



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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**#9 What do you wish you had
known before you'd started?**

Josh: You mentioned something a couple times now, and so I want to come to that question. The gentleman you're referring to, he educated himself. You've talked about how you've taken courses. I've observed you, even in the short time I've been working under your leadership and this business model here, continue to seek out education. You are hungry to continue to learn, even in the writing craft, not just the business craft.

So I want to make sure that our listeners hear that. Yes, there's some intuition, but there's a lot of hard work where you have to go educate yourself.

With that in mind, what do you wish you had known before you had started? And as you answer that, consider, What are some educational components our listeners could consider?

Aaron: I think one is a greater appreciation and openness to receiving feedback.

I didn't have that, I think you even see it reflected in some of the early books (in the series) and Jake's wrestling...he's wrestling with sharing the experience of the scavenger hunt with Wes and Amber. I can box out my wife and my

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wife's feedback, box out my friend's feedback, I can box out your (Josh's) feedback. That's a continual growth area for me.

One of the things I did observe from reading some different Newberry winners and books from authors I really respected, is I would see in their acknowledgements all the people they were working with.

They've built a team of people, and they have learned to receive feedback. I think the most important thing I've learned about giving and receiving feedback is about sharing your experience. As in, "When I read this, I got confused right [here]." That's much better than, "You were confusing." Possibly, ten people read it and maybe I was the only one who got confused! Truly owning my experience of a book, and not judging the book. "This felt like a clunky read to me in here. I was having a hard time understanding it, or I got lost, or I feel like this is a hole in the plot."

The other piece was the **cash flow lag** that surprised me. (Discussed above.) I think that can really sink a business in the middle of success, which is surprising.

A key is not being dependent upon an external system. For instance, Amazon is fantastic for sales, but I don't get any of the customer information.

#10 Why did you decide to sell direct-to-reader?

Josh: Right—so you can't actually build that relationship or brand dynamic with that customer base.

Aaron: Yes. We decided to start selling direct to our customers, and one of the real benefits of that is you have this direct customer relationship, you have customer information. You can let them know when you're launching a new book. It creates pretty immediate cash flow. Often, you're actually getting paid the same day for sales, or soon thereafter, that can pay for your advertising, instead of having to wait 60 days. I wasn't ready for that at the beginning, but that's been a lot of fun. And if you're interested in that, there's a lot of good free information out there. I took Steve Pieper's AMMO course. It's just about selling books direct-to-consumer.

I would say Facebook advertising has changed over the last year, making it more difficult for those of us who were trying to sell a book or two. **You really have to have probably 3 or 4 or 5 books** to pay for advertising and make a profit. Maybe that'll change, but that's been true.

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I think the other thing is, growth is good, but it can become a distraction. If you're independently published, it grows quickly. When that happened, I started doing everything, and I got distracted from writing. And so I've hired you (Josh), and I've hired our Order Fulfillment Coordinator. Both are now full-time, and then to realize, "Oh, I was doing a lot of things, but not really anything well."

Josh: *I was very busy—but was it good business, was it productive busy?*

Aaron: Right. That's the question.

#11 The need to get things perfect.

Josh: Briefly on that, I don't know if this is true for you, but how do you handle the temptation to get things perfect?

Aaron: Wow.

Josh: Whether it be an ad, or whether it be the storyline...the perception that perfection is achievable.

Aaron: Yeah, you know, and this is funny, what helps me is a Greek word. The Greek word *telos*, which gets translated in the Bible as "to come to an end," but the concept behind it is very organic. It's like the idea of a ripe fruit. And the idea of something coming to maturity *in its stage of maturity*.

I remember Neil Gaiman saying that when he wrote *The Graveyard Book*, he had the concept for something like 10 years before he wrote it. When he had the idea, he knew he wasn't the writer who could write that book yet, but he was excited about becoming the writer who could.

My dad is an artist, and I know when I would do some artwork, and then I'd bring it to him, and get his thoughts on where to go next, or critique, he would always talk with me about being careful not to overwork part of it. So sometimes it's letting go of part of it and coming back to that chapter later.

Because maybe it's got to mature in my mind. And writing the book I can write now, not the book that I wish I could write. This is the benefit of having a series; you think, "You know, maybe I can do that in Book 7."

Josh: And I hear, too, there's something about keeping momentum. Keep that soup over here simmering, keep adding ideas. If you can't get that paragraph worked out, just let it sit and go work on something else. Don't

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exhaust yourself, but do stay in motion. Keep it moving, because then maybe a week later that paragraph will come together.

I'll say in terms of the *National Park Mystery Series*, my experience is that book 5 is better than Book 2. I see you becoming that writer, so stay in motion, and keep working the craft, right?

Aaron: Definitely.

#12 What's the best writing advice that you've ever received?

Josh: On that line, what's the best writing advice that you've ever received from others?

Aaron: The best writing advice that I've received? I think the two best pieces came from George Saunders in his book, *Swim in the Pond in the Rain*. It's a weird genre, I've never seen it before, it's like taking a class with him in a book, particularly on Russian writers.

He said that the successful authors he's seen address two things. One, he sees their **willingness to edit**. That's number one, and then number two is that they're willing to work with feedback, particularly on **causality problems**. Most problems in a book are causality issues, which means, "Why did this happen? Why did this happen *now*?" You start having that problem where it feels like something kind of came out of nowhere. It makes sense in your mind, but it doesn't make sense to the reader, because you didn't drop the hints or explain it.

Josh: Yep.

Aaron: The other advice is as someone creating a business, or becoming an author, Kevin Kelly talks about this idea of building a **"thousand true fans."**

Josh: It's like your tribe.

Aaron: Yeah, and so I would say, get that article, "1000 True Fans" by Kevin Kelly. You'll be able to find it easily online. Then from Seth Godin, the idea surprising and delighting, you know, becoming *remarkable*, in serving those thousand true fans.

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The key concept there is **if you have a thousand true fans, you'll be able to make a living**. You should be able to be sustained by a thousand true fans, so focus on those thousand, and serving them, and then the rest will come.

Then from Saul Stein, who was an editor and an agent, he said **write a story that your reader forgets they're reading**. They're so *in* the experience. I'm still learning to do that; it's going to take a while to become really good at that, but I hope that readers experience that when they're reading my books.

#13 On Brand Building.

Josh: As we start to wind down, I want to return to a big picture idea.

When you think about making a living as an author, it goes back to having a clear vision for “What is my *telos*?” What is your *end goal*, and how do you know if you've achieved that?

And another dynamic is that you (Aaron) had to do much more than just the book. Like we mentioned earlier, you actually built a brand around the book that could carry the narrative and carry the thousand true fans.

Aaron: Yeah, you know, a series or a brand dramatically outperforms standalones financially. I remember studying the *Magic Treehouse* series, these really small books, great for the classroom and great ways for kids to get exposed to different points of history and science across the curriculum. But I remember seeing that those books are making about the same amount of profit as a 600-page book because of printing costs. The price point is not that much different, and there's something like 26 in the series. So I was doing the math. If you want to make a living at something, and for it to be a job, a series makes a lot more sense. It also spreads the risk out a little bit; if you're doing a standalone book, you're betting everything on one horse, and it could break a leg.

So that idea of building a brand, it also brings a consistent promise to the reader, so if they experience the first book, read-through is usually 50% on your next book. You get to keep those readers, and then every time you launch a book, it tends to lift the series and the volume of sales. It's a cool little ecosystem that's super fun, but it requires a lot. If you're not business-minded you really have to hire some of these different functions that come around.



#14 Final thoughts on making a living as an author?

Josh: What else have you learned about making a living as an author?

Aaron: Back in 2005 or so, I had a meeting with a fairly famous author. A friend had set it up for me, because they knew each other. I came away a little surprised because he was really discouraging about the writer's life. He basically was telling me how hard it was. I was like, "Yikes, this is something I really want to enjoy, though." And I hear people say that. I hear people say, "I don't enjoy writing, I enjoy *having* written." My perspective is, "Why would you sign up for that?!"

Josh: That sounds painful.

Aaron: It does! And my takeaway from that was, "**Well, how do I do it differently?**" I can find my own way. And I think that's a great commitment to think through: How am I going to do this for the long haul, and how am I going to enjoy it for the long haul?

For instance, I wrote initially out of escape velocity for my first three books. I really wanted to finish up my full-time job and do this full-time. But you can't keep writing out of escape velocity once you've escaped.

You've got to find different places to write from. Deeper places, and happiness and peace.



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.