



Andi Cumbo-Floyd

332: The Craft and Business of Cozy Mysteries

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome word nerds to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/332 because it's Episode 332. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google, and you know, all of the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Andi Cumbo-Floyd. Andi is a writer of both magical realism and nonfiction – but in the last year, she has taken on a new persona as ACF Bookens, author of Cozy Mysteries.

Today, we're going to be talking about her process behind crafting this Cozy Mystery series. Now, when she's not writing, Andi is also an editor and writing coach; and she runs a beautiful, supportive online community – and you should totally check it out. Details are on her website.

She lives in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains with a number of animals who cannot possibly coordinate their veterinary needs; I totally hear you, Andi. Welcome, it is so great to have you on the show.

Andi Cumbo-Floyd: Thank you so much for having me, I'm honored.

GP: So, usually, I start by asking about the story behind the story, but we need to kind of like step even further back first; I kind of need to know, like, the story behind the series or the impulse to write Cozy Mysteries. What prompted you to make this shift into Cozy Mysteries?

ACF: Yeah, it's two things, really. One is that I have a young son, he's two. And I needed to write things that were more fun to write and easier to write than what I usually write. Like my nonfiction tends to be heavier and then sometimes very research-based, and I just don't have time for that right now.

And my Magical Realism is a little bit similar; it comes out of some similar places. So, I wanted a genre that allowed me to write more quickly, but I also wanted to try writing to market.

And I was inspired by that idea by Kirsten Oliphant, who runs Creative Writing, another great group for writers--

GP: Yes.

ACF: -and who started maybe two years ago now writing – what she calls – Clean Romances, Sweet Romances, and had massive economic success with that. And then broke into Young Adult Fantasy in another pen name, and just has done really well.



And so, I wanted to try and just see how that worked. And the most logical genre for me to pick for writing to market was Mysteries because it's something I've always read, it's something my mom read; and so, I knew the sort of forms and formats for that. So, that's how I got started about, oh, I guess, just 15 or 16 months ago.

GP: Wow. And you've written-- At this point, you're on what – Book 4, Book 5 in the series?

ACF: Four came out in August. Book 5 just came out, and Book 6 will come out in January.

GP: Awesome. So, okay, you used the phrase 'writing to market'. And for our listeners who might be thinking like, folks who maybe, once upon a time, when conferences were a thing, would go to Writing Conferences and agents would say, "Do not write to market."

I feel like you're using it in a slightly different way. There's a nuanced difference between what agents mean when they say 'writing to market' versus what you mean. Can you clarify a little bit on what that means?

ACF: Right. I'm not talking about like right now in-- Well, actually, I think it's past even now. There's a trend in Fantasy called 'Academy', where everybody's writing a book set in a boarding school; that's what agents are often cautioning people against because that specific kind of a trope in a genre, can go in and out really quickly.

Like in Romances, there was this thing, the summer with Bad Boy Romances where lots of things I had problems with about this, but like women are making bad boys, good boys; [laughs] and that also faded. So, that's usually what agents are talking about.

What I'm talking about is more finding those genres that both you enjoy reading and writing, but also that have a sort of an established readership. So, like, for Cozy Mysteries, it's mostly women. There are men that read Cozies, but it's mostly women.

They just read, you know, three or four books a week. The same with romance readers, they just read voraciously. And so, you don't have to create your own market for those people; they're looking for books like yours.

And that's a little different than, you know, trying to write the latest book on the election cycle--

GP: Yeah.

ACF: -which you can do it really quick and get it out before November – you'll have a chance – but that's also going to be a time-sensitive book. And so, most agents are cautioning against that unless you're Bob Woodward, and then maybe you can do it. But most of us can't write to something that specific.

GP: So, one of the things that I wanted to sort of tease out in what you said is kind of basically the distinction in what you mean to 'writing to market' is like writing for a specific niche.

Whereas I think what agents often caution against is that idea of 'writing to a trend', like taking a trend that's really hot in the moment. Like while you were talking about the Bad Boy Romances, I was thinking of like back when the vampire books were like a thing... like the YA Vampires, and then YA Werewolves, and then YA Dystopian; it was like a new thing every year, and it kind of cycled through.

ACF: Exactly. I mean, and those things, you know, if you're Marissa Meyer and you write the Twilight Books and you launch the Vampire thing, you are golden.



But if you are me and eight months in and trying to get on that trend, it's going to be really hard to do that just because of how timing works and also because people get tired of things... you know, especially that niche down.

It happens in non-fiction too. Memoirs for a while. These, I call them Trauma Memoirs, about all the really hard things in people's lives... were really popular. And again, if you're a Mary Karr and you wrote *The Liars' Club* at the beginning and sort of launched that trend, you're great.

But if you are Jill Smith and you want to write about your trauma now, it's hard because it's already a market that's kind of flooded and it's fading, you know... and it'll come back. There's always these resurgences of things, but you got to have a target that you can hit and you also have to like it.

GP: Yeah.

ACF: Like it's not valuable. I mean, it's not going to be good writing if you're like, 'Oh I have to write this Vampire Romance,' and you don't like Vampire Romance, it's going to come through.

You know, there's a whole world of Cozy Mysteries that are Paranormal Mysteries, and I love paranormal stuff. I read Fantasy, I write Magical Realism – but I don't, you know, I can't write paranormal that's the right tone for Cozies. It's just not in my sort of wheelhouse.

And they're not the kind of Cozy Mysteries I read. So, I write, you know, my series is set in a bookstore.

GP: Yeah.

ACF: You know, it's just more like my everyday... well, my everyday dream life, maybe. [laughs] I don't own a bookstore, but, so you have to kind of also think about what you have the stamina to enjoy writing... and will enjoy for a long haul.

GP: Yeah, yeah. Totally. So, shifting gears a little bit, because I want to get into talking about the actual Cozy Mystery series that you are working on. Can you tell us a little bit about-- You mentioned that it's set in a bookstore.

I have to say I kind of like the town; I sort of wish I could live there, and I wish that I could be Harvey's bestie. But can you tell us a little bit about what sparked the initial concept? I mean, most cozies have that hook, like it's, you know, like Jessica Fletcher is a writer who writes mysteries and then solves them in her so-called 'free time'. So, what sparked this idea for the hook?

ACF: Yeah, I want to just really want to own a bookstore--

[laughter]

ACF: -in my life, and who knows if that will ever happen. I mean there's nothing about a Cozy that needs to be-- I mean, it needs to be realistic, but it doesn't need to be accurately realistic. So, like, I have no sense of what the business side of running a bookstore is like.

But I've worked in bookstores so I know what it's like to be in a bookstore, and I just really wanted to go back to that; it's sort of a fantasy I settle into when I need to kind of escape the reality of the world, it helps during COVID to think about a bookstore.



And so, I kind of wanted to live into that dream. And then, it's actually, the town is called St. Marin's. It's named after one of my best friend's daughter, which I just think is super, she loves that; I had to add her brother into the series too, so now both there.

But it's based on the town of Saint Michaels, which is an actual town in Maryland. And it's a town I love; it's a Watertown, and it's a tourist town in the summer. But it has this community of people who are very dedicated to the town and have been there forever.

You know, since white people moved into the US, there's a waterman community of oyster fishermen... and there's really strong history. Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass are from that section of Maryland.

So, I just wanted to kind of use that place, but I fictionalized it. Like I use a map of Saint Michaels to kind of guide my writing, but I don't, I don't feel wed to that. It just kind of makes some-- I don't have to decide what direction Main Street runs; I can just look at a map and be like, 'Oh it runs North South, excellent.' You know?

So, that was, you know, two things; this fantasy about a bookstore, and then this town that I just really liked and felt like would make a fitting setting for a series.

GP: And in terms of the Cozy Mystery piece-- I mean, obviously with the Cozy Mystery, there's specific things that need to happen. You mentioned that the readers are voracious; they're reading three books or more per week, which just is mind-blowing to me. So, obviously, they have certain expectations. What are some of the things that as a writer you have to be thinking about as you're putting this Cozy together?

ACF: Yeah, so there's sort of two hard and fast rules, I guess, of Cozies. One is that there can't be any violence... like onscreen, on page violence. So, people die but you don't see them die. And then no sex, no swearing – that's where the term 'sweet' kind of comes in, which is--

I mean, they're not sort of things I talk about normally in my writing, so that wasn't too hard a shift for me. But there also is a tonal piece, which is Cozies have to be--- they do kind of have to create a place you want to go.

You need to really want to live in that town, like you said. You have to want people to feel like they'd like to visit there and they'd like to be friends with the people in the book; so that's sort of a tonal shift.

And then, structurally, you know, you need to have a murder. Some Cozy writers have the murder happen kind of before the book starts. And some Cozy writers, like I have it happen near the beginning of the book. I mean, it needs to be... it's the impetus for all the action, right? So, it has to happen pretty early.

And then the sort of trope is that you have at least three suspects; and a really good Cozy writer will keep the reader feeling like they're on the trail but not reveal, not know until the reveal is given at the end of the book, who the murderer is.

Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't, you know? My latest one, some people were like, 'I figured it out early.' And I'm like, 'Well, I feel like I maybe dropped more clues for you in this one.' And I'm not sure if that's a bad or a good thing because people do like to feel like they figured things out, right?

GP: Yeah.

ACF: And then the resolution is pretty quick. Like there's not a long denouement, there's no great reflection. It's just sort of; we figure out who the killer is, you wrap up what happens to them, and



then, you know, everybody has a party or something. [laughs] It's not really super complex. So, those are the sort of general genre rules for Cozies.

GP: Another one that just popped into my head is the idea of the amateur sleuth. Like you don't... in a Cozy Mystery, you wouldn't have necessarily a detective as the person solving the crime. It's usually someone who owns a bookstore or a Jessica Fletcher type of character who is a writer but solves mysteries. There's usually that element of the person who's solving the mystery is not necessarily law enforcement.

ACF: That's exactly right. And so, yeah, so my character is Harvey Beckett and she, yeah, owns this bookstore, and solves it because she's nosy. I mean, that's just really what it is.

[laughter]

ACF: She's nosy. So, she just gets into everything. I mean, some Cozies... yeah, like the Jessica Fletcher thing, there's a setup, so it makes sense that she would understand mysteries because she writes them.

Sometimes it's that somebody is involved, you know, guess wrapped up. Like I read a series where the woman runs retreats for knitters and people keep dying at the retreat.

GP: Oh lord, that sounds like a fantastic thing to put on the brochure.

ACF: Does anyone go, right? And no one wants to go to my town either because people are dying at like a rate that they shouldn't die in that small town. But the idea is that because these murders happen on her watch, so to speak, she gets involved in them.

So, there needs to be some logical reason the person's involved in trying to solve these mysteries. But they are amateurs; and often, one of the tropes of Cozies is that they annoy law enforcement--

GP: Yeah.

ACF: -because they are getting their nose where they shouldn't be.

GP: Yeah. It's kind of like, so I have to admit, I sort of have geriatric tastes in tv. Like my husband makes fun of me all the time because I'm constantly watching like Murder, She Wrote and Matlock and yada yada, Diagnosis: Murder.

But there is that element of like, you know, the main character goes, 'I don't want to get involved, I don't want to be nosy'... and like two seconds later, they're involved and they're sticking their nose in where they're not supposed to be.

ACF: That's exactly right. And you get Cozy readers who really find it annoying when people stick their noses. I'm like, but that's kind of the whole thing. And you also find the Cozy readers who get particularly annoyed, like if law enforcement asks for their help, which is also something that often happens in Cozies – but most of the time, it's that they're kind of annoying to the law enforcement officers... they're assisting from someone.

GP: And I think it can also play into the humor angle too. I feel like Cozies have, it brings in humor in a way that other formats of Mystery might not have humor.



ACF: Yeah.

GP: Like the fact that you can have that banter between law enforcement and the amateur sleuth – and like that you could have, you know, a sheriff Tucker, or Tupper who's, you know, kind of a bumbling fool and doesn't know up from down... and then Jessica Fletcher has to come in and, you know, sort of sort things out for him.

But like that only works in a Cozy, it wouldn't work in-- If it was a Police Procedural and that was the sheriff, there would be a problem.

ACF: Right. And that's like another element of the tone. It can be really light and funny, which is I think why people read them voraciously, right? But I mean, I read thrillers too, and I like thrillers – but I have the cap on how many thrillers I can read is limited because I need some lightness in all that dark, right?

GP: Yeah.

ACF: And at Cozy you can have a lot of lightness even in a Murder Mystery, you know? I mean, they're classic if you watch the Hallmark Murder & Mystery channel--

GP: Yes.

ACF: That is what they are. I meanm they're just Hallmark Movies with a murder; that's what they. You do kind of get that humor and you can get-- I mean, some Cozy authors have really snarky, amateur sleuths.

A lot-- Most, not all, but most amateur sleuths are women. So, they have this sort of snarky, sarcastic attitude. That's my preference in reading. But there's also a whole world of like very sweet sleuth, you know, just very good people who are solving mysteries... and sometimes, you know, we all need to read and just know there are good people in the world.

GP: Yeah. The other thing I noticed too in Cozy is the supporting cast is really important. Like you need to have that town that feels cohesive.

You need to have that community, whether it's, you know, like the community inside the bookstore or whether it's, you know, Cabot Cove... sort of the major players in Cabot Cove or-- There's always that feeling of the amateur sleuth being a connected person in whatever community they're in.

Andi Cumbo-Floyd: Right. And you do need to-- I mean, that's probably why most Cozies are set in small towns, because it would be difficult-- There probably is a series set like in New York City, in your town, but it's harder because that's not how cities work.

I mean, I know you have people in New York City, but you're not going to run into the same people on Main Street all the time like you would in Cozy. Like in mine-- And one of the things I do regret in my Cozy series is I made my cast of characters big and I'm like, 'Oh wait, they didn't come to dinner, I got to go back and add them into that dinner.' You know?

But you do, you just have friends... and I think, again, it's like sort of building into that sort of desire to create a world where people want to escape to. You know, don't we all want to have this coterie people who just love us and want us to succeed, but also can tease us and guide us if we're making bad choices? You know, I think that's one of the stays of Cozies that people really enjoy.



GP: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it's why I watch the Hallmark Mystery Movies channel when I'm not writing. One of the things that we've hinted at, but we haven't really addressed, is what people lovingly call Cabot Cove Syndrome.

Which is where like when there are enough murders in a small town, pretty soon you have to wonder like; why are people living in that town? Why are people coming into that town? Who have they not yet killed or made into a murderer in that town?

How have you-- Obviously without spoilers, how have you sort of navigated that issue of... there are only so many people in this town and eventually you're going to either have to kill them or make them into the killer?

ACF: Yeah, so the way I handle the killer part is they're always new people to town, in my books – it's not always true in Cozies – but these are people that are always new to town or are visiting town; they're not the long-stay community members.

And then I sort of alternate my victims. So, one is somebody that's, you know, a banker or a nurse. And then the other is, again, a newcomer to town. So, the one I'm writing right now, the woman has literally... like, she dies the first day at her new job.

I kind of try to balance it, but I also just talk about it. Like, that's one of the things I love about Louise Penny's books – which are not Cozies, but they're great mysteries – is that, you know, everybody just talks about how people die all the time in Three Pines.

And it kind of just, you know, it kind of lets the reader in on, 'Ha-ha, we have the secret joke that everybody dies in this town of 150 people and yet people still come.'

[laughter]

ACF: I think you just have to-- It's one of those willful suspension of disbelief things, you know? But I try to just handle it by being upfront about it and being like, 'Look, another person died in Harvey's bookstore.'

[laughter]

GP: And you know, it's funny too, like you see different series or different, I guess, formats that use this, that handle it differently. Like, I'm thinking of *Murder, She Wrote*, because that's the thing that's freshest in my head that... you know, like basically they send Jessica on the road, they're like, 'We can't kill any more people in Cabot Cove, so let's send you on book tour.'

And then all of a sudden, she's, you know, in some other town. But then there is that element of like, every time she shows up in a town, somebody dies. And you got to figure at some point people are going to be like, 'Do not come to our town.'

ACF: Done with you.

GP: Yes. [laughs]

ACF: I think that's where the logical leap to the paranormal is, right? Like, that might be a demon.

GP: Exactly. Very good-natured, smart writer demon. Yes. So, before we started chatting and doing this interview, you had hinted at this sort of the challenges around making the shift from the more literary Magical Realism, heavier, denser work that you've done in the past... and shifting to Mysteries.



You mentioned earlier in this interview that like Mysteries in part, the reason you picked this genre is because it felt lighter and easier. So, can you talk about like, the challenge piece of it? Like, what has made it harder to shift?

ACF: My own mindset, that's been-- You know, I have an MFA in Creative-- I have it in Creative NonFiction, but you know-- I went to, I have a lot of education in Literature, you know, I have an M.A In Literature; and so, I had, probably have still sometimes, the mindset that the only good literature is the serious heavy stuff.

And I love that stuff. I mean, read as buy it for fun. Like, there's not much that's heavier in literature – but that's actually not accurate, right? Like, there's a great deal of value in literature that's light, you know?

And just because it's light doesn't mean it doesn't have depth either. It just means it kind of comes at that depth slanted, you know, quote Emily Dickinson. So, like, I think of... if people ever bash David Sedaris for being funny, they would be ridiculous, right? Because he's looking at really serious things, but he's just funny.

You know, I guess, I assume he is probably funny in-person too, [laughs] because he is so funny. If David Sedaris ever wants to invite me over, I'll come. We don't knock his stuff because it's humorous. So, I don't know quite why we knock what we call Genre Fiction because it's lighter in density, like, but not necessarily in depth.

You know, I've heard a lot of really great Urban Fantasy novels that go into issues of justice or delve into historical themes that are really intense and unspoken often. So, I had to get kind of past my own mindset about that stuff and be like, 'No, I read Cozy Mysteries because I want to get to a world that feels better, but that doesn't mean that I am not a thinking and thoughtful person.'

And so, I can write them and still be a thinking and thoughtful person. So, that's the big one. And then the, yeah, just writing with the idea of economics and-- [laughs] Sometimes it's really, you know, there is that sort of terrible myth of the 'starving artist' that if you're not poor and basically living on ramen, you're doing it wrong... and I'm kind of tired of ramen.

[laughter]

ACF: So I wanted to write some stuff that sells, you know, and Cozy Mystery sell. So, I had to kind of get over myself and be like, 'It's not wrong to make a living at what you love.' There's actually probably something really redemptive about making a living at what you love. And so, I just had to kind of do a lot of mindsets work.

GP: So, can you talk a little bit about, sort of, how you've gone about making that mindset shift? Because mindset shifts are not easy. Like, you know, people use the word 'mindset', like you just snap your fingers and it resets your mind. But no, it's like a big long process. What are some of the things that you've grappled with as you've made this shift?

ACF: Yeah. I mean, I had to sort of add or adjust the writers with whom I have regular interaction. I mean, I still love all of my friends from my MFA program. Some of them also write more light stuff, and some of them are still much more in the literary world; and I'm still in touch with them.

But I also added on a lot of writers who write what we call Genre Fiction. Because I needed to have conversations with people about; you know, how do you advertise on Amazon and what do you do when somebody says they don't like your main character?



I needed to be able to have those conversations as well as the ones about language and Lolita and stuff. [laughs] I just need-- So, I had to expand my community, and that really helps.

You know, you run a business too, Gabriela, so you understand this. Like you have to have a both/and mindset; you know, there's an autistic mindset involved in these things, but there's also a business mindset.

And so, I had to kind of expand the people I was talking to, so I had some more of that business and marketing's conversation in my daily life. That was a big thing I did.

And then I just let myself know myself, like, which again, it's not this sort of like when in the morning I woke up and was like, 'Oh, I love mysteries.' It was just sort of, 'Pay attention to what you've always read, Andi.'

You know, at a very dark time in my life, I probably read 40 Cozy Mysteries over the course of a month because I just needed to sit in happy places; and those books saved me.

You know, so to honor that that happened is not a small thing, you know? And to say to those writers, 'You saved my life, I think.' And to then be like, 'I might do that for somebody else.'

You know, I'm not really that big on myself, but maybe someday somebody will read my book and was like, 'I just needed to go to St. Marin's and be away for a little while.' You know, sitting with that gift as opposed to just the literary gifts that writing gives, that also really helped me.

GP: Yeah. Yeah. And I love what you said about the Both/And Mindset. It kind of reminds me of, you know, in improv that you're taught to say Yes/And. Like it's not about negating, one thing negating the other – but like the two things amplifying each other. And the art amplifies the business, but the business side also can amplify the art piece of the puzzle.

ACF: Absolutely. I mean, and for me too, one of the things that's wonderful about, hopefully-- I mean, I've had some pretty good financial success with these books. I mean, I'm not-- You know, I'm not John Grisham – but maybe, someday.

[laughter]

ACF: But to think that this might open up the space in my life later to do more literary things, and do them richly and deeply and slowly because I'll be able to buy groceries off the Mysteries... and I can spend more time on the other things. Or I can do a really in-depth non-fiction history research project. I mean, that's also valuable too. It does give me both hands, you know, even in terms of genre.

GP: Yeah, absolutely. So, one of the other things... you mentioned like being in the ecosystem of fellow writers who are writing genre stuff so they, you can talk about things like marketing yourself and things like that.

Obviously, you chose a very particular pen name, you chose to do a pen name from the get-go as opposed to like, you know, having the same name that you've published your other books under.

And I'm guessing you've probably also made some very distinct choices in terms of how you've marketed the books, how you're launching this series versus your previous works. Can you talk a little bit about the strategy, the business side part of building this Cozy Mystery series?

ACF: Sure. Yeah, I mean, the nom de plume; I like to sound fancy when I say that. My name is just my initials; and Bookens, because she runs a bookstore; there's like no rocket science to it. I came up with it like on an afternoon.



But I wanted to market these different-- There's no secret. And everybody that knows me as Andi Cumbo-Floyd also knows I write these books as ACF Bookens. So, I'm not trying to hide identity, but I am trying to game, particularly, Amazon's algorithm, which if I only sell Cozy Mysteries will recommend other Cozy Mysteries, recommend my books to people who buy Cozy Mysteries.

But if I muddy the water of my other name, which has already got nonfiction and Magical Realism, like if I could go back, I would also have a pen name for my Magical Realism stuff; that's a harder recommending sell for the Amazon algorithm. So, that's one of the things I was thinking about.

But also, I know so much more than when I started this writing journey 10 years ago. So, I know I need to build a mailing list; and I know I need to be very thoughtful about what my cover designs look like, and what my blurbs look like. And I need to have those fit the genre so that the instant somebody sees my book on Apple Books, for example, they know it's a Cozy Mystery.

As opposed to a thriller or even like a Literary Mystery like Louise Penny's books. I need them to see the cover and be like, 'Oh Cozy, look at the doggy... great, I'll read this one.' You know?

GP: Yeah.

ACF: That's how people find books. You know, we all want to think, they just know of us and want to read our stuff, but that's not how it works.

[laughter]

ACF: So, I'm just really-- I'm a lot more strategic about this than I was 10 years ago, and it's paid off. I mean, I have-- The largest mailing list of my life is related to these Cozy Mysteries because I've just been very strategic about doing newsletter swaps with other Cozy writers about having a free prequel that I give away via book funnel that gets people on my list.

All of those marketing strategies I've just been really, really conscious of as I build this Cozy Mystery brand.

GP: So, tell us a little bit about the newsletter swaps because for our listeners, I have a feeling that like the free prequel sign up for the mailing list, that's a concept most people probably already have heard.

But the newsletter swaps, I feel like those are more, I haven't seen writers outside of Genre Fiction do that type of promotion, although it can be incredibly effective in other venues as well, I would think. Can you tell us a little bit about how that works?

ACF: Yeah, I mean, because Genre Fiction is so niche, I can find-- I mean, so there's a Facebook group for Cozy Mystery authors; and I can go on and say, "Hey, I have a newsletter space next Friday, anybody want it?" And get 20 takers. I mean, I don't take 20 because that's a big newsletter, but like two.

And then they'll, in exchange, share my book. And because our readership for those mailing list is so niche, we can sell a lot of books or get a lot of signups from one simple share. So, for example, my newsletter is going out today's Wednesday, right? Tomorrow.

And so, I have two books in there that people have offered to share my book if I share theirs, and they're just-- Sometimes the books are discounted on the retailers, sometimes they're not, sometimes they're new releases, sometimes they're free prequels.



But it lets you find readers that you might not necessarily know yourself, you know? And it lets you do it in a way that doesn't require a lot of effort like in terms of things like SEO... like the things that we have to do if we write nonfiction, for example.

It just, my Bookens website is basically three pages, and it just has the books and the covers because I need to have a web presence. But I'm not trying to use that as the major marketing tool like I do with my non-fiction brand.

GP: Right. And the other piece of it too is as you were talking, you were saying how, like, it allows the writer to reach larger number of people that may not know them.

I also think the reverse is true too; it's a service to the newsletter readers, right? Because these are voracious readers of this particular niche who are probably looking for new things to read. So, it's also a way to help populate a newsletter without having to write a whole extra ton of stuff and still offer a tremendous amount of value to your readers.

ACF: That's right. Exactly. So, for me, it's... like the newsletter that's going out tomorrow, I talk about, I think I wrote maybe 300 words about the new Enola Holmes movie, which is good by the way. So, I can like--

I can be personal and I can, but, you know, without oversharing, you know, I can talk about what I liked about the movie and what I didn't – but it's short. It doesn't take a ton of effort; I can scroll it out in, you know, 15 minutes.

And then I can share, like you said, these books that people really want to read. I always try to find ones that are discounted because Cozy, a lot of Cozy Mystery readers are older and on fixed incomes. I'm trying to provide them books that don't cost them a lot of money to read.

And then I also do these group promotions through sites like StoryOrigin or BookFunnel where a lot of the books are free. So, like I have this, tomorrow, this book promotion will go out; and it's got 30 free books in it.

GP: Wow.

ACF: So, go and get-- I mean, if they're like me, they'll download them all and then 17 years from now, I'll catch up and read them all – but they're all there, you know? And so, it is for people that are voracious readers; it is a service, it's personal. You know, it feels-- I always get replies to these emails; and so, I get to know my readers too. So, hopefully, they enjoy that as much as I do.

GP: Yeah. I loved also what you said about like, you know, that they can download stuff that's lower priced or like the promotions where it's like 30 free books. That idea of the quick win--

I mean, from a marketing perspective as someone who is constantly living in the psychology of marketing, because it's one of my nerdy obsessions. That idea of giving your readers that quick Yes! Moment is so powerful because a lot of times, I think, as writers we feel like we have to over-deliver and have these like monstrously long essays with all our feels just poured into it. And yet, like that's not necessarily what your reader needs. Sometimes your reader just wants to go, 'Yes! Free books!'

ACF: That's right. Or just, 'Oh yeah, I've been meaning to watch in Enola Holmes.' Or, 'Yeah, oh great, I forgot about that book that I wanted to read back then.'

You know, I think I personally don't like newsletters that are super long because I don't have time to read them, and then I feel guilty.



[laughter]

ACF: So, I like to get these newsletters that give me some value that I can read and find what I need, and then I'm done with them. Like I feel like I accomplished something, and I don't have the burden of them sitting in my inbox while I hope to read them later.

GP: Yeah. And of course, I've said that before and I am like queen of writing the like 2000-word essay with every single newsletter. But I think that also hits on a point of something you mentioned before, which is knowing your readers. You know that for your particular readers within this niche of the Cozy Mysteries, that's what they're looking for, so you can serve that to them.

It's a very different beast... like even looking at and thinking about your newsletters for your nonfiction, because I'm on your list, it's a different feel. Like there's a different-- Like I feel like there's more heft in those. Like I don't see you doing the newsletter swap kind of stuff, for example.

ACF: No.

GP: So, I think it's also knowing the audience

ACF: That's right. And why they came to your list. You know, like the people on my non-fiction list are there because they're writers and they want support; you know, so I'm going to give them more.

But the people that are on my Cozy list, are there because they want to read books, not because they want to hear me go on a diatribe about the nosy amateur sleuth, and whether that's a reasonable trope or not; they don't care, they don't.

[laughter]

GP: So, obviously, one of the things that happens to writers, whether we self-publish or traditionally publish, whether we write genre or you know, literary – but there's always going to be some pushback. Like there's always going to be that one disgruntled grumbly review.

And I think like you've chosen-- You've made some very specific decisions in the St. Marin's Cozy Series in terms of depicting your characters and like depicting race, and being very upfront about race and diversity... the social justice angle that is often woven into the stories.

Personally, I love it. I think it's-- That's one of the reasons I want to live in St. Marin's because it sounds like this beautiful community that I'd love to be a part of. But can you talk a little bit about navigating that? Like obviously when we pick a lane, when we take a stand on things, there will be someone who will object. How does a writer deal with that?

ACF: By posting about it on Facebook, to deal with it on Facebook.

GP: [laughs] I was just thinking about that. I saw your post earlier today.

ACF: Yeah. I mean, probably the number one review, negative review I get is that I identify the racial identity of all my characters. I mean, there's a whole thing about breaking down White Supremacy and a very intentional choice I'm making there, but I just know those people aren't my readers.

GP: Yeah.



ACF: Like it annoys me. I mean, in some level, probably it hurts my feelings if I really wanted to think about it too long. But it's also, 'Well, then just don't read my books.' And I don't say that in an ugly way; I just mean they're not for you if they're--

You know, if you're not interested in that, then there's lots of other books... read the other ones, you know? That's how I kind of think about it. And the way that I usually handle it is like I am trying more and more to learn how to telegraph that social justice element in my books.

So, more and more, I'm trying to just let the readers know that if they read my books, there is going to be this discussion of ethnicity often. Or like the new one I'm writing has stuff about disability, right? Because it's just how I see the world.

And I did a great course with Becca Syme recently on Strengths for Writers; and she and I were having a conversation about how that's just kind of how I'm built. And she's like, 'The key is going to be, you just have to let your readers know that's what you do... and then you'll have those readers for life, and the rest of them you just have to kind of let go.'

So, that's kind of how I think about it is... how do I let them know that's what they're in for, so to speak? Because there are people who want that.

GP: Yeah.

ACF: And if they want that then honestly, gosh, there's like a bazillion Cozy Mysteries – go read the ones about pigs, it's fine.

[laughter]

GP: So, I definitely want to dig into sort of the how do we telegraph that because that's definitely something that at DIY MFA... my team and I, it's sort of an ongoing conversation – we call it releasing readers back into the wild.

Like there's that moment where you just sort of bless and release, and there are no-- Like, you just kind of allow them to leave your ecosystem without, you know, no hate... just release.

Obviously, it's a lot easier on everybody – us and also on them – if we don't attract them to our ecosystem in the first place, because then they can find the things that they would prefer easier and faster, right?

So, in terms of, like, from a Cozy Mystery writer perspective... is that something that you telegraph in the cover design, in the book descriptions, in the blurbs, in the, like how would you go about making that obvious to potential readers?

ACF: We'll have to come back in a year and see if I've figured it out. What I'm doing right now, I do not telegraph it in the cover because I don't know how... I don't know how in an image to get that across; I'm just not sure. I have a great cover design company and they do amazing covers for me, and that fit. But I haven't figured out how to get the social justice piece.

Also, there's the element that I write these really fast; and so, I have the covers and the blurbs done, and sometimes they don't really know what the content's going to be yet. So, I don't really know what I'm going to be talking about.



But the other thing I do is-- But what I have sort of doing is, is in my blurbs on the retailers is putting in there some language around these books, intentionally deal with issues of social justice. If those are not topics that you're particularly interested in, these books probably aren't for you. Like I just try to be really upfront about it.

And now, I just get the recommendation of a friend, I've put it into my Amazon bio just to see-- I don't know how-- I don't read a lot of bios on Amazon, but maybe some people do and maybe this will kind of, yeah, just help them be like, 'Oh yeah, I'm not really interested in reading that.'

I mean, maybe for really great reasons. Like maybe they just are really having a really crappy time in their life and they don't want to have to deal with all the things we're all dealing with all the time. Right? And they just want to go into a book and do that, fine. But that's not what you're going to find in my books.

They're still light, there's still too 'market on genre', but they're not-- You know, there's always going to be a social justice piece. And then I do telegraph it, some in my newsletter... usually to large unsubscribed numbers, but that's okay.

[laughter]

ACF: You know, when the Black Lives Matters protests really started this fall, I wrote a newsletter about it; and I got hate mail. I mean, I got some pretty strong hate mail.

GP: Yeah. We got that too.

ACF: Yeah. And then I just have my assistant remove those people from my list. Again, not in an ugly way but because; one, I don't need that in my life. But also, two, clearly, they don't need to be riled up by me. So, we just let you go, you know?

GP: Yeah. It's the same-- We have the same approach as we, you know, we just release back into the wild.

ACF: Yep, release back... with no hard feelings.

GP: No hard feelings. Yeah.

ACF: We don't need to have an interaction about this, I guess. So, then we're going to be done. Yep.

GP: And the other thing too is, you know, it's funny you mentioned like the high unsubscribe numbers. You know, I've been in conference panels where we talk about email newsletters and yada-yada, because that's definitely something I obsess about.

But you know, and often, like a lot of authors get themselves all tied up in knots around unsubscribes. Like, I don't want to mail my list because I might get unsubscribes; yet, I see unsubscribes as being like a metric of engagement.

Like it's a metric for how well you are weeding out your list of the people who your list is not for.

ACF: That's right.

GP: To me, it's like I see, you know, a hundred unsubscribes and I'm like, 'Yes, we did our job this week,' because that's a sign that we actually took a stand on something.



ACF: That's right. I mean, and for me, I follow David Gordon's advice about everything. Like basically, and if I get to meet him someday, I'll be just embarrassingly loving on him. But, you know, his idea is just that when you're paying for people, then you don't want to be there.

And I think that makes good sense. Like I go through my email service provider on a monthly basis and just take out all the inactives because they're not, you know, they're not serving a purpose, so then it's the same when people unsubscribe.

I mean, I even tell them like if they just want to hear when I have a new book out, then follow me on BookBub, and they'll just get a new release alert; and they don't have to hear me blather on about Enola Holmes or whatever they don't want to hear.

And I'm actually fine with that because I also just know we all have limited capacities for intake. So, if what I'm saying to you isn't valuable to you, then please use the space I'm taking to find something else for you. Like, it is just fine with me.

I mean, I won't say like, I don't notice it; I do notice it. I think I'm a person so, you know, I'm like, 'Oh, I got up so high and now 400 people are gone.' But also, I'm like, 'All right, I'm going to go eat a Popsicle and I'll be fine.'

GP: Yeah. Yeah. It also helps to not see those really mean messages too. I very recently started delegating parts of my inbox to members of my team, and I have to say I thought that I was going to feel guilty about it... and I really don't. Like, there's just certain things that-- You know, I love getting email, but there's certain emails that I just don't need to see.

ACF: That's exactly right.

GP: I feel like we could chat about all the stuff and more for another like five hours. But in the interest of time so that we can both get back to our writing, I wanted to ask you what's next. So, when this episode airs, your newest book will have just released, what else do you have that you want to tell our listeners about?

ACF: Yeah, so there'll be one more book in the St. Marin's Series that comes out in January. So, that's what I'm writing right now because this is the joy of self-publishing, right? Like I can write it in September and October, and it'll be on January... fully edited too, by the way.

But then I'm going to start a new series, a new Cozy series about a single mom, which is my new identity in the world, who cross stitches – which is one of my hobbies – and solves murders related to old buildings. I know something--

And I'm going to do a couple things differently; I'm going to have a smaller cast of characters so I don't have to keep up with everyone. And she is going to move around. I mean, she'll be in her geographic area, but she's not going to be in one town. There's going to be a broader geography involved. So, that'll be out next year. So, that's my new thing.

GP: Awesome. Well, we will definitely need to catch up with you to see how that goes. And I'm also going to be curious to hear you talk about how the idea of like closing out a Cozy Mystery series, because often we're used to these Cozy Mystery series that go on forever and you have--

You know, like the Hercule Poirot Curtain, that like we don't find out until after the author is gone, how the series resolves itself, as it were. So, it's interesting that you've made this conscious choice to wrap up the St. Marin's series.



ACF: Yeah, and I probably won't wrap it real hard because I may come back, but I do want to have that sixth book close some things, like I know how things are going to be. I want to know, if I don't go back to the series, at some point, that people feel satisfied. And we don't-- I call it Designated Survivor Series Syndrome where the show gets canceled, and we're all like, 'What, what happened?' You know?

GP: [laughs] Yeah. I was thinking that like, there are a lot of like Cozy Mystery TV series, like I think Murder, She Wrote... this happened. And they're also... like Magnum P.I. also, this happened where like, with them, it was more like they thought it was going to end at one season, but then they're like, 'Nope, we're going to keep going.'

And then, all of a sudden, they're like, 'Actually, no, we are ending.' And there's this just weird like sort of half-season that happens.

ACF: Yes. Or Lost did the same thing, right? They thought they were going to have another season and then they ended up, and then so you just get that weird graph that lost it.

GP: Yeah, yeah. I like that you're giving your readers that closure, that is awesome. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

ACF: Yeah. I think in this context it's; don't be afraid to write something that you think will sell. Like, you know, try it out... see how it goes, follow the rule. You know, the rules... the loose rules about design and cover and stuff. But try it, see how it is, if you like making money.

[laughter]

GP: Does not sound like, you know, something that-- That sounds like something I'd like to jump into. So yeah. Well, thank you so much, Andi, for being here today. It is always such a pleasure to speak with you.

ACF: Thank you so much for having me.

GP: All right, word nerds, thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

