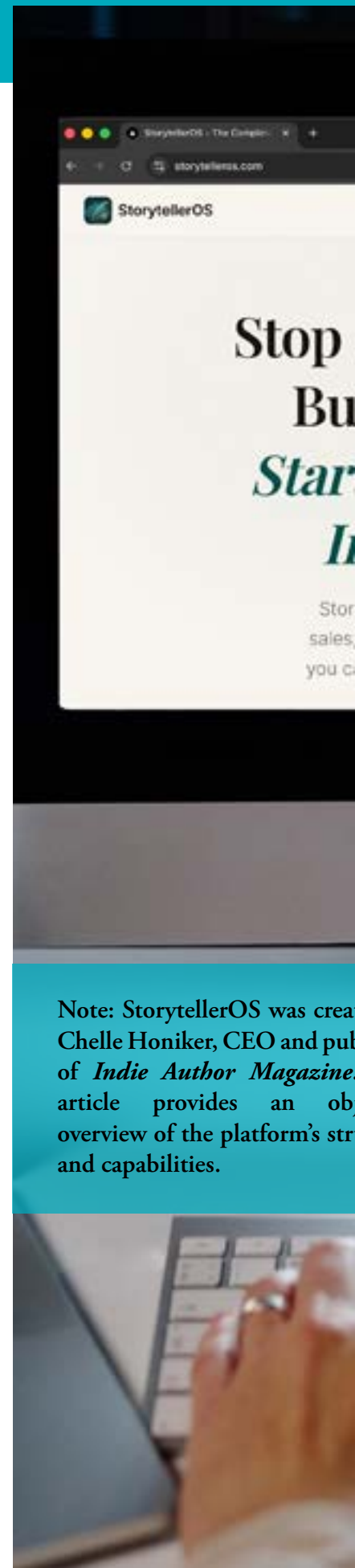


Jenn Lessmann

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.

The Indie Author Operating System

StorytellerOS Brings Writing, Marketing, Sales Tracking, and Publishing Workflows into a Single Workspace



Note: StorytellerOS was created by Chelle Honiker, CEO and publisher of *Indie Author Magazine*. This article provides an overview of the platform's structure and capabilities.



Managing Your Author Business from 18 Tools to Running It from One Intelligent Platform

StorytellerOS unifies your writing, email marketing, and social media into one privacy-first platform so you can spend less time on business and more time writing your next book.

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Indie authors often joke that writing the book is the easy part. The real work begins after the manuscript exists—launch planning, newsletter management, direct sales, analytics, and the constant juggling of platforms required to keep a publishing business running.

Authors today can draft in Scrivener, track projects in Notion or Trello, format books in Atticus or Vellum, sell direct through Shopify or Payhip, schedule social media with Buffer or Hootsuite, and run newsletters through services like MailerLite or ConvertKit. The ecosystem is rich—but also fragmented.

For many writers, the challenge isn't access to tools but coordinating them. Every platform solves one problem while creating another: a growing stack of dashboards, logins, and data silos. As independent publishing grows more sophisticated, some developers are beginning to ask a larger question: What if authors had an operating system designed specifically for running a publishing business?

StorytellerOS enters this landscape with a broader approach: Instead of specializing in one part of the publishing workflow, it attempts to bring many of them together in a single dashboard designed specifically for authors.

Created by Chelle Honiker, StorytellerOS is positioned as an operational hub for managing many aspects of an author business. Rather than replacing existing tools outright, it functions as a central workspace where writing, marketing, sales tracking, and administrative tasks can coexist.

As a relatively new platform—the program entered beta testing in October 2025 and fully launches April 30—StorytellerOS is still evolving. But its design reflects a specific philosophy: that indie authors increasingly operate as small publishing companies—and may benefit from software built with that reality in mind.

From Tools to Infrastructure

The inspiration for StorytellerOS came from a familiar frustration among independent authors: the sense that managing the business side of publishing can overwhelm the creative side.


Honiker describes her own experience as a starting point for building the platform. “I used to start my morning every day the way most indie authors do,” she says. “I would bounce between Google Docs for my manuscript, spreadsheet for my launch checklist, Notion, Canva, my email platform for newsletters, KDP for my sales numbers, and by the time I’d gotten through all that, my actual writing time was gone.”


Instead of building another stand-alone application, the StorytellerOS team attempted something broader: a dashboard designed to bring multiple aspects of the publishing workflow into one environment.


Exit Setup


Welcome to StorytellerOS

Your complete operating system for series authors. One platform. Four studios.
Zero tool fatigue.

 **Project Studio**
Manage manuscripts, story bibles, character profiles, and series development. Your GitHub integration keeps everything versioned and secure.

 **Marketing Studio**
Manage email campaigns, subscribers, lists, and tags. SMS and WhatsApp marketing. Full design capabilities for newsletters and ad creative.

 **Sales Studio**
Track sales performance, analyze trends, and optimize your revenue. Connect with Direct2Readers and other platforms for unified insights.

 **Social Studio**
Schedule posts across multiple platforms, draft engaging content, and maintain consistent social presence. All from one dashboard.

What to expect

This wizard will help you connect your essential services. We'll guide you through:

- **Required:** Airtable (your data home)
- **Recommended:** GitHub (manuscript storage and version control—especially useful if you use AI for marketing assistance)
- **Optional:** LLM providers, image generation, FluentCRM, and social platforms

Setup typically takes 10-15 minutes. You can skip optional integrations and add them later from settings.

StorytellerOS sits within a network of author-focused brands developed or managed by Honiker's company, Athenia Creative Services, over the past several years, including:

- *Indie Author Magazine*,
- Indie Author Training,
- Indie Author Tools,
- Direct2Readers,
- Author Automations, and
- Wide for the Win.

According to Honiker, these initiatives collectively reach tens of thousands of independent authors and involve a contributor network of more than eighty industry professionals.

StorytellerOS was designed to consolidate the lessons learned from these projects into a single system. Authors using the platform benefit not only from its foundation in the developer's experience building these prior platforms but also from direct access to their courses and content, which are housed in the Knowledge Studio.

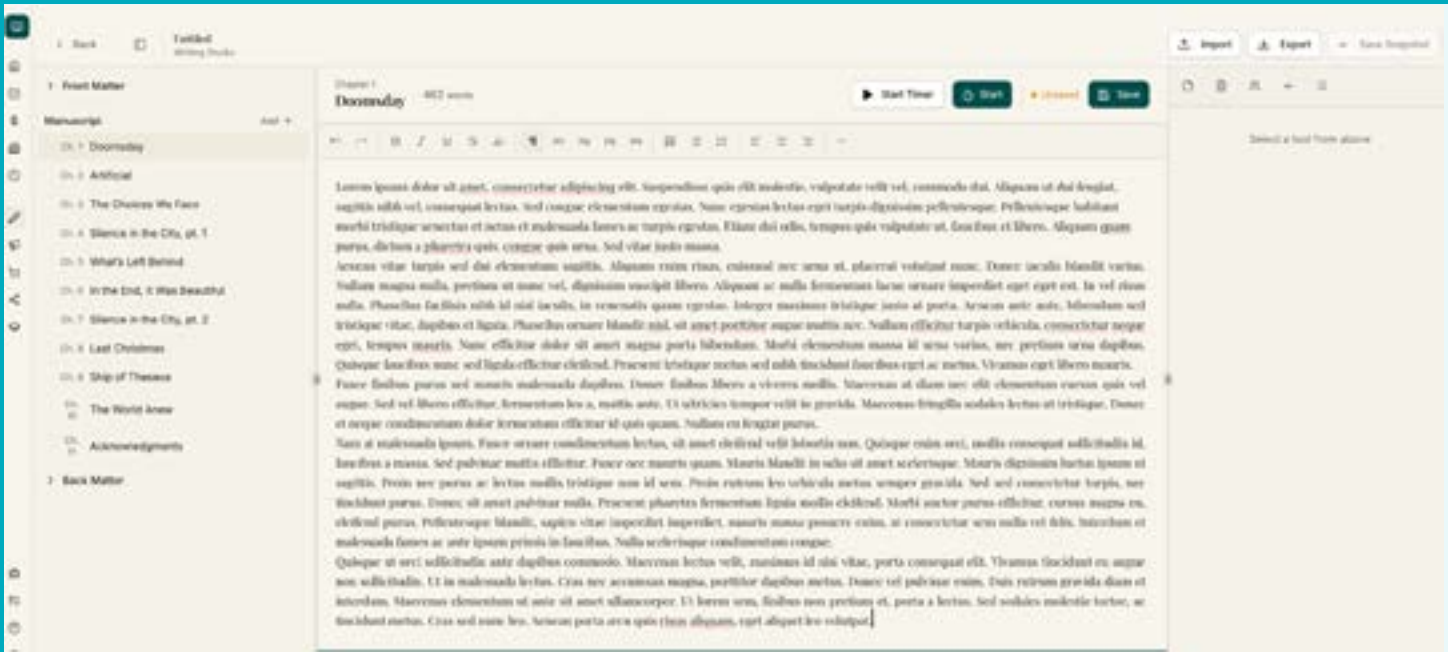
Rather than merely delivering information or training, StorytellerOS provides infrastructure as well—tools that support the operational side of running an author business. In practice, it functions less like a single-purpose app and more like an integrated workspace—think Notion or Airtable—preconfigured specifically for publishing tasks.

The platform organizes those tasks into five primary areas, called studios:

- the **Project Studio**, for writing and story development;
- the **Marketing Studio**, for email and audience communication;
- the **Sales Studio**, for revenue tracking and direct sales management;
- the **Social Studio**, for social media scheduling and campaign planning; and
- the **Knowledge Studio**, for documentation and education resources.

Supporting these studios are additional administrative tools for tasks, finances, and media storage.





Project Studio: Writing and Story Development

The Project Studio functions as the creative center of the platform. Its interface resembles a hybrid between familiar writing tools. The layout includes a manuscript editor, a navigation pane for chapters, and a set of project-management tools designed specifically for fiction and nonfiction development.

Authors can create projects for individual books or series, each with its own structured workspace.

Manuscript Drafting

The drafting environment includes:

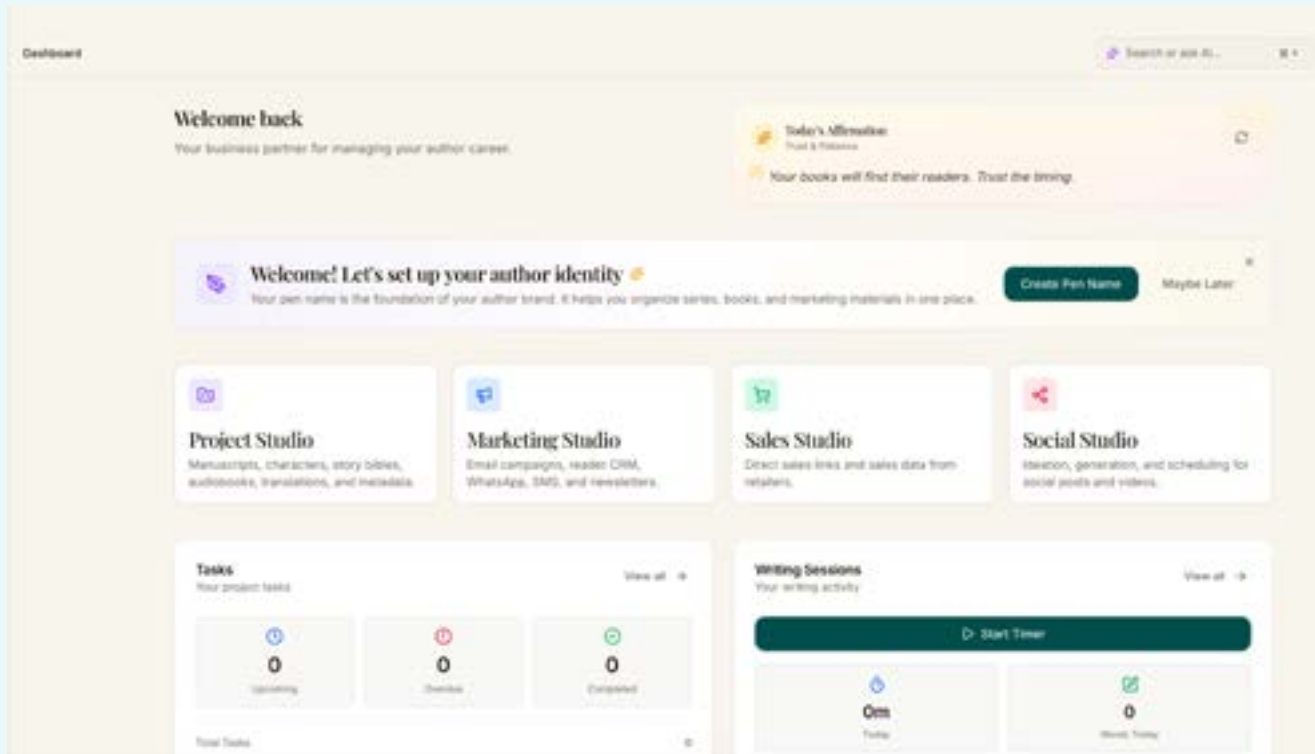
- chapter navigation,
- word counts,
- scene notes,
- outline management, and
- export options.

Writers can also save snapshots of a manuscript version and revert to earlier drafts if needed. This version control approach mirrors features commonly found in long-form writing software.

A built-in timer allows authors to track writing sessions. The system supports traditional timers or Pomodoro-style intervals, with each session logged into a time tracker for later review.

Story Bible Tools

Beyond drafting, Project Studio also functions as a story database. Writers can create detailed profiles for characters, locations, events, world-building details, or other magic systems and fictional rules relevant to a particular project. Each element can be linked to books and series, allowing authors to check continuity details without leaving the writing environment.



Series and Pen Name Management

Independent authors often publish under multiple pen names or maintain several series simultaneously. StorytellerOS includes a structure for organizing both.

Users can create pen-name profiles and attach books, marketing campaigns, and financial data to each identity. During setup, the system offers both a quick-start option and a more detailed workflow that helps authors define brand elements for the pen name.

Marketing Studio: Email and Audience Management

The Marketing Studio focuses primarily on email communication and contact management. StorytellerOS integrates with several email platforms. Current and planned integrations include services such as FluentCRM, MailerLite, ConvertKit, ActiveCampaign, MailPoet, and Mailchimp.

Once connected, authors can keep their subscriber data in their chosen platform and use StorytellerOS as the interface to build, manage, and automate email campaigns.

One notable feature of integrating an email service provider with the platform is bi-directional synchronization. Data changes made in either system are mirrored in the other, reducing the risk of losing information if an author switches email providers later. The platform also maintains a backup of contact data through Airtable, providing an additional layer of redundancy in case an author's mailing list is lost or deleted.

CRM Functions

Marketing Studio can also function as a lightweight customer relationship management (CRM) platform. Authors can store notes about individual contacts, track ARC teams or street teams, and send one-off emails without leaving the dashboard.

Blog Management

Another feature within the Marketing Studio is blog publishing for WordPress and Shopify sites. Authors can draft and manage posts within StorytellerOS before publishing directly to those platforms, keeping the management of these sites under the same roof as other marketing platforms integrated with the platform.



Sales Studio: Revenue in One Dashboard

The Sales Studio attempts to answer a common question in indie publishing: How much is each book actually earning across all channels?

Retailer dashboards typically display data one platform at a time. Authors selling through Amazon, Kobo, Apple Books, direct storefronts, and other outlets may need to check several systems to see a full revenue picture.

Sales Studio aims to aggregate those streams into a single view.

Within the studio, authors can connect:

- retailer reporting tools,
- Shopify or WooCommerce stores,
- direct sales listings, and
- analytics services such as Book Report.

The goal is a unified revenue dashboard showing total performance across multiple outlets.



Direct Sales Integration

StorytellerOS's integration with Direct2Readers, a direct-sales discoverability storefront under Athenia Creative's family of platforms, allows users the opportunity to host direct sales through Direct2Readers and manage them from within the platform.

Within StorytellerOS, authors can create product listings that appear on Direct2Readers and deliver ebook purchases to readers through BookFunnel; subscriptions to StorytellerOS automatically include a storefront listing on Direct2Readers. Readers can then browse books through a conversational search interface designed to help them discover titles within the catalog.

Social Studio: Managing Visibility

Content Calendar

Schedule, view, and manage your social media posts across all platforms.



Maintaining an online presence can consume a significant portion of an author's time. The Social Studio in StorytellerOS attempts to simplify this process with a central scheduling system. Authors can connect social accounts and manage posts across multiple platforms through a single calendar interface. Features include video creation, a visual content calendar, an AI campaign generator, AI image generation, and smart scheduling.

The system currently supports posting to a wide range of social networks, including: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Threads, Bluesky, YouTube, Reddit, and Google Business. If AI tools are enabled, Social Studio can generate promotional campaign ideas based

on an author's brand guidelines and book data. The system may suggest posts related to book launches, behind-the-scenes writing content, or book quotes, or it may suggest content specifically to encourage follower engagement. Authors can review these ideas, accept or reject them, and edit the resulting posts before scheduling them. They can also auto-reformat posts for multiple platforms.

Image prompts and captions can also be generated automatically, using Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, or Freepik integration.

However, like with other AI tools throughout the platform, the studio remains usable without AI features; authors can manually upload content and schedule posts just as they would in traditional social scheduling software.

AI Features: Optional and User-Controlled

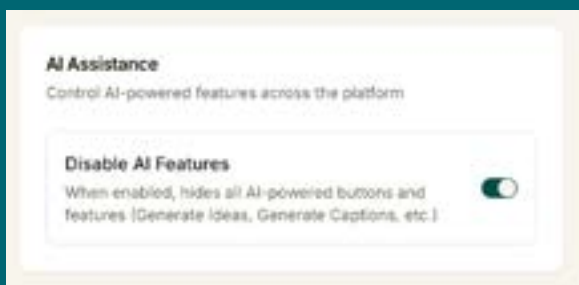
Artificial intelligence plays a role in StorytellerOS, but the platform treats it as optional.

AI tools can be disabled through the settings menu. When disabled, AI-generated suggestions are removed, and users rely on the platform's standard manual tools and search features.

"If I don't want anything AI in my entire studio here, I can disable every AI feature and it's all shut off," Honiker explains in a demonstration of the platform.

For authors who do enable AI, the system uses the technology less as a writing generator and more as a business assistant, for tasks such as generating brand guides for pen names, drafting marketing content, analyzing sales data, or suggesting newsletter campaign ideas.

StorytellerOS lets authors bring their own AI keys—from Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, and more—so any requests go straight through the service they choose, not through StorytellerOS itself.

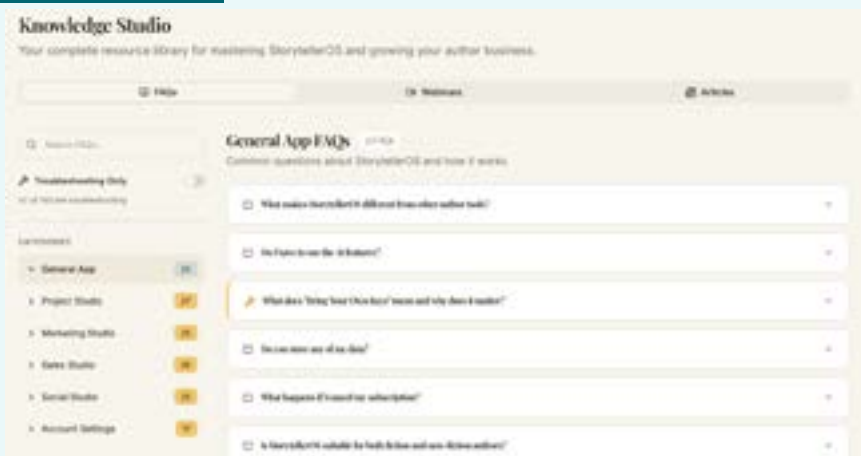


Knowledge Studio: Built-In Education

The fifth studio, Knowledge Studio, connects users to learning resources.

Within this area, authors can access an extensive list of FAQs, including quick-start guides and troubleshooting articles for the platform, as well as recorded webinars from Indie Author Training, and articles from Indie Author Magazine.

The integration essentially turns StorytellerOS into both a workspace and a knowledge portal. Authors working inside the platform can reference tutorials or educational content without navigating to separate websites.



Administrative Tools

Beyond writing and marketing, StorytellerOS includes several tools intended to help authors manage the operational side of their businesses.

Task Management

A built-in task system allows users to track projects through multiple formats, including traditional task lists, calendar views, and kanban boards, similar to those on apps like Trello or Notion. Templates are also available for common workflows, such as book launches, marketing campaigns, or research projects.

Tasks can be attached to specific pen names, series, or titles, helping authors keep different publishing brands organized.



Finance Tracking

A simple financial tracker allows authors to log expenses and monitor payments.

Entries can be associated with particular books or pen names, making it easier to calculate the cost of launching or maintaining each project.

The system also allows users to track vendors, such as translators, editors, or narrators.

Although this tool does not replace full accounting software, it provides a centralized place to record business expenses alongside management of other administrative tasks.

Media and Data Storage

StorytellerOS includes a media library where authors can upload images and other assets and reuse them across different studios. Behind the scenes, the platform uses cloud services like GitHub and Airtable to store data and manage backups. This setup keeps all tools in sync while giving users easy access to their files.





Comparing StorytellerOS to Other Author Tools

Because StorytellerOS spans several parts of the publishing workflow, comparisons with existing software depend on which feature set is being examined.

In terms of manuscript drafting and story organization, Project Studio shares similarities with writing tools such as Scrivener or Plottr, both of which emphasize structured story development.

The overall dashboard concept resembles productivity systems like Notion or Airtable, where users build customized workflows across multiple types of data. StorytellerOS differs, however, in that its workflows are pre-built for publishing rather than constructed from scratch.

Social Studio overlaps with social scheduling platforms such as Buffer or Hootsuite, and its Marketing Studio covers ground typically handled by email marketing systems.

Sales Studio's integration with Direct2Readers places it within the broader

conversation around direct sales infrastructure for authors, a space that includes storefront tools like Shopify as well as author-focused platforms.

The key distinction between StorytellerOS and its comparative platforms is that it aggregates each platform's functions into a single environment rather than specializing in one.

Whenever a platform attempts to combine multiple tools into one system, a common concern arises: the risk of putting too many functions into a single environment. Some authors prefer specialized tools for each task. Others prefer the convenience of managing everything in one place. StorytellerOS attempts to address this concern by focusing on integration rather than replacement. Many of its features connect to existing platforms rather than requiring users to abandon them.

Still, the experience of using the platform will likely vary depending on how many of its tools an author chooses to adopt.



A Platform at an Early Stage

As with many newly launched platforms, StorytellerOS is still under active development. The company maintains a public roadmap where users can request features and view upcoming integrations. According to the website, dozens of updates have already been released since launch.

While StorytellerOS is still in beta, founding members can join for \$149 per month with a 7-day free trial. Authors can cancel at any time through their account settings and will retain access until the end of the current billing cycle. There are no cancellation fees or long-term contracts.

The platform also includes an affiliate program that provides recurring commissions for author referrals as long as the referred accounts remain active. For more information, contact affiliate@storytelleros.com.

A Different Kind of Author Software

StorytellerOS reflects a shift in how author tools are being designed. Earlier generations of publishing software focused primarily on writing or formatting. Newer platforms increasingly treat authors as entrepreneurs running multifaceted businesses.

By combining writing tools, marketing systems, analytics dashboards, and operational management into a single workspace, StorytellerOS attempts to mirror the infrastructure of a small publishing house. Whether that model resonates with authors will depend largely on individual workflows and preferences. As the platform continues to develop, its success will likely depend on how well it balances breadth of features with usability—an ongoing challenge for any software designed to do many things at once.

For authors exploring ways to streamline their processes, however, StorytellerOS offers another option in a rapidly expanding toolkit for independent publishing. ■



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.

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IndieAuthorTraining.com

10 Tips for

Newsletter Swaps in 2026

Newsletter swaps remain one of the most effective, low-cost ways for authors to reach new readers, but the landscape that supports them has changed dramatically in the past few years. Reader expectations have shifted, inbox competition has intensified, and authors now have access to better tools, smarter analytics, and more nuanced ways to collaborate.

Whether you're a seasoned swapper or just getting started, 2026 is the perfect moment to refresh your strategy. These ten tips, updated to reflect the technology and platforms available today, will help you find the right partners, present compelling recommendations, and build long-term relationships that benefit both you and your readers.



01

Build a Curated Swap Network Instead of Relying on Cold Outreach.

These days, the most successful authors aren't swapping randomly—they're building curated networks of trusted peers. Instead of sending one-off requests, focus on forming a small circle of authors whose genres, tones, and readerships align with yours. These networks often form in private Discord groups, genre-specific Slack channels, or small mastermind cohorts. The advantage is consistency, both in quality and in timing; you know the quality of their books, they know yours, and you can coordinate releases, seasonal promotions, and themed swaps throughout the year. This approach reduces the time you spend hunting for partners and increases the reliability of your results.

02

Use Data-Driven Discovery Tools to Find Ideal Swap Partners.

Finding authors to swap with used to require guesswork. Now, authors can use tools that analyze genre overlap, audience behavior, and newsletter engagement. Platforms like BookFunnel, StoryOrigin, and BookSirens have expanded their analytics dashboards, making it easier to identify authors with similar reader demographics. Some authors also use social listening tools—such as Followerwonk or SparkToro—to identify writers whose audiences share interests with their own. Instead of relying on “vibes,” you can now make decisions based on open rates, click-through patterns, and genre-specific reader behavior.

Publisher Rocket is another tool to help you find books that align with yours. Publisher Rocket is specifically aligned with Amazon to help you see your fellow authors' rankings, sales, and marketing strategies. For example, Author A is right on brand with your readership, has a large following, and has a new release. Maybe the latest release is the first in a new series, and she needs to get as many eyes as possible on this book; thus, she might be more willing to do a newsletter swap.

03

Choose Books that Strengthen Your Brand Rather than Simply Providing Filler.

One of the biggest shifts in 2026 is the emphasis on brand alignment. Readers are more discerning, and they expect your recommendations to feel intentional. When selecting books for a swap, ask yourself: Does this book reinforce what my readers already love about my work? If you write Cozy Mysteries with heartwarming themes, a gritty Thriller—even from a friend—may feel jarring. Even branching into different subgenres of the same genre may not appeal to your entire readership; some Cozy Mystery readers may not want to branch into Cozy Paranormal books, for example.

Although you shouldn't feel pressured to always stick to the same genre and subgenre as your books, be aware that some readers may not like certain elements of another. Prioritize books that complement your tone, tropes, and emotional beats. This strengthens reader trust and increases the likelihood that they'll click, download, and ultimately buy.

Pro Tip:

Prior to agreeing to a newsletter swap, reach out to other authors to ask about their books' content to ensure it aligns with yours. If you write YA or Christian stories and make a point to avoid swearing in your novels, you might want to ask your swap partner whether there is swearing in their books, for example.

04

Values Alignment Should Be Nonnegotiable Expectations and Protect Your Time.

Beyond genre and tone, values alignment has become essential. Readers increasingly expect transparency and authenticity from the authors they follow—and they'll expect it from the authors you recommend as well. Before agreeing to a swap, take time to understand the other author's brand values, messaging, and public presence. Do their books reflect themes you're comfortable endorsing? Do they engage respectfully with readers? Do they maintain professional boundaries online? Recommending a book is a form of endorsement, and your readers will associate that recommendation with your own values. Protecting your brand integrity is just as important as boosting your reach.

05

Present Swaps as Recommendations Rather than Ads.

Readers respond best when a swap feels like a personal recommendation rather than a transactional promotion. Authors today are leaning into storytelling when presenting swap books. Instead of dropping a cover and a blurb, introduce the book with a short anecdote, a thematic connection, or a personal reaction. For example: “If you love the small-town charm in my latest book, you’ll adore the quirky community in this new release from ...” This approach humanizes the swap, increases click-through rates, and reinforces your relationship with your audience.

06

Use Visual Consistency to Elevate Your Swap Section.

Design matters more than ever. Readers skim, and a visually cohesive swap section helps your recommendations stand out. Many authors now use branded templates—created in Canva, Adobe Express, or Affinity Designer—to present swap books with consistent fonts, colors, and layouts. This not only looks professional but also signals to readers that you’ve curated the recommendation thoughtfully. Consider using a recurring header like “My Recommendations” or “Books I Think You’ll Love” to create familiarity and trust.

Pro Tip:

If you’re looking for more customization options for your newsletter, publisher Chelle Honiker shared popular platforms for creating custom email templates in the March 2025 issue of *IAM*. Read her Technology feature, “Stand-Alone and Deliver: Pro-Level Email Designs That Make Readers Click,” at <https://indieauthormagazine.com>.

07

Track Swap Performance with Analytics.

The analytics landscape has evolved significantly since 2022, when *Indie Author Magazine* first reported on newsletter swaps. Authors now have access to more granular data, including heat maps, device-specific open rates, and link-level attribution. Tools like ConvertKit, MailerLite, and Beehiiv offer advanced segmentation that lets you see which readers engage with swap content. You can track not just clicks but also downstream behavior—such as whether readers downloaded the free book, joined the other author’s list, or purchased a follow-up title. Reviewing this data prior to your swap, the day after your swap, and a week following the swap helps you refine your swap strategy, identify high-performing partners, and avoid swaps that don’t deliver value.



08

Use Swap Agreements to Set Expectations and Protect Your Time.

As newsletter swaps have become more common, so have misunderstandings. Today, many authors use simple written agreements—nothing formal, just a shared Google Doc or Notion page—to outline expectations with swap partners. These agreements typically include: the date of the swap, the book being promoted, the format of the promotion, the number of links included, and any required assets, such as a cover image, blurb, or author photo. This prevents last-minute surprises and ensures both authors deliver what they promised. It also helps you maintain a professional reputation and avoid awkward follow-ups.

09

Explore Adjacent Tactics that Complement Newsletter Swaps.

Newsletter swaps are powerful, but they're even more effective when paired with complementary strategies. In 2026, authors are experimenting with:

- micro-influencer collaborations, especially on BookTok and Bookstagram—many authors provide free books and merchandise to these influencers for unboxings and reviews in the hope that their books will go viral on the platforms;
- shared bonus content, such as co-authored short stories or themed recipe collections;
- reader-driven recommendation chains, where fans share your book with their own networks;
- podcast guest swaps, where authors appear on each other's shows; and
- cross-platform bundles, where authors offer a joint giveaway across newsletters and social media.

Although these tactics might not directly correlate to your newsletter swap, they can help to expand your reach beyond the inbox and help you build a more resilient marketing ecosystem. If readers are promoting other authors' books in their newsletters and social media posts, swapping with an author who has an "in" with one or more of these influencers could substantially boost your readership.



10

Prioritize Relationships Over One-Off Swaps.

The most successful authors in 2026 treat newsletter swaps as the beginning of a relationship rather than a one-time transaction. After a swap, follow up with your partner to share results, express appreciation, and discuss future opportunities. Consider creating recurring seasonal swaps, joint promotions, or even co-branded reader events. Long-term partnerships lead to better alignment, stronger trust, and more consistent results. They also reduce the time you spend searching for new partners and allow you to build a stable, supportive author community.



Newsletter swaps in 2026 are more strategic, more data-driven, and more relationship-focused than ever before. Authors who succeed aren't just trading links—they're curating recommendations, protecting their brand values, and building networks that support their long-term careers. By embracing new tools, prioritizing alignment, and exploring adjacent marketing tactics, you can turn newsletter swaps into one of the most powerful components of your author platform. ■

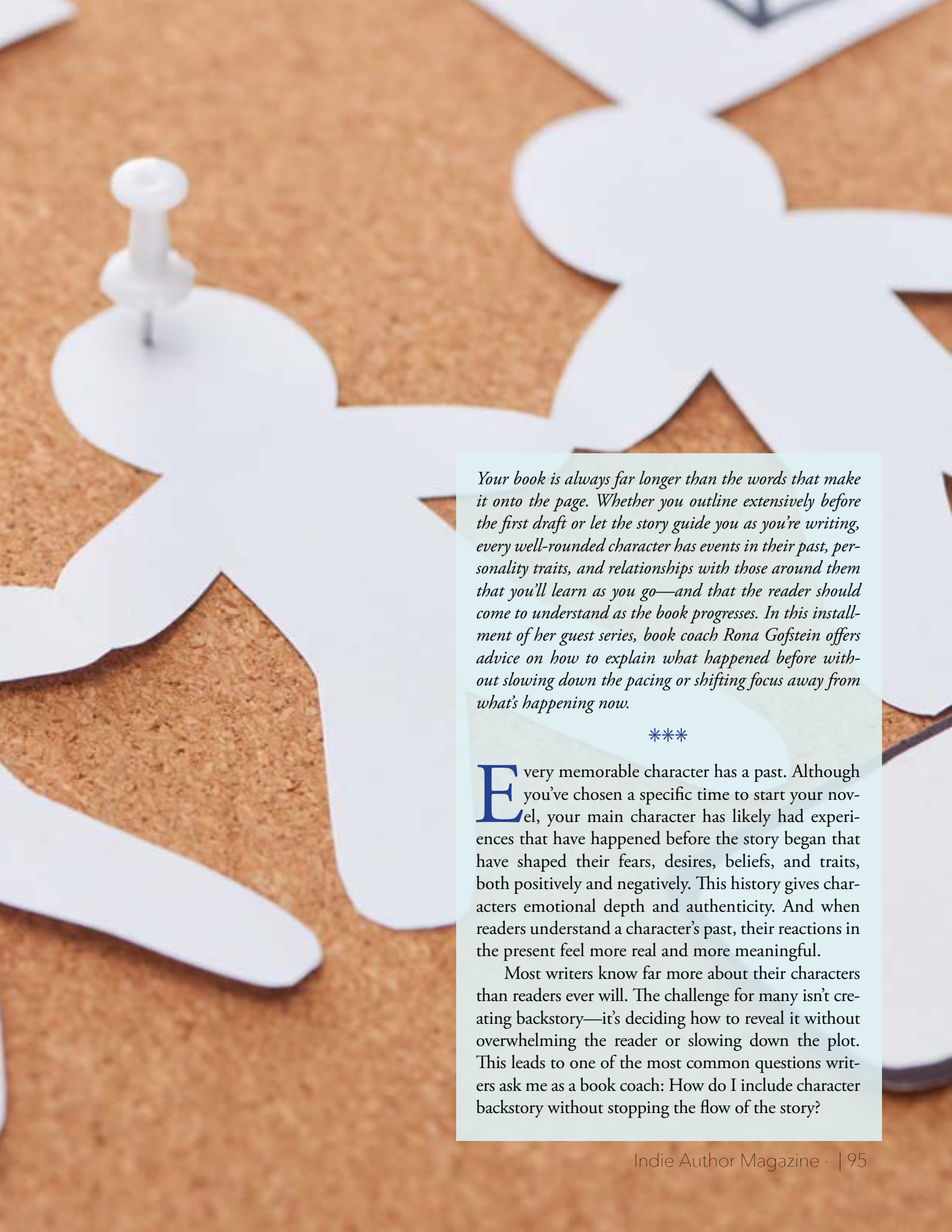


Gayle Leeson

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.

Ask a Book Coach: Sharing a Character's Past Without Interrupting the Present



A corkboard with several white paper cutouts of human figures. One cutout in the foreground has a white pushpin stuck into its back. The background is a textured, light brown cork surface.

Your book is always far longer than the words that make it onto the page. Whether you outline extensively before the first draft or let the story guide you as you're writing, every well-rounded character has events in their past, personality traits, and relationships with those around them that you'll learn as you go—and that the reader should come to understand as the book progresses. In this installment of her guest series, book coach Rona Gofstein offers advice on how to explain what happened before without slowing down the pacing or shifting focus away from what's happening now.

Every memorable character has a past. Although you've chosen a specific time to start your novel, your main character has likely had experiences that have happened before the story began that have shaped their fears, desires, beliefs, and traits, both positively and negatively. This history gives characters emotional depth and authenticity. And when readers understand a character's past, their reactions in the present feel more real and more meaningful.

Most writers know far more about their characters than readers ever will. The challenge for many isn't creating backstory—it's deciding how to reveal it without overwhelming the reader or slowing down the plot. This leads to one of the most common questions writers ask me as a book coach: How do I include character backstory without stopping the flow of the story?



Put It in Practice

What's it look like to reveal backstory a little at a time? Here's an example:

“What do you mean you’re going to drive to Colorado?” Jane asked me. “That’s two days away. At least.”

I didn’t know what to say. How could I explain that I’d rather not give the keynote speech than set foot in an airport, let alone on a plane, no matter how important this was for my career? I never spoke of Jason. He was my past, and I needed him to stay there.

Now, aren't you curious?

My answer is simpler than you might think. The key to providing backstory is to remember that the reader only needs to know what is happening for a character at a given moment. Always stay in the present, and let the backstory come out when it is triggered by something happening now.

No matter how intricate a past you've created—sometimes that additional level of detail can be helpful during the drafting phase—readers don't need a character's full biography. Including this can end up sounding like an info dump, which I've written about in a previous article in this series. What will pull them in and keep them turning pages is the emotional impact of the past on the present. They want to experience how that past influences the character's goals and the choices they make as the story unfolds.

Maybe your heroine refuses to travel by airplane no matter how long the trip. Maybe your hero flinches when someone raises their voice. Maybe a character avoids a certain place in town. When this happens, that's the moment to offer an explanation.

The Seasoning, Not the Meal

Think of a character's backstory like seasoning in cooking. A little sprinkled over the main ingredient enhances the dish. Dumping the entire spice jar into the pot? Not so good. Early in the story, a character might show an unexpected reaction to something. Later, the narration may hint at a past experience. Later still, the full story could come out in a moment of emotional vulnerability, when the character is either faced with the pain of their past or is finally ready to let it go. Just as adding seasoning at different stages of cooking deepens the flavor of a dish, each layer of backstory deepens the reader's understanding without interrupting the forward momentum of the story.

This reveal can be one of the best and most impactful ways to create emotionally charged moments between characters. A character shouldn't sit down and explain their past—we

don't even do this in real life, usually. Instead, pieces of their history will naturally surface when emotions are high, such as during a quiet conversation, an argument, or a moment of unexpected trust. When your character's backstory is tied to emotion, it feels meaningful rather than informational. It reveals more about the character and makes the reader understand and care more.

The purpose of revealing backstory isn't to document everything that happened in the character's life. It's to help the reader understand why the character makes the choices they do. When deciding what backstory to include, and when to include it, ask yourself:

- What experience shaped this character's greatest fear?
- What moment created the belief they hold about themselves?
- What memory still influences their decisions today?

Reveal these when that fear comes up for them, when their belief is challenged, and when the memory keeps them from acting or forces them to act quickly. And if you're unsure whether a piece of backstory belongs in a scene, ask: Does this information increase tension in the present story or reveal something that moves the character forward? If it does, it's likely worth including.

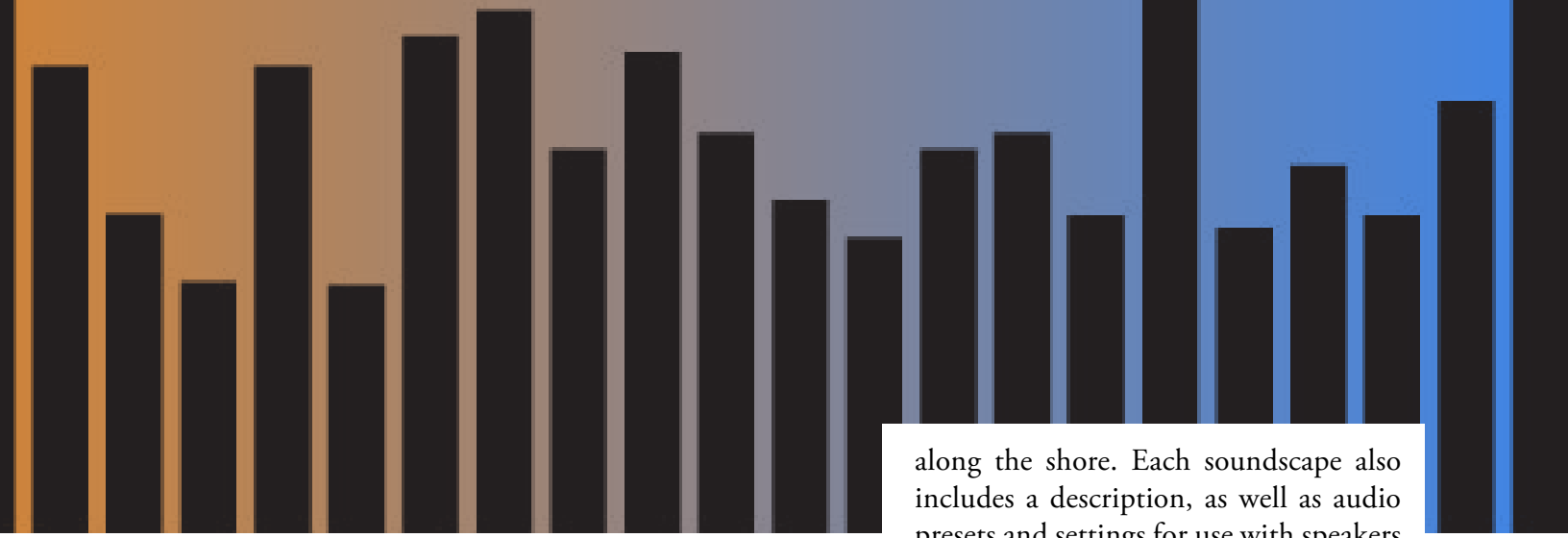
When backstory is revealed with intention and restraint, it allows readers to understand more and invites them to keep turning the page in order to discover what happened in the past—and how that character will ultimately overcome it. ■



Rona Gofstein

Rona Gofstein is a published romance author, developmental editor, and an Author Accelerator certified fiction book coach who loves working with writers who need support to make their book writing dreams a reality. She describes her style as intensive feedback combined with compassionate enthusiasm because she knows that on this journey, writers need clarity, support and encouragement. She has spoken on writing craft and business across the country and is the past president of the New Hampshire RWA chapter and Broad Universe. A Jersey girl at heart, she lives in Massachusetts and is always up for getting coffee, finding a great new pair of shoes, or deciding where to go out for dinner.





MyNoise.net Creates Soundscapes that Set the Mood

Writers are no strangers to using sound as creative fuel, whether that means listening to a curated playlist for inspiration or a white noise app to block out distractions. MyNoise.net builds on that familiar writing routine, offering a library of customizable soundscapes that can help you focus and sink more fully into your work.

Sound engineer Dr. Stéphane Pigeon created myNoise in 2013 as a thoughtfully designed audio toolkit built around how sound affects the brain. He records the site's nature soundscapes himself, and musicians perform others, making the sounds unique to the site and more immersive than generic loops. Pigeon notes on the website that "generative AI is never used to create myNoise soundscapes."

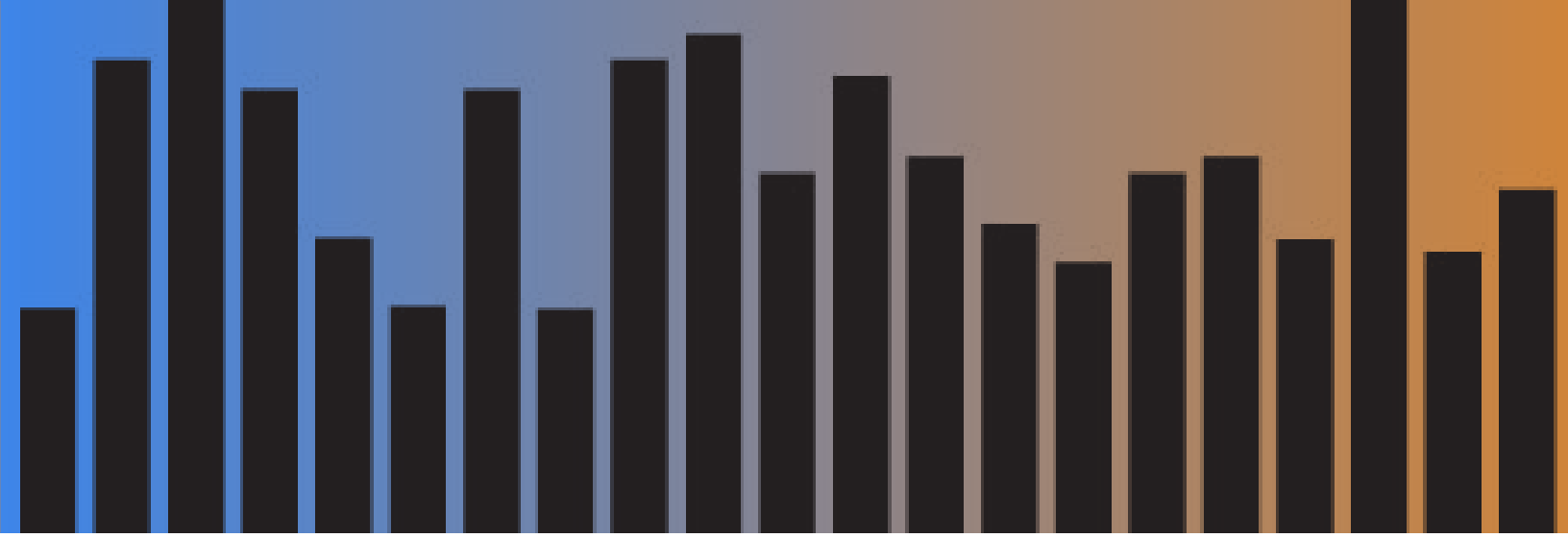
On the site, there are hundreds of soundscapes, each with ten individual sounds on sliders, allowing you to customize sounds with specific frequencies and layers. "Demolition Site," for example, isn't a single recording but a blend of bulldozers, jackhammers, debris, and ambient rumble, while "Irish Coast" offers a combination of wind, waves, and pebbles tumbling

along the shore. Each soundscape also includes a description, as well as audio presets and settings for use with speakers or to compensate for hearing loss.

This flexibility is where the site shines for writers, especially those with ADHD or sensory sensitivity. Certain noise profiles can mask background noise, helping your brain ignore distractions like coffee shop chatter or sudden household sounds. MyNoise also offers specialized generators, including binaural beats and focus-oriented channels, for those who find structured sound helpful for concentration. MyNoise can also mask everyday noise or offer tinnitus-friendly background sounds.

In its full index, the site sorts sounds into intuitive categories like "healing," "ambient," and "fantasy," and even includes themed radio stations that stream continuous variations within certain sound types—so you can either fine-tune a specific atmosphere or let it run and keep your creative momentum intact.

For drafting, try atmospheric environments, such as "Medieval Library" or "Port Town," which may help you slip into a story's setting. For administrative work, gentler soundscapes like "Japanese Garden" may keep your mind steady, and "Cat Purr" or "Underwater" may help you wind down after a long editing session. The site also allows you to open multiple mini-players and play sounds across multiple soundscapes, creating your own custom background ambience.



MyNoise is free to use, though donations help sustain the project. Contributing unlocks downloads and additional features, including the ability to save your favorite soundscape settings and run up to five generators in a single window. There's also a free companion app for iOS and Android, with optional in-app purchases to expand the available soundscapes.

If sound is part of your creative process, myNoise may just offer the perfect backdrop to inhabit the world you're building—but the final sound mix is up to you. ■



Jackie Dana

Jackie had a few practice careers before finally deciding to become a full-time writer. To keep the computer humming and her cats fed, she's a freelance writer and editor. She's also the brains behind Story Cauldron, a Substack newsletter devoted to storytelling and the writing process as well as the home of her current YA novel series, *The Favor Faeries*.

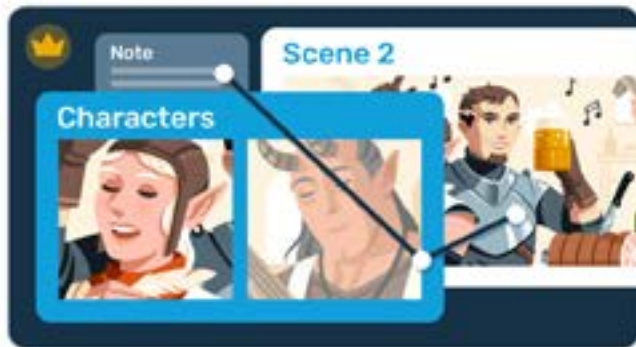
reedsystudio

Every writer needs a Studio

A **FREE** place to plan, draft, edit, and typeset your book

The screenshot displays the reedsystudio interface, which is divided into several functional areas:

- Manuscript Management (Left Panel):** A sidebar with a dark theme showing sections like 'Front matter', 'Copyright', 'Table of Contents', 'Body', and 'Back matter'. 'Chapter 1' is currently selected.
- Editing View (Center):** Shows a manuscript page for 'Rocket Bride' with the chapter title 'The Rehearsal D' and the beginning of a paragraph: "Are you ready, Princess?" Bria placed the delicate silver crown "I don't know." Ximara pressed temples, just below where the ci bit of a headache. **Maybe it's the braids?"**
- Goals & Insights (Top Right):** A dashboard showing a 'Word count' of +1000 and '+1123 +123 Added/Removed'. It includes a calendar view for the week of Oct 23-27 and a 'Manuscript goal' section with a 30% progress indicator, 12,079 words written, and a 40,000 word target due on Nov 30.
- Main Characters (Bottom):** A character management panel titled 'Main characters' featuring three character cards: Princess Andromeda, Aether Lefield, and Captain Perseus.
- Tools (Bottom):** A floating toolbar with icons for text formatting (bold, italic, underline, strikethrough, link), alignment, and other editing functions.



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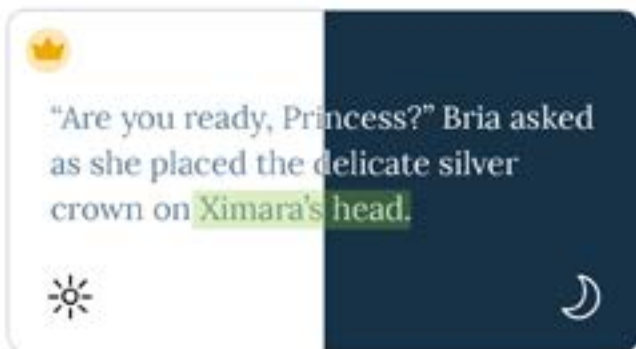
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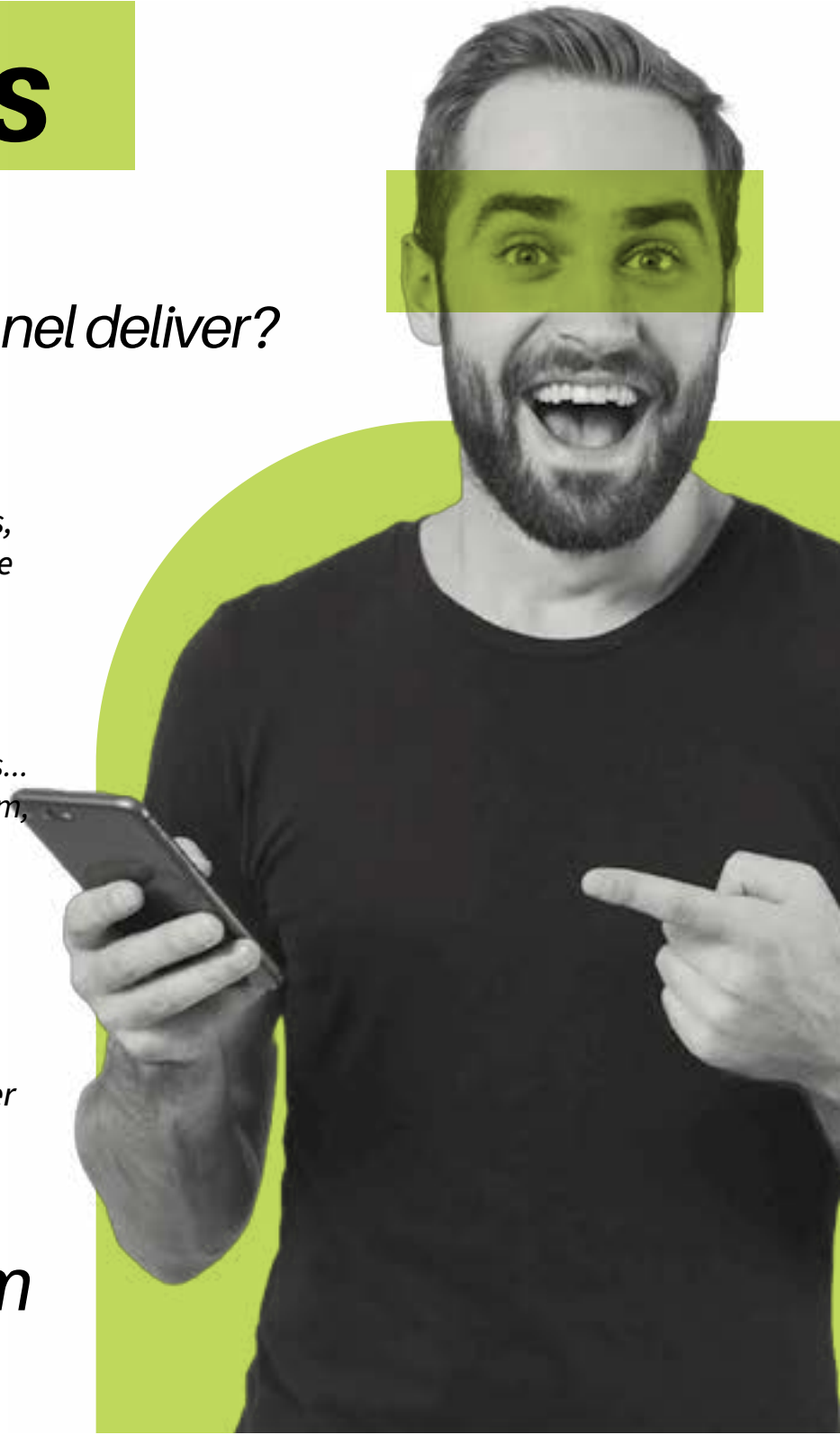


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