

NATIONAL PARK MYSTERY SERIES™

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

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#5 Where do you print your books?

Josh: Well, let's talk about the actual book. I learned to use Vellum; I can do an EPUB. In fact, getting an EPUB out is actually pretty easy. But when I actually do want to physically print a book, which printer do you use?

Aaron: There are a lot more options over the last few years, and I tend to print runs in the thousands, and so experience is a little limited in the sense of volume, but let's say you're doing less than 200. You can order author copies once you publish through Amazon (I believe you have to publish first, unless they've changed that).

So you can go into your Amazon dashboard, order author copies, and they actually are pretty competitive, I think. For ordering low volumes, it's kind of hard to beat. And then when I'm doing beta tests and stuff like that, if I want a really nice, high-quality, book in a short time, you cannot beat 48-hour Books. U.S.-based, out of Ohio. Their packaging is unmatched, just meaning, your books don't get destroyed (I get a lot of damages with Amazon). 48-hour books come bubble-wrapped and double-wrapped, and it's incredible. I love working with them. You're going to spend more, but I think they're absolutely worth it, for short runs.

And then, I work with a few different printers for doing inkjet volume and then offset large volume runs. I highly recommend Dave with Believer's

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Books out of Colorado Springs. He served a lot of us authors in the independent publishing area, and he's a great go-to guy.

#6 How do you sell at volume?

Josh: You mentioned Amazon, you also mentioned...well want do I want to say?...the hard truth – there are lots of options on Amazon. So, how do you promote your books and reach your audience? You had to make your first sale, and then many beyond that, so how did you scale that?

Aaron: Re-read *Perennial Seller*! And anything else on the topic.

I made a game plan, because it's a multi-pronged approach, but, going back to the cover piece, your cover is your number one marketing asset.

So, **we'll talk Amazon first**. Amazon is pay-to-play. When you've got a new release, they're going to give you visibility, but after 30 days, that starts to wind down. Day one, after launching, I have it all set up and ready to go.

It's similar to in the grocery store, you've got the end caps, right? And companies pay for to have their potato chips put on the end cap instead of buried in the back of the store.

When I started doing Amazon advertising, I think I was a little obsessive, but it's had huge payoff. I would keep a spreadsheet with key data every day. And what was interesting in doing it daily is that I started to learn about data lags, there's a 3-day data lag. So you may get an order, but it's not counted in your data set until it's actually shipped. That can take a few days. There's even a 7- and a 10-day lag. The only way to get a sense for how that worked was tracking the data, and seeing what was effective. Another analogy I use is that it's like a surfer that's going into the water, and you're feeling the waves, and after a while, you get a sense of, "Oh, there's one coming." You get kind of more of an intuitive feel with it, but it took those 18 months.

Also, **I took courses** and watched a lot of videos on the topic.

I had to spend money, and that was hard. And sometimes it feels like wasting money on experiments to see what and what didn't work. But the key thing is that it's like investing. And my rule on investing in advertising is to ABE: always break even. And on Amazon advertising, your key figure is going to be you ACOS.

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I won't get into all the details of it. There are great YouTube clips (~ 2 minutes) to help you understand that. Really knowing what that is, and the ACOS you need to break even is the benchmark for advertising.

If you're tracking your date, you'll learn stuff like: With every book I sell with an ad, how many am I selling organically?

And when over time you develop a confidence in your benchmarks, and you learn to weather the volatility, you can make decisions to scale your spend, and increase your sales. But that took me a good part of two years to get to.

That was maybe one of the bigger inflection points for me in this whole area of promoting books—**realizing how emotional the experience of advertising spend** was for me, and for everyone else.

Josh: You've heard this from others?

Aaron: Definitely. You have to take the emotion out of it and keep coming back to your benchmarks. It's like flying through a storm or fog where you've got to trust your instrument panel.

#7 Writer's Block.

Josh: Aaron, there's a related question that *plagues* every writer. Writer's block. Have you experienced that? If so, what do you do? Or what have you learned from yourself or from others about dealing with that reality? Because it comes for everybody.

Aaron: I absolutely love what Steve Martin says about writer's block. Because, you know, he's a musician, comedian, actor, and writer, and he says that "writer's block is an excuse to drink alcohol." Now, I think what he means is that we are prone to turning it into some type of neurosis, something that you're a victim to. It is a convenient way to check out.

I think that quote is actually really profound. Because writing is a long-term project, and it engages your heart, mind, and emotions. It's going to start surfacing emotional stuff that maybe you've not thought about in a long time, or that's going on presently and you're not feeling, and then you start feeling.

Normalizing it instead of turning it into some neurosis is key. It's a normal part of writing, and it's not even a bad thing, because I actually think it signals for me, most of the time, when I need to take a break. So, I'm going to get stuck.

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I'm always going to get stuck, but it's just time to get up and go for a walk, not slam on the gas pedal and spin my wheels. Most of the time, it just means my imaginative capacity or mental capacity has hit its level for that time period. And usually it solves itself fairly quickly by getting up and moving. Going for a drive, being out in nature, going for a walk. Usually, if I'm on a walk, or sometimes it's just sleep, I wake up with the answer.

I don't think it's something that plagues us, I think it's a normal part of the experience, and actually a welcome part of the experience, because it's inviting you into something meaningful. "You're at an important juncture right now, and the next thing that's going to come, it's going to come, but it's going to be really good when it comes."

Josh: That's helpful. So not saying it in the way I framed it initially, because that's how people tend to think about it, myself included. "I'm plagued by it." Instead of saying that, saying, "I've now reached a point where there's development, growth; there's an opportunity for me to expand my understanding of myself. There's some reason the writer's block has come."

So, if I can work with that, it's not just that I'll get unstuck, it actually will bring a new dynamic to me, as well.

#8 Emotions and Cash Flow.

Josh: Back to the idea of emotions, if you could name, or if you could describe the emotion that feels the most intense when you talk about the emotional experience, what word would you use? Is it anxiety, or frustration, or anticipation, or...

Aaron: I think it's a fear of risk, like...

Josh: ...like...am I doing something wrong?

Aaron: In a way, it's "Am I doing something wrong spending *this much*?" And you do have to answer that question, but your benchmarks will answer that for you. You can't be asking that question every day, or you're going to drive yourself crazy.

But that leads to the next big learning for me that I did not see coming, and that was that **success creates the problem of cash flow**. And what I mean by that is the more you're selling, you want to feed the Amazon creature, and you want to scale that. But the problem is, Amazon, like a lot of places, is going to

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pay you royalties net 60. That is, 60 days out from when they were earned from the *end of the month* in which they were earned. So you have that issue, but your advertising, especially when you get started, is due immediately. Sometimes daily, depending on how much you're spending.

That gives you this **60-day cash flow gap**. As you grow and are spending more in advertising, you have to wait for that check to come in to be able to pay for it, so you've got to fill that gap, and that was a real pain point for me.

One of my friends is a biv-ocational pastor, but then *also* he has his writing. From his business, he saved up what might have been, like, \$5,000, for ads. And then while he was saving it up, he was spending all this time *learning* about ads. I forget how many months it took him. And then...he risked it all.

You've worked so hard. You're working with your hands – this is hard-earned cash, and you're not sure what's going to happen. It takes a lot of courage. He didn't risk it all in one day, but in a sense, he did, because he said, "I have this plan of how to spend it, and I'm making the commitment, now I'm going to spend it all."

Josh: *I'm going to spend it, and so it's all going to go, and that's the experiment, is to spend it all, and just watch it happen.*

Aaron: Yeah! And he had success! I think it's because he put all that education time in. (Again, about two years of work).



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.