



An Interview with Aaron Johnson,

Author of the *National Park Mystery Series*

Hosted by Josh Bleeker, Director of Operations

Part 1: The Nature of Self-publishing

Part 2: Printing, Writer's Block, and Cash Flow

Part 3: What I Wish I Had Known, & The Best Writing Advice I Received

**TRANSCRIBED FROM AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN FEBRUARY 2026
EDITED FOR CLARITY MAY 2026**

Aaron: *One piece of context as I share, and you'll probably notice this, that this interview will be less about writing and more about publishing, because that's what most of the questions I get are seeking to understand...*

Josh: I've seen that, too. Most questions don't necessarily inquire about the writing craft. They just want to know how to get their writing(s) out there and get sold. "How do I make that happen?" So, they're not asking questions about coaching in terms of writing; the business thing is really the big question. But even if you do have a great business model, and you don't get repeat customers, then there's a different issue. At some point, coaching the craft is absolutely essential, which you talk about below.

Josh: Welcome. My name is Josh Bleeker, and I serve as Director of Operations for Aaron Johnson for the *National Park Mystery Series*. We wanted to have Aaron answer a few of the common questions about self-publishing, and how he's done some of what he's done with this business.

So, I want to give him a chance to introduce himself, and then we'll jump right into our questions.

Aaron: Hey, y'all. I get a lot of emails from folks, and some of it's about writing in general, but most, I'd say 80%, of the questions are more about, **"What does it take to successfully publish a book, or get a book to do well?"** And so, what we've done is we've broken that down into several sets of questions.

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

And Josh and I are going to go back and forth with him asking questions, and then, maybe asking some clarifying questions. I've had a lot of time to think about this; I used to have the time to actually answer long emails with details. Now, I can't do that and write, so we decided to put this into one interview. And then we'll be able to hopefully use that in the future. People will be able to benefit from it.

Josh: Thank you, Aaron. I appreciate your time taking the time to do this, as I've had some emails come in to me as well, and I thought, *we really should actually capture some of this*, because—I'm saying to you as the listener—I do believe that Aaron has some important insights and advice and lessons learned to share, and so we're going jump in.

One of the most common questions is:

#1 What advice would you give to someone who wants to write and publish children's books?

Aaron: The first thing that I tell people... You could probably just hear the next few seconds, and then turn this off, if you did this one thing. And that is go buy a copy of *Perennial Seller* by Ryan Holiday. Listen to it, read it, take notes, and that's all you need. Well, maybe not all you need, but it's...

Josh: Maybe we need a little bit more!

Aaron: Ok (smiling). If you want it all in one place, there's no match to that book, and there's no match, really, to Ryan's experience. He's launched some of the largest book launches in history. That's my understanding. So he knows what he's doing, knows what he's talking about, and he's a really great thinker, too.

But... when I'm talking with people, the **first thing that I'll tell them is to really get honest with yourself. And clear about your writing goal.** Because that goal is going to determine your timeline, how much you're willing to invest time-wise or budget-wise. It's going to determine the skills that you want to develop..

Each publishing goal is going to take you on a really different journey. So, for instance, if I want to write a memoir of my family as an heirloom, and do a limited batch printing, that's going to be really different from me wanting to make a living as an author.

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

Josh: I see. Makes sense.

Aaron: Or, what if you want to make a big splash with a bestseller? That actually wasn't my goal. My goal was to make a living as an author, and then (secondary) I would love to make a big splash with a bestseller—but those are different goals and different journeys.

Or it might just be that *I want to finish a book, and I want to have a copy in my hand...something I can give to a friend, and they can read it, or I just want to read it myself.* That's also a very legitimate goal. All these goals are very legitimate. It's just really important to be honest with yourself, and clear about it. For some reason, when I ask people to get clear on their publishing goal, most of them go silent, or get hesitant. I think it's because you feel the whole weight of the daunting project, you feel the risk, and the cost when you state it in clear and certain terms.

If you want to make a living as an author, whoa, there's a lot of risk entailed in that, but the risk is totally necessary to that journey. So, having this a clear vision of what success looks like is critical.

Josh: But, having a clear sense of, “This is how I know I have achieved what I hope to achieve,” is having a picture in your mind of how you define “success.”

Aaron: Exactly. Years ago, I got some good advice on this. I actually found the source of this the other day. There's a guy named Chris Guillebeau. And he's done a lot of work on the topic of self-employment. He had this really fun resource called *279 Days to Overnight Success*, which I found really helpful. I was starting a hiking website at the time, and a lot of that PDF was about blogging, and it is now a bit dated, but one of the things he said in there that stuck with me was **find something that you can commit two years of your life to.**

That's a take-your-breath-away question, and that's why I like it. Because it gets you counting the cost. It drives you to ask a lot of good questions, like “Who do I need to become in order to do that?” Or, “What kind of capital would I need to raise? What kind of quality would I need to put out into the world?” All kinds of other questions flow out of that one question.

Josh: Right. It's not just a little side project, but it may be something that you do on the side. Yet, you're realizing that you will be doing this on the side for an extended time. In order to take that first step and really get it out into the world.

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

And what I've seen you (Aaron) do, too, one of the things that I noticed immediately and really appreciated was that you didn't just publish your first book, you actually built a brand environment around it.

So, there are dynamics to...what I'll say is...what surrounds the book. Kind of creating almost a narrative shell in which the book initially resides, and then it continues to grow. So, it's not just about the book, especially if you're asking the question, "What advice would you give if you want to publish?" Then it's more than just the book in order to get the book to really float.

Aaron: Yes. If your goal is to make a living as an author, I believe you do need a brand. Because when you publish a book into the Amazon ecosystem—and this is not very encouraging—it's like throwing your book into the ocean. There are millions and millions of books. It's so flooded that our story could even be amazing. It could be better than Harry Potter and it wouldn't matter because the attention is diluted.

(Added Content): Writing a book is not like a weekend project. For instance, my daughter and I worked together recently to build some patio furniture. Writing a book is more like building a house. That level of personal investment really demands clarity, and like you said, defining success.

So, to sum this first part up and bring it to a close.

1. Get clear on your goal. Write it down, spell it out.
2. Define success in clear terms
3. Decide what you're willing to invest to make it happen
4. And I'll add, read *The Dip* by Seth Godin

#2 Where do you get your ideas?

Josh: Well, when you think about writing a good book, how do you get your ideas? Especially if you're a listener and you've read the first several books (in Aaron's series), you can see that there are layers and layers to what Aaron has put into the book. Not just a book about "We're going to go visit the Grand Canyon," but all the layers inside the books, too. How does that occur?

Aaron: I turned 50 on Monday (as of recording February 18th, 2026) And one thing that would be good for people to know about me is that I've been an entrepreneur, not just for a..

Josh: Month.

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

Aaron: Right! (laughing) I started my first business, growing and selling indian corn and pumpkins when I was 14. At 15, I designed my first product line, and began selling it to stores all across the United States. While in college, I was running my parents business, and started my third business. So, the National Park Mystery Series was not an overnight success. It's part of a larger series of successes and failures. It's probably more accurate to call those failures experiments, because it's been a process of getting feedback, and a lot of discovering what doesn't work before I could understand what was going to work.

One great example is that I first published some non-fiction books, and what I learned from those two different nonfiction books is that I don't like writing non-fiction. That's good to know! But in that process, I learned so much about the whole process of publishing: cover design, formatting, software, advertising, etc.

So, in short, the ideas grow out of a garden of creativity and entrepreneurial risk taking. Honestly, I have more ideas than I know what to do with. The takeaway from that is to invest yourself in constant learning, reading, discovery, testing, and taking lots of small risks.

I learned this from my Dad and my high school art teacher, Mr. Kinnard. Those ideas are like soup that you're constantly stirring, adding ingredients to, and tasting. Or a garden that you're constantly cultivating. **And the key is not criticizing the ideas.** Only about 5% of our ideas are really any good. But imagine taking those and instead of throwing them in the trash you're throwing them into that pot of idea-soup and letting them simmer. You're planting them in the garden, and who knows what's going to come up?

And those ideas start to interact with each other. And this is where it gets really interesting. Even our bodies do this (I think God designed us so that this happens). When we're sitting by a fire, or we're sleeping, this happens – everything that has happened during the day moves to the back of the brain.

Josh: It starts to get filed, right?

Aaron: Yeah, and all our experiences and ideas from the day and days past are interacting and bumping up against each other. And when we're tending to that soup, at the right time, I think the best ideas come to the surface.

For me, with the *National Park Mystery Series*, I was in Saguaro National Park, but I had been asking a lot of different questions of my ideas, like, "I really want to write a book series. What really interests me that I could invest years into? And I tell people, it hit me like a freight train. And it should have,

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

because **I was seeking, asking, knocking, I was asking about these ideas**, and I had been tending the garden and the soup, and then, boom. It feels like a BOOM! But it's actually this long fun process.

Josh: I've never written fiction (my discipline has more been in education, administration, leadership), but just in writing, whenever I've had a writing project, one of the things that I would do is I would just write down every idea I had, like you said, and not criticize it. Evaluation comes later. Right now, we're getting everything out, and then I would go for a walk, or a run, or a hike. You're in, you know, Saguaro, and, all of this work is happening, and you don't realize it until it pop...*there* it is. You know? And so, after a hike, I would come back, and now I have all the ideas for how to structure this piece of writing, and that long simmering process is important.

Aaron: It really is.

Josh: You and I swap book ideas a lot. So just a lot of input, within reason, but a lot of exploring even your own mind, and just letting that file, right?

Aaron: Yeah. Filling that up with reading, travel, experiences...and letting all those things interact is super, super important.

#3 Why did you choose to self-publish?

Josh: Well, as you had that moment, and you thought, “Now I know what I want to write, and I sense this direction.” Why did you choose to self-publish, then, as your starting point?

Aaron: There are a few things. **One is just the royalty math.** While I may not have the same volume that a major publisher could bring, I'd know I'd be able to keep a lot more of the profits. So, that would be, instead of 8-12% in traditional publishing, I would have upwards of 60%. But, that also means I'd have to invest in advertising, build an edit team, build out the websites, work with a cover artist, etc.

So, that brings me to a **second reason:** it meant building a business, and that was attractive to me. It's what I've grown up doing, and I love it.

Third, (and this comes from my DNA and personality) I really don't like that idea that you can invest all your time in something, and then there's a gatekeeper who tells you whether or not you can get published. That's just the way it is, and it makes sense. It's a very big space, lots of manuscripts

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

coming in. They have to say No to most of them. But then you look at things like JK Rowling getting rejected 12 times, and I think *Chicken Soup for the Soul* was over 100 times, and it sold 150 million copies. So, if you go the traditional route, I'd say you're in really good company when you get rejected.

Fourth, I wanted to make a living as an author: pay the mortgage, put our kids through school, etc. as part of my day-job as a writer. And you can see how one, two, and three above interact with that.

#4 How did you self-publish?

Josh: So, as you did choose to self-publish, then how did you go about getting your book into print? Something you could actually hold in your hand and sell and mail out, and produce digital formats?

Aaron:

Formatting: Well, on a software level, I use Vellum, and I don't really think there's anything as good as it. I would highly recommend it because it saves me hours, literally days of formatting.

I've used primarily—my first way of publishing—was through Amazon and uploading my documents according to their specs, and then, that program Vellum also spits out an EPUB or Kindle format that you can upload. That's been pretty straightforward, easy to use. I guess early on, I would hire a book formatter, so you can also contract with someone to format your book who already has the software. That's another option.

Covers: Thinking through that process, I really prioritized getting a professional cover and layout. And I think it's a good test. The cover's a good test of our willingness to invest in our work, and our belief in our work. And I've seen other folks who really want to promote their books, and they've written to me, and that's my first piece of advice. And it's gotta look good. It's funny, **it's got to look good as a thumbnail**. It might look good in your hand, but I can't sit there and figure it out on a screen. I've got to immediately know what it is and what it's communicating to me, its main idea.

Josh: Yeah. People do judge books by covers.

Aaron: They do, they do. It's kind of funny, I think I found that you can have a B+ book, but you've got to have an A+ cover.

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

Josh: And as you're sharing that, the first thought I had is going back to one of your pieces of advice: *Are you willing to think in terms of 2 years*, and also, *Where do you want to invest your time?* So if you're like, "I don't want to do book formatting," well then you're going to have to pay to have someone else do that. But maybe you do want to take that on for whatever reason.

And this particular aspect, though, in terms of the book cover, unless you are a professional book cover designer this seems like an area where it's worth the time and the money to have it done really, really well. Unless you personally are one that can do that work, which not many people can do.

Aaron: It really is. I think that, for me, that's a non-negotiable. I'm sure there are exceptions. And I would say, on this kind of whole topic that gets more technical, I'd say don't get caught up in the technical stuff. Focus on the writing. Again, read *Perennial Seller*, and especially the first part about you just gotta have a good book. Because you'll be able to figure out all that other stuff later, and a lot of it is negligible in terms of its impact.

I see people asking lots of questions about things like translations, selling internationally, what keywords to target in ads, but it's just not 80-20 stuff. What I mean by that is, it's not that 20% of stuff that really moves the needle. You want to put 80%+ of your time, energy, and resources on writing a really good book, and getting a really great cover.

And this is just a little sidebar. Avoid online groups that talk about this stuff, *and here's why*: my experience in those places, sometimes there's some really helpful stuff (I'm in a middle grade group that is super helpful) where I can go in and ask questions. Or to get motivation, regular guidance. But I find there to be more people looking for affirmation. And a lot of focus on the anxiety. (This is just a personal thing for me.)

Josh: There's not shared coaching, necessarily.

Aaron: No, unless you're in a very curated group. I've created some editing relationships and beta groups. I think that's different, but if you're jumping onto a Facebook group or something like that, I've not found really good ones. But I'm more anxiety-prone, so you might go in and be like, "Hey, this is really helpful to me." Good! But I've found that a majority of what we're asking in those spaces is not 80-20 stuff, and a lot of the topics just feed my anxiety.

Josh: It's not stuff that really moves the needle.

That's important to note, too, your personal makeup in terms of, "Are these groups helpful?" or do they accelerate your anxiety, or does the group have a

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

negative culture, or is it a group culture where it's shared coaching? And so, you gotta feel that out and ask, "Is this actually providing energy or draining me?" And then make a decision to stay or go.

Aaron: Yeah.



We hope this discussion provides a bit of insight and direction for your own journey into publishing your creative work. If you have additional questions, please contact marmot@nationalparkmysteryseries.com – we cannot guarantee a response, but we do strive to read each inquiry.

© 2026 Aaron Johnson and National Park Mystery Series LLC