

Joanna Penn interview

Tiffany Yates Martin/FoxPrint Editorial

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SPEAKERS

Joanna Penn, Tiffany Yates Martin

Tiffany Yates Martin 00:05

Joanna Penn, I am thrilled to have you here. You and I have talked once before on your show. And I've been very excited to get the chance to sort of turn the camera around and talk to you and share with authors some of your journey. So I'd love to just read a little bit about how you started. And then I want to dig in deeper, because I think a lot of authors have questions about how you achieve the success you have and so quickly,

Joanna Penn 00:29

Okay, great. Well, yeah, lovely to be on the show.

Tiffany Yates Martin 00:33

Thank you for coming. I say quickly, because you worked in it up until 2006. And then--hang on, reading from this--then you--

Joanna Penn 00:44

2011. I started self-publishing in 2006. But I didn't go full-time until 2011.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Which I think is astonishing. You were, up till 2006, you were working in IT. You self published your nonfiction, your first nonfiction, which is now titled Career Change, right?

Joanna Penn

Yeah, in 2008.

Tiffany Yates Martin 01:05

Started the Creative Penn in 2008--the website--you started the podcast in 2009. Wasting so much time. [Laughs.] In 2011, as you say, you published your first novel, which is now Stone of Fire. And then

you left your day job that first year. Since then, and I know probably everyone listening knows this but I'll go ahead and say it, you're an award nominated New York Times, USA Today bestselling thriller author, as J. F. Penn, as well as writing your series of nonfiction--which congratulations! Today is release day for How to Write a Novel.

Joanna Penn 01:36

It's on my head in the video. I can't wait to talk more about that.

Tiffany Yates Martin 01:39

You've sold almost a million books to readers in 169 countries, in five languages. You're an independent author exclusively publishing through your own small press, Curl-Up Press, and an international professional speaker--award winning, the Creative Entrepreneur Award, the Publishing Commentator of the Year by Digital Book World, and your show the Creative Penn podcast has been downloaded over 5.6 million times.

Joanna Penn 01:42

Over 7 million now. I need to update whatever that is.

Tiffany Yates Martin 01:45

Oh, is it? Oh, good. We want to be current. [Laughs.] In how many countries--in 220 countries. So that's astonishing. I was reading the beginning of How to Write a Novel and you talk about how you have always loved books, but you never thought it was something that you could do, that it was something ivory tower intellectuals did. So you went into the IT world--what made you finally decide in 2006 to try to write that first nonfiction?

Joanna Penn 02:43

Well, I got to that place I think many people in their sort of mid 30s--I think I was I was almost 30...31 in 2006. And it was kind of like a mini midlife crisis, early crisis of Why am I doing this job? Like I hated my job. And I was just like, What is the point? And on the video, you can see my little banner here that I made, which says, "Measure your life by what you create," which is super important because that's the opposite of what I felt, was that everything I did in that IT space got overwritten within a year or the project was done, you know, they changed software. Everything I did was just to earn money to pay the bills. And there's nothing wrong with that, people--like absolutely nothing wrong with only doing a job to pay the bills, so you can live. But I just felt like there must be more to life. And I needed to figure out a way to get in touch with my creativity again, but also figure out a way I could feel like my life was more than just the grind. And so I decided to figure it out, and started to research. I have always read loads, and I started to research the idea of career change. And I thought, Well, maybe by figuring out how to change my own life, I could change my own life. And so I wrote that first book, which was How to Enjoy Your Job or Find a New One. And in the process of writing that I basically discovered that I liked writing and writing a book, I enjoyed researching, and then just you know, one thing followed another and that's it. I want to just come back to your intro as well, because you're talking to me 15 years later, more than 15 years, almost 16 years later. And so it's just one thing after another for 16 years. Anyone who does anything for 16 years is going to be quite a way along in their career. But if you were talking to me in year one, we just wouldn't be having this conversation. So yeah, I think I went into writing because I

needed more than just paying the bills. And now it does pay the bills. But it is also more than that. It's still that I feel like I measure my life by what I create, like, "Here's my next book, and therefore, that's good." It's not just the money.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Did you know going into it that this was something you wanted to try to make into a full-time living?

Joanna Penn

To be honest, I mean, I think you know, every first-time author thinks that they're going to make a million dollars and retire, and everything will be amazing. And I'll get on Oprah, and then everything will be perfect. And Reese Witherspoon will offer my book. And so yeah, I probably did think that was gonna happen, but pretty swiftly realized that wasn't going to happen. And my original business model was to become a professional speaker. I was living in Australia at the time. A lot of nonfiction authors self-publish; I've always self published, I've always done print runs and sell books at the back of the room. So I went to join the Professional Speakers Association, I did courses on professional speaking, and essentially saw that as the primary income--speaking--and then I would earn money from book sales as kind of the book-as-business-card model, which, you know, is a nonfiction business model for higher-priced products. But then what happened in 2008-2009 is that really the blogging world tipped over into not just a sort of a hobby; people were making money online, and I could suddenly see the potential for making a living online, and I started to follow the bloggers who were making money. And that's where I started my podcast. I could see a model where I could make a living from my laptop, and I followed people who were doing that. And that's when I saw it could be done. And I think this is really important, too--I hope people can do this: you have to find a model. And not just for the craft. I love Stephen King, right? I love his books. And for my J. F. Penn fiction, some of my books are kind of Stephen King-ish--Desecration, books like that. But I can't ever have Stephen King's business model, like I can't earn money like Stephen King. He started publishing back in the, let's call it the heyday of what being a traditionally published author is. Where he is now--I just can't emulate that model. I can emulate his craft, but not his business. So people listening, watching, make sure you pick models who are actually making money in the way that you want to make money. And I see a real problem in the publishing industry is people think just because an author is "famous," in inverted commas, doesn't mean that they're a full-time author. And in fact, most authors are not full-time authors. So you have to really decide what you want and who you want to model. And for me, it was always about financial independence, creative freedom, physical independence, and being able to make a living wherever I was in the world. Location independence before the pandemic. So, yeah, all of these things, basically.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Okay, you just said so much I want to dig into so let me just start. Let's start sort of where you got to with this, because I love what you say about modeling--authors need to model not only their craft, but their business, and I do think that's something that authors sometimes don't think all the way through. And you say model it on someone you want to emulate. But I do think a lot of authors do what you said--they want to emulate Stephen King.

Joanna Penn

Oh, yeah.

Tiffany Yates Martin 08:34

They want a million dollars. They want the Oprah. That is--as you and I know, and I think many authors know--phenomenally unlikely. How does an author decide who to emulate that might be an achievable goal that will sustain a long-term career for them?

Joanna Penn 08:51

Well, I think you have to just, well, for one, dig a bit deeper into where the money is flowing. And it is hard because in traditional publishing and indie publishing, there's a lot of smoke and mirrors. So you know, if you can dig a bit deeper then dig a bit deeper. I mean, there's a lot of us who were very honest. Like you know, one point we'll probably talk about, I make money from multiple streams of income. I don't just rely on one book; I've got over 30 books now. So even if I was just making money from books, it wouldn't be just one book or one series or one course or so. That would probably be the first thing. And then also, how long have they been around? So this is one of my own things that I have now--I'm really love talking to authors who've been doing this a long time. So some of my models are Kristine, Kathryn Rusch, Dean Wesley Smith, Kevin J. Anderson, all of whom have been...

Tiffany Yates Martin 09:50

Trailblazers.

Joanna Penn 09:50

Yeah, traditional publishing, absolutely. But also have gone indie, you know, they're all mature in years as well as in publishing. So anyone who has been doing this full-time for over a decade, which now I can count myself in that, that to me says they have a sustainable business as a published author, the same in traditional publishing. So what's interesting right now is a lot of the big names you'll see out of traditional publishing--either authors who've been publishing for a very long time, you know, James Patterson, Nora Roberts--even though both of those authors are totally prolific, Patterson with his cowriters, Nora because she writes like a crazy person all the time. And she's amazing. So you can find models. So you look at someone like Nora Roberts and say, Why is she successful? Well, yes, she's traditionally published, but she writes five or six books a year. So I'd say her success is more due to being prolific than it is the fact that she's traditionally published, because that's actually a model that many indie authors are doing now. And then you could look at James Patterson and say he has more than a book a month out with all his cowriters. So again, he's prolific then. But the problem is that many authors look at a debut. They'll look at whatever the latest debut is, or the one-hit wonder. It's like musicians, a one-hit wonder--what happens to that author a few years later? I mean, they might be writing under another name, or they might have gone because the money comes in, and then it goes. There's nothing wrong with being an author for a hobby, or for a side hustle or whatever. But you know, we're talking about specifically business stuff here. So yeah, if you want to find people, you have to have some criteria. And you should also look at how many books? How many? How long? Have they been doing this in a consistent way? Can you try and figure out how the money is working? And then don't look for the lightning strikes. As much as we love, like, Andy Weir, for example, with *The Martian*, who just put his book out on his blog, and then they said, "Oh, hey, can you put it on Kindle," so he stuck it on Kindle. So Andy Weir is self-published, E. L. James with *50 Shades of Grey* also. But there are millions of erotica writers who did not get to *50 Shades of Grey*-level of sales; there are millions of

sci-fi writers who did not get a movie deal for their first book. You can't build a business on a lightning strike. So what I build my business on is, write some more books, put them out; over time maybe that lightning will come. And by the time it comes, then maybe I'll have enough books that it will make it worthwhile. But yeah, I've never had a breakout hit or a massive spike in money. It's just been a slow build for years.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Well, the thing I hope that authors are hearing in everything you're saying, and one of the reasons I admire what you do and your business model so much, is that while writing is clearly the heart of everything you do, and your love for it comes through in not only your novels and your nonfiction, but your podcast--everything you do, you can see that you just love this--but you also do approach it as a business. And I think this lightning-strike model you're talking about is that sort of stars-in-the-eyes, you know, Hollywood "I'm gonna be discovered." And that isn't, I think, what sustains a long-term career. So what I'm hearing you say, I think, is that you have to know what your goals are exactly, specifically, and that they need to be realistic goals. I mean, yeah, we'd all love as a goal. Like you said...

Joanna Penn

A Netflix deal.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Right. But what's a realistic goal that you have some control over and you can achieve? Did you know that from the beginning of your career, and did you always know you were going to do indie? You said, with your nonfiction, that was always your intention. But did you think that that was going to be your main focus as a business model?

Joanna Penn

Well, if you remember 2006, there was no Kindle, there was no iPhone. So I first self-published back when you paid the printer for a couple of thousand copies, and they sat in your garage, because I was going down that traditional, sorry, that speaker route. But I did look at traditional publishing back then. I was living in Australia, as I said, and I didn't know anything about publishing before that. And when I realized that it might take me two years to get an agent and then maybe get a deal, I was like, No, I need this out like next week, because I want to get on with everything else I'm doing. So I'm not a very patient person. And my husband says I have a bias for action. And so this is a personality thing. I will jump before potentially thinking through the ramifications, but that is both a strength and a weakness which I totally acknowledge. So yeah, I jumped into indie, you know, as soon as the Kindle hit; it wasn't even open to non-Americans and I went through Smashwords, as it was back then. I started a podcast in 2009, when it wasn't even really called podcasting until about 2014. But in terms of seeing, I got into online marketing because I saw the potential because there was a guy called Yaro Starak, who's at Yaro.blog if people are interested. At the time he had a site called Entrepreneurs Journey, and I completely could see a trajectory that I could follow online. And now he's not an author, he still hasn't even written a book, even though I've encouraged him. But it's like, I could see that it was possible to make money online. So I started that way. And then what happened is, I just shared what I did along the way, I shared my process. I got really ripped off that first year with one of those kinds of scams where you pay to put a chapter in a book, and you know, one of those scams, and so I blogged about

that, compilation books, they're called. I blogged about the fact and I got on national TV national news in Australia and didn't sell like more than a handful of books. And I was like, "Right, that doesn't work. I'm gonna go online, I'm gonna do digital marketing." And so I jump into things. But I didn't see where this would go. Absolutely not. I mean, they say this about discovery writing--I'm a discovery writer, too--is that if you're driving, what do they say, from San Francisco to New York, you don't necessarily know the whole way; you just see what's in the car's headlights in front of you. And that's kind of how I do it is I see what's ahead. And sometimes I see a bit further than other people. But I definitely just kind of jump into things. And then I've, you know, we all make mistakes, like I put most of those books, those first lot of books, they went in the landfill, because I just went, "I'm gonna sell online, I'm just gonna give up hand-selling print books," and I didn't even do print books for another five years or something. You know, it's kind of crazy, just because it was like, "It's just not worth me doing print books when I can sell to Americans on Kindle," right? You get to pivot, you know, we all get to pivot along the way.

Tiffany Yates Martin 17:15

Yeah, sorry, I'm writing down things you say as fast as I can because there's so much I want to follow up on. I want to come back to this idea of pivoting. But I want to go back a little bit, to dig in a little bit. You say you sort of gave up there with the landfill, you know, putting them in the landfill. And I think about you starting your blog, like you said when you maybe weren't getting a huge following right away, and starting podcasting before podcasting was huge. What kept you going when you weren't getting that kind of validation and it wasn't maybe having the effect you hoped?

Joanna Penn 17:49

Well, I think I do things in a short term but also in a long term. I do think long-term, I have always thought long-term. So I could see how long things take. And also, again, having these models of other people nobody was jumping on. I mean, those early bloggers, for example, they deserve all the money they made, because many of them had been blogging for like eight years before anyone even knew about the internet.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Oh, say that again, please. Because that persistence and resilience and patience, that's every aspect of this business, isn't it?

Joanna Penn

It is. But also like right now I'm seeing this again in the blockchain space, and people who are doing NFT books, and people who are looking at where Web 3.0 is going, and hence why I'm getting involved in that too, because it'll probably be another 10 years before the mainstream goes that way. So just in terms of the podcast, I did podcasts for about six months, and literally there was a handful, like 10 people, because again, nobody knew about podcasting. There was there was, well, there just wasn't an audience, plus self-publishing until about 2012 was very looked down upon--you remember that time. So people treated me like crap. Basically I got treated like a lot of crap by a lot of people in publishing, and authors who thought that what I was doing was vanity, as it was called back then. But in terms of seeing the future, why I kept doing it was one, I really love writing books. Like you said, I really, I got the bug. And I think if you get the bug you can't stop yourself, even if you're not making any money. And then for podcasting, basically I didn't have any friends. Like, I mean, as an author--all my friends were

in my IT career. And I was like, How do I meet these people? Also a lot of Americans--the early indies were all American. So how do I meet them? "I know--I could do a podcast," and my YouTube channel has been going since 2008. And I can meet people and maybe I can make some friends because, I'd never even met an author before this. Really. So yeah, so I started podcasting in order to network. And also because a lot of authors were not technical back then, and to make a podcast was quite technically challenging. Whereas now it's just super easy, right? So I was helping authors with doing something multimedia. And in return, they were having a chat. So in some of those early episodes, some of these people are really good friends of mine. So you know, it's great, right? We networked on a podcast; you came on my show over here. I mean, the community is so much, I think, a part of what keeps you going, especially when it is a long game.

Tiffany Yates Martin

And that's one of the things I'm hearing you say a lot is that this is not a get-rich-quick job. It's not a lightning strike. It's a long game. If you want to do this for a living, dig in and figure out how to sustain not only your craft and your career, but how to sustain your motivation. And I keep hearing you say how forward-looking you are; you're always on the cutting edge of everything. Like you say blockchain, I glaze over, because—

Joanna Penn

We don't need to go there.

Tiffany Yates Martin

But I also am struck by the fact that periodically every year you publish sort of a retrospective of what you've accomplished and learned from the previous year. How important is that in your business model?

Joanna Penn

The roundup thing, yeah. Well, I kind of do two a year. So I left my job...it was like the ninth of September 2011. So every year on that anniversary I do a "lessons learned from X years of being a full-time entrepreneur." And first the very good reason to blog or podcast is to see how far you've come. Because that really helps. And that's why if you go to my YouTube channel, the Creative Penn with a double-n, you can still see my earliest videos. I have not taken them down. And it is like, yeah, it's pretty awful. But I've left them there for myself, but also for other people. I mean, even just our expressions, like some of my early videos, I might look like wide eyes, terrified, talking in a very different way. I didn't have any confidence. And like, my first podcast, I rang up someone on an actual phone and held a recorder next to the phone. Zoom didn't exist, you know, it's quite come along. But the thing is, we start where we are. Like you mentioned my first novel was called Pentecost, and then I rewrote it in like 2012. And then 2015, it became Stone of Fire and in 2022 I did another rewrite this year, more than a decade later, because my writing...I've got a lot better, basically. But it's like, we are looking back. So by having those September posts, and then also I do a year-end--so every 31st of December I do a "This is what I've achieved this year. And then what have I not achieved." And then on the first of January, I do my goals for the year. So all of those things, they're kind of accountability, but they're also an ability to look back and forward and also to see how ridiculous it is half the time that you make these plans. And then God laughs or whatever the phrase is, you know, and things are

surprising, things change. But I think you know, coming back to people who are writers, I feel like we have a default creative type. And you know, you as well, you're a writer, and writers write. So you can't stop yourself like there. Like you said, this is not a get-rich-quick scheme. There are so many more easy ways to make money than this. I mean, like literally for many people going and being a barista in a coffee shop would be more profitable. And I mean, I work very hard. Like since my over a decade full-time I work more hours than I ever did in a day job. But the thing is, you love it or you don't. And if you love it, this is the most rewarding career. If you don't love business as well, you can get to love business. If you don't find yourself interested in money, for example, then being an independent author may not be the path for you because to be successful as an independent, you have to think about a lot of the things that publishers do, and in return, you get more money. But publishers do that stuff very well. So I'm not anti traditional publishing at all. I think for many authors, it's a much better choice because they're not interested in doing the things that I do and love, so you have to love...I love it all. Oh no. Tell a lie--I don't love editing audiobooks.

Tiffany Yates Martin 24:47

Really? Oh, you edit your own, don't you? I hire an engineer. Changed my life.

Joanna Penn 24:53

Yeah, well, I edit my own because it's me narrating and I want to make sure, but I just did it for How to Write a Novel. But the thing is, it's so very rare. It's like once a year, so it's not that big a deal. But yeah, I got a bit of RSI from that. But yeah, you can outsource all this stuff. And there are lots of ways to run your business. But yeah, I think there is a personality type that wants to write for the long term. And there's a personality type that likes to run a business too.

Tiffany Yates Martin

But I think even if you do--and I'm also pro traditional publishing, pro every path--I think even if you do take a traditional path, the days of like, "Here's my book, and now I shall retire to my roost and continue to create those" are over. You still have to take on a lot of marketing responsibilities.

Joanna Penn

Oh, for sure.

Tiffany Yates Martin 25:37

You have to have a business mindset to a degree. And I do see a lot of authors who feel that they don't either have that or don't want to do that side of it.

Joanna Penn 25:46

Yes.

Tiffany Yates Martin 25:47

What's your thought for authors like that? Or your advice?

Joanna Penn 25:51

Well, we all have to learn this stuff, right. So I have a degree in theology; I don't have a degree in publishing or English or whatever. I've learned all marketing, I've learned all of this. We didn't know how to podcast, we didn't know how to do video, I didn't know how to write a book. I mean, self-publishing, publishing a book, for me takes a couple of hours. The publishing side is not the work. The side of the work is the writing and the marketing. And you're correct--many authors have to do that too. Many traditionally published authors, but so I think again it comes down to what do you want? And what are you willing to do for that? As I said, I love my independence. And I absolutely would take--I have taken--traditional publishing deals, by the way, but they're foreign rights deals. Okay, so not in English. But I would absolutely take a publishing deal if the contract had terms that I thought were good for my business. And if they were offering things I can't do myself, so and I will, no doubt, at some point, take some other deals. You know, it's just that I've made some decisions around my business and the things I like to do. So for example, you mentioned my How to Write a Novel book. I've just launched that on Shopify, CreativePennBooks.com. And the reason I'm doing that is because I can make 95% of the sale.

Tiffany Yates Martin 27:16

Wow.

Joanna Penn 27:16

And it is in my bank account the same day.

Tiffany Yates Martin 27:19

Wow.

Joanna Penn 27:20

Yeah, exactly. And also that will be a small percentage of the overall sales that obviously Amazon and Apple and Kobo and Barnes and Noble, they will all take their cut when the book trickles out to them. But for me to take 95% and the money in my bank account now, that means so much to me and my business, and my husband, and our mortgage, that I want to take that cut from the audience I have spent over a decade building, and they want to support me too. So there's so many ways to get your book into people's hands. Now the technology is amazing. It's not that hard to do. And people like me, you know, we're sharing how to do all this stuff, as well. So I think authors just need to consider are they excited by some of the things that I'm talking about? This is how I talk about it, now: My energy and the energy I have around creation, but also business, is this something that makes you energetic? Or are you sitting there going like you just said about blockchain, "I glazed over." Most of the people who are not interested in what I'm talking about have left already. And many of them, like if you're sitting there listening to this or watching this and you're like, "Oh, no, no, no," then this is not for you. But if you're someone who's like, "Oh, that sounds really interesting. I want to find out more," then maybe that's the path. So I would really listen to your energy and your excitement around a particular thing in the same way that we feel around books. It's like, "Oh, look, there's a new Stephen King, I'm gonna go get that!" And if there's a, like...I don't read romance but like, "Oh, there's a sweet romance, not interested." So like, you've got to just tap into that feeling of what lights you up, I guess.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Well, and one thing I keep hearing, and one of the reasons I love your approach, is if you want to build a creative career, it is equal parts creativity and career. And whether you follow your path or my path or a traditional path or any path, this is a business and there is no escaping that. And if you can incorporate that into your expectations and your goals. I think that's the key for long-term success as a writer.

Joanna Penn

Yeah, I agree with that. Yeah, absolutely.

Tiffany Yates Martin

All right. I can do this all day, because I love picking your brain and hearing your experiences. You're one of those people that I sort of picked out as a model I really like. So thank you for all that you do. But I do want to talk about...this series is called How Writers Revise. And I read your, been reading through, How to Write a Novel, but of course I went right to the editing sections because that is my passion. And I love that the first thing you talk about--which I do not hear a lot of authors make this distinction--is between editing and revision. I think those get elided a lot. And I think that's why authors have difficulty doing the revisions, because they've skipped over the editing part, but you deliberately do not. Can you talk a little bit about your process?

Joanna Penn

Well, it's interesting, now you've picked out certain things that... So my process, I guess, for me, the self-editing is a big part of it. I'll just overview the process. There's self-editing, and for me I print it out, I do it by hand. And then I put it back into Scrivener and I make all the changes. I print it out, I do it by hand, and then I use Pro Writing Aid, which is a tool that helps me do some adjustments. And then when it goes to my editor, and then it comes back with edits, then I do I guess what you're calling a revision.

Tiffany Yates Martin 30:53

Well, to me, I always say editing is assessing, revising is addressing, and you can't just jump in and start making changes until you see what changes need to be made. And that's the part I think authors sometimes skip over. They go back to page one, and they just dive in and start changing.

Joanna Penn 31:09

On to the typos for example.

Tiffany Yates Martin 31:11

Yeah, and you've got to see what's on the page, which to me is editing, and figure out what's there, what's not there, what needs strengthening and how to go in and do it, which is the revision process. It sounds like you intuitively do that differently.

Joanna Penn 31:24

Yeah, well, but I think this actually is an important point, which is everyone calls things different things. So for example, someone will say, "Oh, I do eight drafts," or "I do 20 drafts." And I'm like, "That sounds crazy." But what they call a draft, some people will change a couple of typos and save it as a new draft.

And some people will copy the whole thing out by hand and that will be a draft. I think what you're calling editing and revision might not be what's in my head as editing and revision--I call the whole process editing. And revisions, to me, are probably the comments that come back from someone else, rather than what I would do in my self-edit. And to me the biggest edit now, at my level of my journey, the biggest edit is a self-edit, because that's the bit where, because I'm a discovery writer, when I finish and print it out as a first draft, my first edit is a pretty big reorganization, so often a lot of "Oh, look, that just didn't make sense. I need to put a chapter earlier on in the process, I need to foreshadow that," and often it's putting things back into the earlier part of the book, because I didn't even realize it until later. So that kind of process as a discovery writer, the first edit to me, or the first revision, I guess, is the biggest, and then there are kind of smaller iterations from there. But yeah, the biggest tip for people is what you call a draft may be different. And also I've discovered, as I put in the book, that different editors call different things different things. For example, a copy edit versus a line edit, you know, some editors call them the same thing, often it's a country-specific thing, or that's a different thing. So again, writers, if you're hiring an editor, make sure you're both on the same page as to what you want and what you're gonna get. You know, there's nothing worse than someone who thinks they're getting one thing, and then they get something else.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Yeah, yeah. And there is a lot of overlap. Like, I think a line edit, to me, that is the embedded comments. And it's huge. And I do think a lot of people call a copy edit, roughly, a line edit.

Joanna Penn

Yeah, exactly. So there's a lot of different things. Or if you're an independent author, proofreading is quite different to if you're traditionally published, because in traditional publishing you actually get sent those PDF proofs to check. Whereas like, for me, I just order a book. I actually, like, I just do it in the book. And I just don't understand how people proof from a PDF.

Tiffany Yates Martin

You know, I started as a proofreader, and back in the day you had the galley pages, which is basically what the PDFs are now, and the original manuscript and you had to painstakingly compare them.

Joanna Penn

Oh, my goodness.

Tiffany Yates Martin 34:18

it was hideous. It was the worst of jobs.

Joanna Penn 34:20

Well, it's interesting you say that, because this is a big thing is that the tools make everything so much easier. Now. I mean, I love Scrivener, as, again, discovery writer--I write out of order and drag and drop things around. It's just like a miracle. I mean, I just absolutely love it.

Tiffany Yates Martin

I know our time is coming to a close, so let me address these two things that I find really interesting. I think this reflects what you were just saying--you call yourself...I think you said you edit as a whole. And I think this goes back to what we were just saying about editing versus revision. It sounds like that's all kind of one process to you, assessing what's there, what needs doing, and making those revisions, and you do these intensive edits and then you still hire an editor? What's the purpose of that for you?

Joanna Penn

Well, for me, the self-editing process is to make the book into the best thing I can make it. And then I hire an editor--and I don't use beta readers at an early process, like I prefer to pay a professional. You already know I love editors--I'm a super fan of editors. Yeah, I want to pay someone to make my book better. And the best person to do that is a professional editor. But when I'm doing my self-editing, I'm trying to look at it from the reader's journey. So I know some people do sort of pass-through edits, like, "Now I'll look at character" or "Now I'll look at theme." And I don't do that--I read the book as a book, like a reader will read a book from beginning to end. And then when I send it to my editor...you know, as a writer, it's all in your head. So sometimes you've written things that might not make sense to someone else. Or you've you thought you said something, and you didn't say something. And so the editor to me is the first human who is going to read all the way through end to end, and then the feedback I get on that edit, I will then change things in certain ways. Depending on that feedback, then I also may use sensitivity readers, specialist readers, beta readers for other reasons. So you know in *How to Write a Novel* I talk about the volcanologist who read *Risen Gods* to kind of check on my volcano references, and an Indian reader who read *Destroyer of Worlds*, which is set in India, to make sure I was culturally appropriate. So those types of readers come up really near the end of the process. So I do that too. But to me, all of these things, it's about making the book the best it can be for the reader. And you talk about this kind of changing heads, changing perspectives, you know, from your author point of view to the reader point of view, and from the writer point of view, to the editor point of view, and you do get to a point where it's very hard to switch heads yourself, so you need someone else. But no, I still use an editor on every book, fiction and nonfiction.

Tiffany Yates Martin 37:12

How do you decide what feedback fits your vision and what isn't right for your story?

Joanna Penn 37:19

Great question. I would say first up, never look at your edits when they come back to you.

Tiffany Yates Martin 37:25

[Laughs.] I'm gonna make a plaque with that.

Joanna Penn 37:29

Yeah, just don't look at them. You know, like, just don't even look at them. Because seriously, whether you're paying someone as a professional, or you're assigned an editor from traditional publishing, they have a job. Like, if the editor came back and said, "Yay, go you, you're amazing, nothing to be changed," well, they're not doing a very good job, are they? Why are they getting paid for just clapping you on the back and going, "Well done." That's not their job. And I feel like especially new authors, they think that's what they're going to get--they think they're going to get "Well done. That's amazing." And I

think good editors do give positive feedback, too. It's not all criticism, for sure. But the editor's job is to criticize. Essentially that's how it feels, anyway--it feels like a personal attack on your stuff. So what you have to do, like I said, is don't look at them immediately. Only look at them when you have some time and some space to try not to be emotional about it. And then what I do is I will kind of read through the whole thing. And sometimes you get extra notes that are, "This arc doesn't work," and then I will think about it, and then I'll start the process. And usually any reactions I have, by the time I get to them the second time around, I'll be like, "Yeah, yeah, I agree." And I probably make between 80 to 90 percent of the changes at that point. Because to me, they're from the point of view of someone who has a new vision, or sort of a new perspective on the work.

Tiffany Yates Martin

But it's subjective, I think--everything is subjective. And so I think it's telling that 10 to 20 percent of that is you saying "No, no, that's not what I--"

Joanna Penn

Yeah, that's not what I'm doing. Yeah.

Tiffany Yates Martin 39:19

Right. And you just have to know your story well enough to... What the editor does, I think, is not necessarily criticize and tell you what's wrong with your book so much as hold up a mirror and say, "Here's what's coming across on the page."

Joanna Penn 39:31

"And here's how we make it better."

Tiffany Yates Martin 39:33

How to make it better, and how to help readers get what you wanted them to get out of it. So to me, it sounds like what you're saying maybe is that you decide, yes, you take in what the editor says as far as "This is what I'm seeing on the page," but then they may or may not be right about what your intention was with that for readers. And you have to know that.

Joanna Penn 39:54

Yeah. You just have to be confident and maybe you grow in confidence. But I get emails from people sometimes who say, "This editor basically wants me to change everything." And my answer is, "I don't think that's the right editor for you." Because it seems like that, or maybe they chose the wrong editor. So this is another thing--you know this. If you write, like I do, if you write thrillers, don't employ a literary fiction editor. Or if you write paranormal romance, don't get a historical nonfiction editor; you have to pick an editor who likes your genre. I feel like when people try and change the whole thing, it's because maybe they don't like the genre--that's probably the biggest thing, is a mismatch. And that is not the author's fault. It's not the editor's fault. What I would say is, it's like dating--you know, you have to give it a try. And some editors do a sample edit, so I think that's good. But I know not everyone can do that. But I think if you 100 percent you disagree, then either there's something wrong with you, the writer, or it's a really bad match, and they're the wrong editor for you.

Tiffany Yates Martin 41:07

It has to be a good fit.

Joanna Penn 41:09

It does.

Tiffany Yates Martin 41:11

I have four minutes, and I'm taking them because I am dying to ask you why you do hand edits. You said that you do them, what, like in red pencil, like the old-fashioned way?

Joanna Penn 41:18

Black, black Biro. Yeah, I print out--one A4 page has like two pages on it, although I have to wear glasses now because it's gone a bit small. But then I, yeah, I scribble. I mean, I still journal as well by hand. And I feel like the analog method--and also what happens is, if I'm reading a thing, I'm like, "I'm sure I've talked about that earlier or later." And I just go and find it. So by the end, this kind of pile of pages has...it's the reorganization, I think, for me, especially that first edit. It's a lot of "move this paragraph here and move it there." I don't know if you had a look at Thomas Hardy's edits that I linked to in the book?

Tiffany Yates Martin 42:03

I love that, when you describe it as--I'll let you describe it.

Joanna Penn 42:04

It's in the British Library. So Thomas Hardy wrote *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and his hand edits are in it, of course; he wrote hand edits, because it was before the typewriter, I even think. And it's all like how I do it, lots of diagrams and crossings-out and arrows. And that's just the way I like to edit. And it makes the book completely different to what I saw on the screen.

Tiffany Yates Martin

I was going to ask if it was a perspective shift. You talked about switching heads, and I call it changing brains. So same thing.

Joanna Penn

Yeah.

Tiffany Yates Martin 42:31

But it is--you have to switch over to this assessing mindset. And I wondered if that was one of the ways you distance yourself and do that.

Joanna Penn 42:45

Yeah, it definitely is distancing. But I literally think it's also being able to shuffle through a physical book and find pages where I've done things and then kind of knit them together. And then I put it all into Scrivener. Again. I should say to everyone, I back it up every day. Like I back up everything every single day--there's a whole chapter on that. Lock it up, people.

Tiffany Yates Martin 43:09

You're a delight to talk to, and you are just a font of knowledge. And I what I love is that you shared your personal perspective--I think every author is different, and that's really important for authors to know and find what works for them. So thank you so much. And I hope that we do this again.

Joanna Penn 43:24

Yeah, well, thanks for having me. This has been great. And if people are interested, I have a podcast, the Creative Penn podcast and YouTube channel. It's audio only. But yeah, people can come over there. And TheCreativePenn.com is my website. And that's where they can find your book, yeah? Yeah, everything.

Tiffany Yates Martin 43:40

That leads to the Shopify link right now for the new book and all of your other books.

Joanna Penn 43:44

Indeed, yeah, everything's there. Lots of free info.

Tiffany Yates Martin 43:47

Yeah. Great resources for authors. I want to too that there are just wonderful, free downloads and that kind of thing, and all of the education that you do.

Joanna Penn 43:56

Oh, thank you so much for having me. This has been great.

Tiffany Yates Martin

Thanks for coming on. Take care. All right. I'm gonna stop the recording.