

PROLOGUE

I HAVE AN IDEA

I first had the idea of writing a book when I was twelve.

I am forty-five now.



So if you bought this book because you have an idea and would like to know what to do next, the first piece of good news is that apparently there is no immediate rush.

My idea survived for thirty-three years.

Mostly because I did absolutely nothing dangerous with it, such as trying to turn it into a book.

For a very long time, writing a book belonged to the comfortable category of things I would definitely do one day.

One day is an excellent place for ambitious projects.

There are no deadlines there.

No bad reviews.

No plot holes.

Nobody asks what your genre is.

You don't need an ISBN in one day.

You certainly don't need to know what an ISBN is.

The book I was going to write changed many times over the years. Sometimes it was a vague story. Sometimes it was a slightly less vague story. Sometimes it was simply the pleasant knowledge that I was probably the kind of person who could write a book if I ever decided to.

This is an extremely efficient way of being a writer.

Nothing can go wrong.

Then, eventually, I made the mistake of actually writing one.

That was when I discovered that having an idea and making a book are separated by a surprisingly large number of activities, many of which appear to have been designed by people who strongly preferred that I do something else with my life.

At first, I expected the obvious problems.

Characters.

Plot.

Dialogue.

The minor inconvenience of needing approximately eighty thousand words when you currently have seventeen.

Those seemed fair.

I wanted to write a book.

Writing would presumably be involved.

What I did not expect was everything else.

I stopped asking questions like *What does this character really want?* and started asking questions like *Does this paperback need bleed?*

I learned about trim sizes.

Metadata.

Keywords.

Categories.

ISBNs.

ASINs.

Margins.

Front matter.

Back matter.

I discovered that there are several different ways to describe the exact same book and that apparently I was expected to know which one Amazon wanted at any particular moment.

I learned that a cover can look beautiful at full size and become completely useless when reduced to something approximately the size of a postage stamp.

I learned that publishing a book and helping another human being discover that the book exists are two entirely different professions.

This book is about the first one.

The second profession would very much like my credit card details.

We'll get to that another time.

None of this was part of the original idea.

The original idea had characters in it.

This is how you become extremely busy without knowing what you're doing.

You start with a story.

Then you make the perfectly reasonable decision to write it down.

And somewhere between Chapter One and pressing Publish, you find yourself at eleven thirty at night comparing two almost identical fonts while reading an article about ebook metadata and wondering when exactly you became this person.

The strange thing is that none of this made me want to stop.

Quite the opposite.

Because underneath all the technical nonsense, new terminology, wrong turns, unnecessary experiments and occasional moments of staring at a screen with genuine hostility, something was actually happening.

The imaginary thing was becoming real.

A sentence became a scene.

Scenes became chapters.

Chapters became a manuscript.

The manuscript became a file.

The file became a book.

And eventually, somewhere I couldn't see, someone I had never met opened it and started reading.

That part is still slightly ridiculous to me.

For thirty-three years, the book existed in the safest possible place:

nowhere.

Nobody could dislike it there.

Nobody could misunderstand it.

Nobody could give it three stars because they liked the story but found one character annoying.

It was perfect.

Then I published it.

Less safe.

Much more interesting.

This book is about everything between those two points.

It is not a promise that following a particular sequence of steps will make you a bestselling author.

I have no such sequence.

And I would be deeply suspicious of anyone claiming to have one.

It is not a comprehensive encyclopedia of publishing either. There are professionals who know vastly more about editing, typography, book design, distribution, copyright and everything else we're going to wander into than I do.

You may eventually want to hire some of them.

This is a map for the person standing where I stood, looking at an idea and thinking:

Okay.

Now what?

We'll start with the story.

We'll find out whether the idea can survive more than seventeen pages.

We'll build characters, a skeleton, a timeline and several problems that did not exist before we started.

Then we'll write it.

We'll make it worse.

We'll make it better.

We'll give it to other humans.

Then we'll turn the manuscript into an actual book.

We'll choose a title.

A cover.

A size.

A font.

We'll meet ISBN.

We'll meet metadata.

And eventually, after learning considerably more than seemed reasonable when we began, we'll arrive at a button.

PUBLISH.

There will be useful things in this book.

Actual useful things.

Checklists. Processes. Questions to ask yourself. Ways of organizing a story. Things worth doing before you press Publish. Things you probably don't need despite the internet insisting otherwise.

I'll tell you what worked for me.

I'll also tell you what didn't.

And when something is simply my preference rather than a rule,
I'll try very hard not to turn it into one.

Especially considering how much of writing consists of staring at
something you wrote yesterday and wondering what the hell you
meant.

You don't need permission to start.

You don't need to understand everything we're going to cover
before writing your first sentence.

Right now, you need something much smaller.

An idea.

If you already have one, congratulations.

So did I.

For thirty-three years.

Having an idea was the easy part.

This was my first mistake.