

Writing and Self-Publishing Fiction Transcript

This is a transcript of the seminar, edited slightly for easy reading.

You can find the audio version at www.writershuddle.com/seminars/apr2014.

Ali: Hi, this is Ali Luke and this is the April seminar for Writers' Huddle, *Writing and Self-Publishing Fiction*.

I'm really thrilled to have Ellie Di Julio here with me today. She's the author of three books which she has indie-published under her own brand.

The most recent one, which I've just read, is *The Transmigration of Cora Riley*, which I really enjoyed. She's also written *Inkchanger*, which I haven't got to yet, and she's the co-author with Kyeli Smith of *Time and Again*, which is another great read.

She's also the editor of *Why Did I Write That?*, which is a collection of really bad anonymous teenage poetry, which is quite funny if you want to check that out.

So Ellie blogs at elliedi.com, and you can find other links to her online presence and books in the worksheet.

Her writing is, if you couldn't guess from the titles, urban fantasy – so it's sort of contemporary but with magic and all sorts of interesting stuff going on.

I'm really excited to talk to Ellie because I write in a similar genre, and she's definitely gone further than I have with the self-publishing road. So I'm really looking forward to her views, both on the writing side and the self-publishing side of things.

So Ellie, thanks so much for making the time to be here with us.

Ellie: Thanks for inviting me, I'm really excited.

How Ellie Got Started Writing Fiction

Ali: I thought we'd just begin by maybe talking a bit about how you got into writing fiction. Is it something you've done all your life, is it a bit more recent than that...?

Ellie: I was totally one of those kids that thought they were going to be an author when they grew up. And I tried to write my first novel when I was like fourteen. And I was really heavy into David Eddings and high fantasy at the time.

So I was trying to make this complicated world and these traditional characters, and I got so bogged down in it that I wrote one chapter, and then got sidetracked with world-building and gave up because it was so hard. And I was like, I'm never going to be able to do this.

And then just carried on with my schooling and then didn't really pursue it ... and then fast-forward almost fifteen years – yeah, fifteen years, holy crap. In 2012 I had this meltdown in my life, and then had to completely change all the stuff that I was doing as far as work was concerned, and I was dealing with stuff in my marriage.

It was October, and I was like, you know what? **Screw this. I'm going to write a novel.** 'Cause NaNoWriMo was coming up. I'm gonna do this. So I just did it.

I was reading an interview with Francesca Lia Block, who I greatly admire, and she was talking about metaphor: don't say it felt like the house was on fire; burn the house down. Don't say it felt like roses were growing out of her chest, actually make them do that. And that last image really stuck with me, so I built that entire novel, *Inkchanger*, around that image.

One thing fell in line after another and all of a sudden I had 50,000 words. And I was like, oh! I guess I can do this, fifteen years later. And I just kept going.

Ali: That's fantastic. I started, actually, when I was about 14, and I wrote some really bad science fiction novel. I think I wrote the kind of stuff I read, maybe,

at the time. I probably still have it in a notebook somewhere. I should probably burn it.

Ellie: You should polish it up a little bit and then publish it and then be like “See where everyone starts.”

Ali: Yeah. That’s really, really cool that you got started with NaNo. I’ve done NaNo once and actually won it, and I’ve attempted it a couple of other times. And we’ve had quite a few people in the Huddle succeed at NaNo or at least join in with it. I think we quite often cheat in the Huddle – a lot of us have had different things going on than full novels.

Ellie’s Latest Novel, *The Transmigration of Cora Riley*

Ali (cont): I know *The Transmigration of Cora Riley* is the most recent book you brought out, and I know you had the launch party for that fairly recently. Do you want to tell us a bit about the book?

Ellie: That’s such a broad question.

Ali: I know – “tell us everything!”

Ellie: Generally speaking, I didn’t want to write this book after *Inkchanger*. I swore that I was never going to write another magical realism/urban fantasy book with a strong female protagonist, and that’s exactly what I wound up doing.

Again, I was reading Francesca Lia Block's latest novel, and I kept having these ideas for new books of my own. And I'm like "Man, I don't wanna do this! I wanna do something different!"

And essentially, it's this story of this small-town girl who's lived in rural Missouri her whole life, and she turns thirty and she has a quarter-life crisis and goes out into the world, and is like, I'm going to go find what makes me special, I'm going to go find my destiny. And she has a car accident and dies on the side of the road.

So she gets to the Underworld and is like no no no, that's not okay, I want a second chance. And she makes a bargain with the Mistress of the Underworld to get from one end of the Underworld to the other and back in three days in order to get her second chance at life.

And that all sounds very traditional, you know, it's very Persephone myth, which is intentional, it's where Cora's name came from. **But the world of it is what everybody seems to really like, which is this idea that there are multiple afterlives.**

It's not a unique idea, I will freely admit that I stole it from Terry Pratchett, who has this great idea in the Discworld that whatever you think will happen to you when you die is actually what happens.

I did all this research, thinking there's got to be a hundred different afterlives, and I realised that there was only about a dozen real distinct ideas across cultures and across time.

So I came up with these dozen different doors. And Cora has to go through these different doors to find the end.

She starts out in the afterlife where you become part of nature. She meets up with an angel named Jack Alexander who's escorting this little boy to his proper heaven. And they go through these other different heavens, and things happen along the way, there's some plot there.

She finds out that there's actually more to her than she thought there was. And by the time the novel ends, it's like this massive transition, which is why the word "*transmigration*" got used in the title.

Ali: I like the word, it's a good one, yeah.

Ellie: Well, again, I was searching - I'm terrible at naming things, terrible. Novels, people, places, everything. And I pulled that from the thesaurus. Because I was thinking I need something to describe moving from one place to another, like evolution, and pulled out *transmigration*. It rung a bell in my literary brain because I'd read a book by Philip K. Dick called *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, which is about – very short version – it's about a preacher who goes crazy. So I used it as a sort of hat-tip to Philip K. Dick. But there's all kinds of other nerd references in that book anyway.

Ali: It's a good read. I really enjoyed it, and I think for me it's almost a coming of age story for Cora. She's almost thirty, I think, in the book –

Ellie: She's thirty, yeah.

Ali: She's thirty. I felt that it had that kind of coming-of-age structure. She wants to be somebody, and in the first section you really get that sense that she feels like she's been cheated somehow.

She's been told that she's someone special and she feels like she could be someone special, but she's working a dead-end job and waiting for something to really change. And then the car accident happens, and then it all kicks off.

Shifting Viewpoints in a Novel

Ali (cont): So something I wanted to ask you, because I was really interested in this from a writerly point of view, is about the viewpoint.

You start off with Cora as a first-person narrator, and I felt like you captured her voice really well, and I was really into it.

Then the long middle section in the Underworld is all third person narrative, and you switch between Cora and Jack, the angel you mentioned.

And then the end of the book surprised me, because I thought we'd go back to Cora as a first-person narrator, and instead it's Jack narrating in first person in the final section, which is back in the "real world".

I think you pull it off really well, and I have my own thoughts on why you chose to do it that way in terms of mixing first and third.

Why did you do it that way, and how easy or hard was it to make that work?

Ellie: People really love that or they really hate it, because some people say, "I don't read first person fiction" or "I don't like reading present tense," so I get a lot of pushback on that. So I'm actually really eager to talk about it.

It was almost completely an accident.

Ali: A happy accident.

Ellie: Yeah, a happy accident. And I wanted to play with the structure because I like writing in first person, but it's more "acceptable to write in third person.

What I wound up doing was I wrote those first three chapters in March of 2013 and then didn't write the rest of the book until almost August. And so it just started as an experiment because I'd had this idea about this new story and I wanted to just feel it out.

I had written *Inkchanger* in third person, and I had just started working on *Time and Again* with Kyeli, which is in first person. So I was playing with first person, I was really in love with it. And it was also a good way for me to get into Cora's head. **So I just wrote these three chapters as an experiment, and I was like "oh man, this is actually going to go somewhere."**

So then I sat down and did the brainstorming and wrote out the outline. And I thought, this is kind of a fun, almost prologue-ish way to start. That I set the

scene, you find out who Cora is, and then this thing happens, and then the main act starts.

And then I was like, well, this is going to be a series, and I don't want it to be Cora above all else. I have never really liked the idea that there has to be one primary hero.

So I wanted Cora and Jack to go together as a pair, different but equals, and I decided to go ahead and mirror that first-act structure using first person to end the book so that people can really get to know Jack.

Because there's a huge revelation of his character close to the end of the third person section. And in order to carry him forward in a way that made sense, to bring him up in the reader's eyes, I felt like it was needed to do that, so they could get a sense of who he is and what he's thinking.

I'm actually writing the second book right now. I've had some trouble figuring out whether I would like to continue that first-third-first structure. Because I have had so much pushback from readers.

Ali: I've definitely heard that first person is more likely to get the response of "Oh, I don't read first person." I've never heard anybody say "I don't read third person."

I like first person when it's a really strong voice, so *The Help* I really enjoyed with the first person, *Room* by Emma Donoghue - there've been quite a few books that I really loved because they had such a unique, distinctive first-person narrator.

Ellie: And all the Dresden Files books are in first person as well. And I think people forget that. These are massively popular books that are written in first person.

Ali: You're right, there are quite a lot of series that are written in first person. I guess maybe it's that some people have had bad experiences of it, and I do think the first person can be tough to write well.

I don't do first person because I just somehow can't pull it off. I don't know what it is but I'm definitely just drawn to third person. Though what I liked is that you very much stick with the limited third person in the middle part. You know, it's either Jack or it's Cora, and it's not an omniscient, telling you about the whole world viewpoint.

Ellie: Right. I'm struggling with that as well in the second book. Because there's so many different parts that I want to talk about, and things that need to make sense in order for the story to come together, that it can't just be Jack and Cora in third person for Book 2.

But in the first book it made sense because they're really, realistically, the only two characters in the book. You know, there's some tertiary characters and there's bad guys and whatever, but they're the only two people in the book. So once they get back to the real world and we go forward with the series, there are lots of other characters - the cast is massive. I'm having trouble with that. I'm having trouble with a lot of this!

Ali: I always feel like that when I'm drafting, when I'm just at that stage.

Ellie: I liked using the limited third, and it's not one we see very often, as well - I guess that I wanted to play with the format. But it did have some challenges. You have to be very, very, very careful if you're going to use limited third because it's so easy to let stuff slip in there, because you as the author are omniscient in this world, and so you slip things in where your characters may not actually know or see or experience, and it's just your brain. That's what editors are for.

Ali: I agree that first person is definitely easier in that regard, because when it's an "I" character, you know it has to be their perspective. And I've definitely seen, with third person, people hopping a little bit from one character to another without quite intentionally shifting the perspective. Because it's easy not to think of it in quite the same way. But I definitely think it works, and I'll be interested to see what you do with the next book.

Cora Riley is kind of Book Zero of the series, isn't it, in a way?

Ellie: *Cora Riley* is Book One.

Ali: Okay.

Ellie: What I wound up doing because one, I was loath to give up some of my older characters, and two, because they kind of fit in, I actually pulled one major character from *Inkchanger* into *Cora Riley*.

Ali: I clearly need to read *Inkchanger*.

Ellie: Then I'm pulling another major character from *Inkchanger* in Book Two. And I've already – I actually posted something a few weeks ago, as I was writing the draft, with this character's name in it for Book Two, and a bunch of people freaked out. They're like, "Yeah! This is so exciting!"

So it wound up being that I just liked the world, I just liked the idea, that it's not really uncommon, you know, you have *Supernatural* and *X-Files*, where there's this other layer of magic and supernatural occurrences in our normal everyday world.

I wanted to carry that forward from *Inkchanger* and then I realised that I really liked writing these two particular characters from *Inkchanger*. And so I thought, I'll just take them with me. And so *Inkchanger* wound up being

Forgotten Relics Zero. And it gives you the origin story of two of these characters that will appear later.

Ali: Cool. Well, I will definitely put it on my to-read list. I'll get all the stuff I missed first time round with *Cora Riley*.

Ellie: It's not really that big of a deal, honestly. Because I took very special care to make sure that I didn't lean too hard on these characters' backstories, trusting that people would have read *Inkchanger*. Because it's a young adult book.

So I was careful in *Cora Riley* and now in *Sword of Souls* that you don't have to have read *Inkchanger*, but you're rewarded for doing so, like watching *Iron Man* and *Thor* before you see *The Avengers*.

Ali: That's definitely the way round to do it. So it's kind of like *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*, it's got that sort of relationship.

Ellie: Yeah.

The Decision to Indie-Publish

Ali: So I agree with you that this is becoming a much more popular genre, you know, to have fantasy that's set in a very contemporary real world. So things like Harry Potter or as you say, *The X-Files*, or *Supernatural*, or I guess even something like *True Blood*.

There's a lot of TV and a lot of fiction at the moment that seems to be set in the modern world but with this kind of magical layer going on alongside, and sometimes more visibly than other times.

Cora Riley is really publishable and marketable in that I think it would fit well within the traditional market. Did you always plan it to be an indie project, or did you consider traditional publishing as well?

Ellie: For *Inkchanger* and *Time and Again*, self-publishing was the only route. *Inkchanger* because I was just playing, because I wrote the book on a whim and I had been sharing snippets of it and people were really excited, and asking if I was going to make it for sale.

Amazon makes it so easy, relatively speaking, to get that stuff out there. So I just put it up on a whim, and sold a hundred copies in two weeks. I was shocked, I was like “This is amazing! Self-publishing is the best!”

Then we did *Time and Again* with Kyeli, because it was her baby and she had been waiting for so long to have this book out in the world. So we didn't want to shop it around, we just wanted to tell the story the way Kyeli wanted it told, and put it out.

But when I got to *Cora Riley*, by the time I was starting to think about how do I want to publish this, I had already had this epic meta-plot outlined. You know, it's kind of sketchy towards the end, just 'cause that's how that works, but in five books it's one book at a time.

So honestly, it was impatience. I am not patient enough to sit and query and wait, and I knew that it was good enough. If I could get a pro edit, I knew that this book was good enough to shop.

And I didn't want to wait. I didn't want to wait a year to find out if I could continue the series. I didn't know what else to write at the time, I had no other projects, I do one thing at a time – I'm very much a unitasker and I do things obsessively. And so, I decided to self-publish again.

I figured that I had a good enough audience after both of those books, and I was continuing to try and shift my brand 'cause I was a life coach for a long time, I'm really embarrassed about that. I shifted my brand from that to being an author, and I was like, no, I'm going to make a go of this on my own.

I was listening to the [Self-Publishing Podcast](#) with Johnny and Sean and Dave, which is amazing, I highly recommend it, and I was like, no, I can do this, I can do this.

Basically, that one decision locked me in for this entire series. Anything that I write now with the Forgotten Relics IP must be self-published because a traditional publisher will not pick up a self-published title unless it's sold thousands and thousands of copies. Because (a) it's already been published, and (b) you're a risk.

Unless they can see there's some proof of sale, that you're going to be "good enough" to put their money and time and effort in after you've already published part of the material, then they're not going to want anything to do with that world.

So these five books plus all the other stuff that I've been planning is all totally unavailable for traditional publishing now. So there's a bit of a word of warning that impatience is not always the best reason to make a decision.

Ali: I think it is a factor, though. To be honest, impatience was largely behind my decision to indie publish rather than just keep on and on and on looking for agents.

Ellie: Right.

Ali: I think also having seen a couple of contemporaries from my Masters course get agents but no publishing deal, which is kind of an eye-opener that it's not really an automatic step to success.

It's interesting with the series, because certainly my understanding is that with traditional publishing, it's really hard to shop a series as a first time author. Because it is a risk to ask somebody to print even three books, a trilogy, let alone more than that. They might take on Book One but you might never get to write the rest.

Whereas with indie publishing, all the advice I've come across is to work in trilogies or more, because once somebody's bought one book in a series with a set of characters, they will buy the second book and the third book and so on, because they've already got an investment in those characters and that world.

Ellie: One of the other pieces of advice I hear in that regard is that your second book in the series will sell better than the first one, and then that will up sales of the first book. Because people see that there's a bit of hype, and they want to go back and see what it's all about. And then they can buy the first and second one together, so they don't have to wait.

So there's a bit of jockeying that you can do, and certainly, unfortunately in my case because of the way that I do this, and the unitasking thing does have its downsides, I can only do one thing at a time. And that means there's only going to be one *Forgotten Relics* book a year.

That is death in self-publishing, where somebody like Johnny B. Truant and Sean Platt are putting out a new book almost every week, because of the serialised format that they use. They have this massive library, but what it does is it keeps people interested, and it keeps sales of other books going up, even when they make the first one in a series free or 99 cents or whatever, because people can look and see, oh, there's all these parts. And they're relatively cheap, and so I'm going to pick them all up at once, or you know, I've read *Unicorn Western* so now I'm going to read *The Beam*.

The bigger your library, the easier it is to make it work. And I'm doing it badly! So we'll see how it goes. I am trying to train my brain to do other things besides obsess about one novel at a time, so that I can make this model actually work for me instead of following basically a traditional publishing schedule in a non-traditional setting.

Ali: I think it's a weird world at the moment. I mean, Johnny and Sean are just fantastic, but I don't know how they do it. I really don't.

I think there probably are other ways to succeed, and we'll probably see different sort of success stories, different ways of making it work.

Ellie: For sure.

Ali: I mean, it's still such early days.

Ellie: Yes. It's hard to remember that. Things move so fast now.

Ali: The Kindle came out in maybe 2007, maybe seven years ago. In the history of books, that's nothing!

The Changing Face of Speculative Fiction

So I wanted to change tack slightly at this point and talk a bit about speculative fiction, slightly more generally.

By "speculative fiction", I'm meaning both science fiction and fantasy – so anything that isn't like a hundred percent real world. It might be set in a world very like ours, like a parallel universe, or it's set in the future, or it's set in a mythical past, or something else beyond what we would consider real.

When I was kind of a teenager and into a lot of this as a reader, it was quite a geeky and specialist sort of niche to be in. There was a lot of sci-fi and fantasy around, but it was quite formulaic in some respects. Maybe I just never found the good stuff. But it did seem to be quite a limited circle to be in. And if you said you read science fiction and fantasy novels, it was rather – well, geeky is probably a nice way to put it!

But to my mind, and I think we touched on this earlier, speculative fiction is becoming much more popular and varied. *Game of Thrones*, for instance, has been absolutely massive.

It seems to me that fantasy in particular has become mainstream, but so has science fiction, with a lot of sort of sci-fi movies in recent years. And it's not just vampire novels that have become popular.

Do you think this is the case – and if so, do you think there are reasons why this is becoming a really big genre?

Ellie: Ooh, that's a good question. I actually didn't know what spec-fic was until about three or four months ago when I'd already published a book that fell into spec-fic. So I actually had to ask somebody, because it is such a vague definition. It includes everything, pretty much.

The Wikipedia article was actually fairly hilarious for how long the definition is, just because of how many different genres it lists that fall under spec-fic.

Personally I think that the reason we are getting so into the supernatural as our mode of entertainment is because of the 24-hour news cycle. Because we are so overloaded with death, mayhem, economic crashes, everything is horrible, everything is ruined forever. All the time. At our fingertips, from multiple sources at once.

I think that we need that escape. I think we need to get away from it and believe in magic for a little bit, you know. Even if it's horrible, dark, gross magic like Supernatural is in the first season, where it's like "This is terrifying! Why am I watching this at ten o'clock at night - what is wrong with me?" But it's escapism.

And all the way back through history, back to cave paintings on walls, humans want to believe in magic. We want to believe that there is more than what we can access with our senses. And combining that with the amount of technology that we have to bring us bad news I think has helped foster this explosion of speculative fiction in all media.

Advice for Science Fiction / Fantasy Writers

Ali: Quite a few people in the Huddle are working on fantasy or sci-fi-type projects, and I guess there may be others who are at least considering that as a genre. So I wanted to ask you specifically about tips for these writers, especially anything that gets overlooked by traditional mainstream writing advice. Because I feel like a lot of the advice lags about twenty years behind where the marketplace is.

Ellie: Recently I've been getting asked this question quite a lot. And my first and best piece of advice to anybody who's writing anything is you have to put your ass in the chair and do the work. Because it's not going to write itself.

Specifically for sci-fi and fantasy – this is the fun part – go do your research. Go watch *Supernatural*, go read *Old Man's War*, and go back, go back, go back and read the Epic of Gilgamesh and see where the history is.

There's a huge resistance (and I have this too, I'm fighting it right now in writing this draft) to getting into work that other people have done, as inspiration or research or anything like that in sci-fi and fantasy. In particular because we want to have an original idea.

And I had to come to grips with this really early, that there are no more purely original ideas. There are new spins on old ideas, but there are only seven basic stories. And so we tell those stories over and over and over again, we just change the details. So I was resisting watching *Supernatural*. Because I've had so many people tell me that my work reminds them of that. And I'd never seen it before, I'd just started watching it last week. I've never seen Torchwood, I'd never seen Doctor Who – I know, I'm sorry –

Ali: Your geek credentials have been revoked now.

Ellie: I know, it's awful! But I did watch a lot of Star Trek, and I did watch The X-Files when it was on, and I read a lot of mythology.

And so branching out and looking around to see what other people are doing and how they're dealing with it, it stirs your creative juices. It's like paint – you know when you get a can of paint, it's all there, all the materials are in there but you've got to shake it up real good before you can actually use it.

I need to remember that personally because for example, I do these flash fiction pieces, these thousand-word pieces once a month for my newsletter list, set in the Forgotten Relics world, that I've been angsty about what to do. It comes around to the 15th and I have no clue what I'm going to send around to my people. But we were watching an episode of *Supernatural* that involved Bloody Mary – is that an urban legend in the UK, Bloody Mary?

Ali: Yep. It was around when I was at school.

Ellie: Yeah, and when I was a little kid, but I had totally forgotten. And I ran down, and ran to my desk and wrote myself a note, "Don't forget about Bloody Mary."

In the world that I'm using, these people are real, more or less, depending on human beings' belief levels in them. And so there is a piece right there. And all I had to remember was that I wanted this particular thing, and then I could use my voice, my flavour, my details, to flesh it out.

I think that there's a lot of resistance to accessing other people's materials as research and inspiration because we think that our well will be tainted. But don't resist it. Read authors you've never read before, take recommendations from people you trust, let Netflix suggest things to you – be open to that. It'll help.

Ali: I definitely agree with all of that. I think you do need to fuel yourself, and as you say, fill the well with really good stuff. And I don't think that writers should worry too much about, "what if I copy something by accident?" Because, as you say, nothing's truly original, and unless you're really deliberately basing your whole plot on something else, you know –

Ellie: Which is satire, and also OK.

Ali: Yeah, there's lots of ways to make it work. I mean, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which was massive, started off as Twilight fanfiction.

So there's a lot of things that can work. And honestly, this was done a lot in the past, like Shakespeare borrowed his plots from other people I don't think people should worry about being unduly influenced.

Promoting Novels (Self-Published or Otherwise)

Ali (cont): Okay, let me move on to something that I'm personally interested in. And I think a lot of the Huddlers are at this stage, some people in the Huddle may be thinking about this for their future. And that's – how have you promoted your novels, and what's worked and what hasn't worked for you. It's a big question, but...

Ellie: Well, it's not just a big question ... I just got done because *Cora Riley* was published on March 4th. And I promoted it professionally: I hired people to help me this time.

So with *Inkchanger*, because it was on the fly, I just talked to the people who were on my Facebook and Twitter, and that was it. I didn't ask for retweets, I didn't send it out to anybody – nothing. I just let it out there. Which actually seemed to work pretty well.

And then for *Time and Again*, because I was working with Kyeli, she had a much bigger audience at the time and knew a lot more people. We did what you would normally do for product launches in online entrepreneurship, which was get in contact with big-name people that could boost signal, ask for shares, set up a week-long thing – both of us did blogposts – you know, we did all the things we knew to do from our background in self-help entrepreneurship. And did terribly.

We had SARK [Susan Ariel Rainbow Kennedy] retweet our Amazon link, and our blogposts, and got thousands of hits on the blogposts, and sold zero copies.

I think we sold ten the first day. But I think I sold twenty the first day of Inkchanger. And so it was kind of rough. We didn't sell a whole lot of that book.

I think it has to do with the subject material – it has a very difficult beginning, especially for mothers. And so it's difficult to sell. It's hard to pitch it to people. I don't even want to talk about it here because I don't want people to cry.

It's a great book, though, I really believe in it, it's a lot of fun, it's a really interesting time travel magic story with a great ending and a dog – but the first thirty pages is really difficult because of what this woman goes through. So I think we had trouble there.

So the promotion – we did “all the right things,” didn't do so hot. I thought, you know, whatever, not a big deal, it's fine, it's fine.

So then *Cora Riley* comes around, and I know that I've got a good book. I did the crowdfunding in October to pay my cover artist, and did smashingly well. I am still utterly humbled by how well we did. We aimed for 2,000 dollars and made 2,500 dollars. It was amazing.

So I was thrilled. I thought look, people really want this, they're gonna believe in it, they're gonna talk about it, it'll be great. So I went ahead and acted as if. I said, well, what would a professional do?

And I asked around and got some suggestions to do a cover review, launch day blitz and then a blog book tour afterwards. Great. I paid money to one company and then had another company offer to help me for free. And I wrote about this on my blog. [[Deconstruction: Lessons learned from paying for book promotion](#)]

The long and short of it is that with the cover reveal (which was too far away from the actual launch, it was two months out) the launch day blitz and then a two-week blog tour, I sold 25 copies.

I was extremely angry. Because even accounting for the crowdfunding copies of this book, I still sold less in two weeks than I did with *Inkchanger*, my very first.

And so I was disappointed, and I realised that what I had done was shouted into the vacuum. Because all of the posts that went out on this blog tour were on book review sites, and sites that do this professionally. So it wasn't just me, I wasn't a special snowflake, I was one of sometimes three or four posts that went out on the same site that day.

Some of these places have something like 10,000 Likes on Facebook – assuming a 1% turnover, it's still 100 people that saw it, on that one site. And I actually did better with the company who helped me for free than I did with the company that I paid.

What I took away from this is that grassroots is the way to go, that I need to make some better connections and have other authors, and find my superfans, and get those people to help me with launches, instead of shouting into the vacuum.

So promotion is tricky. It was always hard for me when I was a different kind of entrepreneur. I'm thinking about new things to do all the time, like I just switched over from making people friend me on Facebook to an author page, which anybody right now will tell me is the stupidest idea ever, because of the way Facebook algorithms work, nobody sees anything. But it's going really well.

I'm just feeling out what I'm going to do, I'm like contacting local bookstores to take my materials because the big names won't take it – big-box stores won't take your books if they're self-published. But the little guys will.

I went to Ad Astra Toronto, it's a fantasy con near me, and did a panel on social media for self-publishing, and gave a reading, and helped out in the art show. I met Patricia Briggs, who wrote the Mercy Thompson novels. And like so it's like getting out and meeting people and connecting, and – in my mind, going back to what I believed forever ago, which was connections is how this works. Legitimate, genuine, mutual connections.

Like doing this right now. We sent you a copy of *Time and Again* when it was getting ready to be published – stuff like that. Meeting people at conventions - I'm going to go to a couple more this year. And talking to people. You know, continuing to be excited about my own work. Which is difficult, let me tell you. As soon as *Cora Riley* was done, I never wanted to look at it again.

Here's a dirty secret. One of the things that I'm doing, I just finished making up the materials for it yesterday, is I've got business cards with my book covers on them and on the back it's got my title and my name, and it says, "If you like this, you will like *Inkchanger*" or "You will like *Cora Riley*." And then there's about a twenty-word description. So you know, the *Cora Riley* one says something like "Red-haired woman tries for a second chance at life, defies mistress, is snarky, meets angel, gets superpowers."

And then it has "now available on Amazon, or for more information, see elliedi.com." And I stick them in books at other bookstores.

I've gotten some feedback from it, where people are like, hey, I found your card at this bookstore, in this book. And so I just printed up a whole bunch of them. Because it's easy for me, and I'm sure other people, to forget in this digital age that people still buy books at bookstores.

I've been neglecting my in-person and local connections. And so don't forget about that. It's actually turning out to be really fun.

I used to be a horrible public speaker, I actually quit my Masters in Education program because they wanted me to go and talk in front of third-graders and I didn't want to do that.

But now I'm doing Q&A, I'm doing these interviews, I did that panel, I do readings, and you've gotta do it. You know, you've gotta get out there, you can't hide behind your computer screen and stay locked up all the time. You know, half of promotion these days is people feeling like they know you as an author. Not just your work, but you. And I value that – I love that. I love talking to people just one on one – I think it's so much fun. That's a huge part of promotion: if people like you, they're more likely to buy your work.

Ali: I think that's so true. And often the first people who buy and write reviews are maybe they're not quite your family and best friends, but at least they know you – they know who you are, they have a reason to support you. Certainly that was the case for me.

What I'm hearing from you is that there probably isn't one secret to promoting your novel – it's just the case that you have to try a lot of things and see what works and not rule anything out. And not be afraid to put yourself out there.

I'm not the world's most confident public speaker, but I've done the odd talk in front of a room of people. And the more I do it, the easier it is.

Ellie: Right. And you find your style, too. I did a book launch party a couple of weeks ago, and it started with a reading, and then we opened the floor to Q&A. I was more nervous reading than I was during Q&A. I was sweating – it was gross – because everyone was staring at me expecting something from me.

But when it was Q&A I was making connection with a person. And we did a recording of it, and everyone was like, you were so funny and you're such a natural public speaker, and it's like, that's where my strength is. My strength is not standing up and lecturing. My strength is having a conversation, even if it's with one person in a huge group.

And so if you can find that thing, that's kind of scary, where it's uncomfortable but not painful – there's a very delicate balance there. If you can find the thing that makes you uncomfortable, and it seems to work for you, chase it.

That's what I'm doing. I'm trying to sign up for panels and trying to do guest speaker stuff at these different conventions in my area. Because all I have to do is show up and talk to people, and then say hey, I have this box of books, do you want one?

Fanfiction: More Legitimate These Days?

Ali: So something we've kind of touched on already, a little bit, is different fandoms. You know, Supernatural, The Avengers, other things. And I know within the Huddle we've got a few fanfiction writers, and I've certainly read my share of fanfiction. In fact, if I'm up at 3am with Kitty, fanfiction is what keeps me going through the night.

I feel that it's harder to write fanfiction than original fiction, because you've got to keep to the characters and the world that someone else has created.

So I think as a writer it's quite a challenging thing to do. And I hope for people who write fanfic it's rewarding.

My sense is that fanfiction might be gaining more sort of legitimacy, especially with the Amazon Kindle Worlds scheme, allowing fanfiction for certain books and certain worlds.

I feel like it's becoming a bit more mainstream, basically. Do you think it's becoming more legitimate? What's kind of your experience of fanfiction been?

Ellie: So my first experience of fanfiction was in high school, where we were all into anime, and one of my friends was like, "Did you know that there are these people who write alternate stories for these characters?" and we were like "That is the best thing ever, give it to me right now!"

And I still kind of feel that way, like, I was talking to my husband about this interview and saw that question and was like 'that's amazing, I can't wait to talk about fanfiction!' and he was like 'Why?' Like, because as a writer at my level, the moment someone does fanart or does fanfiction or makes a fansite, you've made it.

Ali: That's totally on my list as well.

Ellie: Yes. To me that is the most flattering, amazing thing that anyone could ever do. Because it means that you love and understand the work that I'm doing so much that you cannot stand that there is not more of it. I love it, I think it's amazing.

Back to my experience – I read a couple here and there, we were watching Ranma 1/2 and Escaflowne, and so I read a couple here and there but it never really grabbed me. And I think now, looking back, it's because I don't like reading on a screen. If somebody handed one to me that they had printed, I would read it –not a problem.

But even now I have trouble reading on my e-reader. I've got to get a smaller one to try to compensate. But I will confess that I have maybe read more than my fair share of Harry Potter slashfic. And I am not proud of that. Slashfic is basically what Fifty Shades of Grey is, where it's porn fanfic.

And I think that the instant they gave E.L. James a book contract, that legitimised fanfiction. The instant they said, "Yes, this is good enough to be published," and it was Twilight fanfic, that legitimised fanfiction forever.

I think Kindle Worlds is doing something interesting, but I think they're scared. Because it's only certain properties, and you have to be invited to it. Delilah Dawson wrote for Kindle Worlds for a comic book series. They're still trying to be gatekeepers, which I find ironic because they've got Createspace and Kindle Worlds, and in my mind it should be, "We have these properties, submit your fanfic to us as a halfway publisher" instead of saying "only these authors." But it's probably a copyright issue and all kinds of legal crap with the actual owners of the material.

I think that we're getting to that point, where fanfiction is no longer looked down upon. Which is a huge step in the right direction.

And I think there was this tendency for people to think of fanfic authors as really gross people who had nothing better to do with their lives, and who were wasting any of their potential by writing this material. And I think this has totally changed.

There are communities for fanfiction – legitimately respected communities. And I think the attitude of "You shouldn't be doing this because you're wasting

your time, you're wasting your talent, you can't come up with anything new" is totally crap, and most people are starting to get away from that. Anybody who's really talking about it.

Because it's the ultimate love, right? You're expressing your love of whatever fandom you're part of by extending the story, like I said earlier, putting more of it in the world. I know a lot of people who between Sherlock season 2 and 3 either read or wrote a crap-ton of fanfiction. Because they needed it, they needed more, and it just made them more rabid for the show when it came out.

So I think the fear that people have about fanfiction threatening IP, they're not totally unfounded because some people can be like that. There are some fanfiction authors who are totally violating IP. But I think that the IP holders need to embrace these extra worlds.

And at least as far as my long-term pie-in-the-sky plans are going, I would love to have a place for fanfiction on the Forgotten Relics books site that I can't look at because there's IP issues – like if I read someone's fanfic and then wind up using an idea in one of my books, they can sue me, which is weird. But having a section of "This is fanfiction, and you guys can go here and post fanfiction for each other, and have that centralised place to talk about it and celebrate it, and have some interaction" – I think it's wonderful.

Ali: I agree with you. And definitely, as an author, I'd see it as a massive compliment, not in any way a threat. I think you're right with Fifty Shades of Grey, in some ways that's already brought fanfiction into the mainstream permanently.

More and more people are able to publish online, compared to say ten or twenty years ago. It's a lot easier to publish, and more people are doing it, and you know, perfectly normal people who just want to write more stories in worlds that they love.

I think we're pretty much out of time. So I'm just going to say thanks very much for coming. It's been really fantastic to hear more about your writing and to also hear a bit about how you work as a self-publisher.

And I'm sure the Huddlers will get a lot out of this, and I'll link to your blog and to any posts that are specifically on topic as well. So I hope people can learn from that. Thanks very much for coming!

Ellie: Thanks so much for having me.