

Book Journeys Interview - January 8, 2015

Dr. Angela Lauria with Brit McGinnis, author of *Gin and Brimstone*

"I would say it's more important to be consistent with writing than to do a lot of writing at once."
~Brit McGinnis

Angela:

Hang on. Ah ok. Alright, we are gonna have to ... this later but we are kicking off a little bit late today. Ahh, just had to restart the program, a little bit of technical difficulties but we are here now on Book Journeys Radio. Better late than never and we have this week sort of a different, a different cake than we normally talk about. Brit McGinnis is the author of *Gin and Brimstone*. We're gonna talk about Brit's entire process and while we usually have non-fiction authors on the show, I think Brit's approach to creating books and to telling stories is really unique. So Brit thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

Brit:

Of course thanks for having me.

Angela:

Awesome. Well, let's start with your first book, *Gin and Brimstone*. Just to give people an idea of the kind of work that you do, why don't you tell us what that book is about?

Brit:

Well, of course. It is a urban fantasy which basically means, take any city or conventional setting, usually a bigger city. My book primarily takes place in San Francisco and added supernatural elements or fantasy elements to it. A great example of this genre is the TV show Grimm which takes place mostly in my hometown which is Portland, Oregon. But then you have creatures and monsters and all that running around. And I especially love...

Angela:

... creatures and monsters in Portland. I've seen that. I've seen them.

Brit:

(Laughs) Oh goodness. You have no idea how thrilled I was to see that The Flash, the new TV show about the superhero, The Flash, is ... in Portland. They use lots of Portland landmarks even though it's not exclusively called Portland.

Angela:

Springfield. A generic city. Yeah, awesome. So you write urban fantasy and then *Gin and Brimstone*, what's the premise of that story?

Brit:

Exactly. It's a little bit of a Persephone story. It's a very young woman who is confronted by the devil, the actual devil and asked to make a bargain with him. She can leave her old life behind, which is in no way is a bad life but it's very ordinary, and become his bride and become something completely different. So part of the premise is, "Would you choose something that is so radically different than where you are now even if it's scary and unknown?"

Angela:

Love it, love it. So you have kind of a unique way - selling any book is hard but selling fiction is I think in many ways an even bigger challenge, and I was really impressed with the way you've really been building a platform and readership. Can you talk to people about the Patreon project, the Britmakesbooks project? How does this work and what was your idea behind it?

Brit:

Well, basically my Patreon project which is patreon.com, it's basically corresponding but it's a subscription service to people's work and basically you help sponsor your favorite artists, gather funds so that they can keep doing their work. It gained a lot of popularity among YouTube personalities and the experiment I tried this year which...

Angela:

Love it.

Brit:

Yeah, it's a great way to keep content that you love going even if advertisers don't necessarily gather them and gather their information and see them as big enough. But basically what I tried and which I eventually kind of retired because I wanted to spend more one-on-one time with my fans but I highly recommend this, is I just put out all of the information for all of the books I'm planning to write over the next five years. And I said, as soon as I hit these financial goals, because to be honest, I have a day job and writing is not yet my full-time career, so I have to set aside time and therefore potential earning hours to write books. So I said as soon as I hit these landmarks, much like you would do with the Kickstarter campaign, I will release these books. And whoever is a patron of mine will receive free copies of these books for life or as long as they're a patron of mine. I basically wanted to make the best modern fan club that you can and I think Patreon is very well-fitted for that.

Angela:

So your fan club, why would somebody join it? And you've got some really specific reasons which I think are awesome so share some of those.

Brit:

Well, I try my hardest to treat my readers like they're my friends. So, but the book, I'm also the editor-in-chief of a book review blog because me and my friends wanted to get together and read great books. And I think the most successful authors in this day and age treat their fans not only like they're equal to deserve ... inside process because I think ... toward that, but they

really like when you treat them well. So as part of my fan club called The Inner Circle, I would sign up with some of my author friends and give them a free bonus reward every month. So for example, anyone who sponsored me this past month, any new patrons would receive a copy, actually three different copies from my dear author friend, Lauren Wilder.

Angela:

Wait, what is that?

Brit:

Dear author, my friend, my author friend, Lauren Wilder.

Angela:

Oh, oh got it. Okay. Cool! So it's actually a way for her to maybe develop fans as well but you're giving them a, like a bonus.

Brit:

Absolutely. I'm actually releasing my first non-Inner Circle newsletter. And there's a similar feature in that where I say, "Here are books by authors I think you'll love if you love my work." And I think that's just how the modern author's cape, I guess, is shaping up to be is that, people trust personal recommendations.

Angela:

Mmm. Yeah, absolutely. And especially there's a certain, whether it's justified or not we could argue, but there's a certain place that authors hold in readers' hearts. There's a certain amount of credibility you get so a recommendation from me might be something different than somebody who is a reader and a fan of yours. They're gonna listen to it in a different way. I think that's really powerful to leverage.

Brit:

Absolutely. One of my favorite authors on Twitter is Meg Cabot. She's the author of The Princess Diaries series and she has completely embraced this despite being traditionally published and despite kind of, I don't think she's ever independently published a book on her own. But she has seen and taken notes of what independent authors have done and she's so great. I love her because she speaks in a very natural voice, she's very friendly. She praises other authors on her Twitter account and says, "Oh I'm so happy for my friend. She made the New York Times Bestseller list." She wants to, she wants her fans and her readers to see her as a friend. And I think that's fantastic because well, what do you have, what do you have to lose? You know, people get enthusiastic, people get enthusiastic about things. So if you can match their enthusiasm and give them, and reward them for being enthusiastic about you, you'll have a true fan and they will advocate for you.

Angela:

I love that. So uhm, by the way, I wanna spell this for people 'cause I wasn't familiar with this website. Uhm, you might know Kickstarter, Indiegogo. This is a very different take on crowd

funding and I really love it so I'm gonna spell it for you. It's Patreon - it's P as in Paul, A as in Alpha, T as in Tom, R as in Romeo, E as in Elephant, O as in Open, N as in Nancy. So it's patreon, patreon.com. And then if you wanna see Brit's page, which I think is awesome, you can go to patreon.com/britmakesbooks and Brit spells her name B-R-I-T like a British girl, uhm, britmakesbooks. And uhm, I really recommend you check that out and think about creating a campaign, but also look at the energy that she has towards her fans. So when you're thinking about your readers, what does your connection feel like? Do you think about your readers? I know you think about your message. I know you think about your story. But almost always, when I talk to fiction authors, they wanna tell me their story. And you know, Brit has a great story and I think she's done a great job of explaining this genre. But I love the energy she brings to that connection with her reader because that's really the magic and we've talked on the show about how there used to be 300,000 books a year that were published ten years ago. And now we're seeing 600,000 books a month published. So if we're reaching that level of just such massive growth in the number of books that are out there, the real differentiator is the connection you make with your readers. That's what people come back for, that's what people actually read your book for and I think, you know, just looking at that energy and that relationship she's building even if you don't do a similar campaign I think will be helpful. So you have talked about a five-year plan. I'm hoping this isn't like a Soviet communist five-year plan. Uhm, you've talked about how the multiple books, do you just have *Gin and Brimstone* out now?

Brit:

Yes, but I'm actually dropping a series of three books over this next year.

Angela:

Oh!

Brit:

Yeah, I've been working on this for a little bit but I figure better early than never. So yeah, that will be coming out later this year. Should I talk about it?

Angela:

Ok so lets, well, here's what I wanna talk about because you've had a really interesting experience with publishing your first book. So why don't you talk about how you published *Gin and Brimstone* and then what I'd love for you to share with people are some of the lessons learned, things that you will do differently with this new series or things that you might recommend that people differently than you so we can learn from your mistakes.

Brit:

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Well, when I finished the book, I mean I was extremely green, this being my first book, I held it up as, you know, this is going to be THE book. This is going to be the paragon which I think from what I've gathered a lot of people feel about their first book. Eventually I got really tired of this because I was 22 when I finished the book and it only came out last year when I was 23. And I eventually realized that honoring my first book, while important because it's my first book, keeping it under a rock was only hindering my entire career

starting because the longer I held this to be sacred and you know, I wanna do it absolutely right the first time and this is going to influence everything. That was a lot of pressure on myself and in the meantime, you know, my career wasn't going, wasn't starting yet. So I found a very small independent publisher, who were great but they were primarily, they were general publishers. They did not specialize in fiction. So if I could, the first thing I would recommend to people is if you're publishing something, especially something like urban fantasy which is fiction, but it's a very specific kind of fiction, make sure if you're going with the publisher, that they specialize in that thing.

Angela:

Ah, I think that is great advice and easy to, you know, a lot of the steps are the same. But what was the thing that you felt like they were missing not understanding your genre as well as maybe you would have liked?

Brit:

Well, one thing that's really key for fiction books in general but especially supernatural books is that, the key to most people's success initially in this genre is signing up for blog tours which is basically distribute the, I love these things because it keeps me on the ground and makes me hook up with people who really love this genre. You distribute your books through a lot of different blogs, usually through a coordination agency and there are some really good ones out there. And they'd take it up and they either promote it through a single promotion post or they reveal it and basically your book is highlighted across their specific group of niche blogs for from, anywhere from three days to two weeks. So I was game to do that. I said, "Hey we should do this, get to send to these blogs." And they said, "No, the mailing list should be enough." And you know, it did distribute my book but not as much as it could have been in the blogs. And honestly, I don't blame my publisher because I was following my instinct in going with people who had been in publishing longer but I was holding back from saying something that I felt was right. So I would first, so that's the second set of advice is even if you feel like, even if you're dealing with people who know more than you, if you have an instinct about what you want to do with your book, listen to it. I mean I was 22. I mean I was 22 years old. I figure I am the greenest person ever. I should just listen to what they have to say. And they were very well-meaning but they didn't know what to do best with my book. So I would say listen to your instinct, experiment, even if it doesn't work, you'll know.

Angela:

Mhmm. So what are you doing differently this time?

Brit:

What I'm doing differently this time is I'm spending much more time on my cover. If you looked at *Gin and Brimstone's* cover, and I'm actually thinking about doing a special 2015 Halloween edition with new cover. That will hopefully go down next year. But if you look at the cover it's a highly romance-centered cover. And while a romantic relationship is at the heart of my book, I mean it's one of the driving forces, it's not key to the mood of the story. But last time I'm like, "Okay, I just wanna get this out. I wanna meet my deadline. I just wanna get this out." So this

time I'm definitely investing more time in my covers. The second thing is that I'm not going to be as adherent to deadlines. I know that sounds bad but I think sometimes holding through a certain deadline like I'm going to get all of these books out by the time I turn X no. of years old which was me at a certain time. I think adhering to that mindset sometimes forces you to cut corners where you don't need to be. And for me again, now that the pressure's off and the first book is out there, I'm going spend much more time trying to do it right and trying to do it true to the story.

Angela:

Mmm. And so, and with your uhm, with your, you've decided are you gonna use a publishing company this time or are you gonna do it yourself?

Brit:

I'm going to do it completely myself. I found a great cover artist. I don't mind plugging if you don't mind?

Angela:

That was my next question! I was gonna say, how did you find, how did you find or how do you plan to find the resources to do it yourself? Give us a little bit of a how-to and where you'll look and yeah, by all means, any resources you wanna share, that's great!

Brit:

Absolutely. Well, first of all never underestimate the power of Twitter. I actually found people, I found my formatter through getting into conversation with someone about this on Twitter. We ended up direct messaging her and I asked, can she answer a trivia question and ... like, "Hey, I'm gonna give a copy to someone who can answer this random question about V for Vendetta." Because I love that ... novel. So I just said, "Hey, if you can answer it, I'm gonna give you a free copy 'cause it's a Friday, why not?" And she answered it correctly so I direct messaged her the book and I said, "Hey you seem really knowledgeable about this. Do you wanna be a paid reader?" She's like, "Yeah maybe, but I'm actually a formatter right now." Like, "Oh I need a formatter. Can I get your email address?" So that was great! And again, again just picking up on the energy and being enthusiastic about your own work can really get you far. For covers, I cannot plug this guy enough. He is humblenations.com and he has a business model that I wish most companies had. You can work with him one-on-one for, you know, standard fee, maybe a little bit more above standard. But that's only because he makes pre-made copies that you can purchase and you say, "Here's my title. Here's my subtitle. Here's my name." He will ship you back the exact cover with your information plugged in and that is yours to keep. So it's just in...

Angela:

Wow!

Brit:

Uhm, it's so great! He is...

Angela:

Okay can you spell his website for people.

Brit:

Okay, it is goonwrite.com or humblenations.com. He is ... humble so I don't mind plugging both. His news, I would say if you're at all curious about him, subscribe to his newsletter if you're on the bench because you will get alerted when he has new covers up for sale. The covers are, you buy as is but you will plug in your information and give you a few different versions of the cover that you can use for your own formatting. And he usually releases about a hundred new covers at a time.

Angela:

Wow! This is the crazy model. I love it! So I'm gonna read this to you guys so you share what you think. Sometimes it's hard over a recording. So it's HUMBLE like humble pie. H as in Happy, U-M-B-L-E, NATIONS, N as in Nancy, A-T-I-O-N-S.com. humblenations.com and the way this works is these pre-made covers are only 40 bucks each, which is awesome and really, really cool designs as well. Looks like there's a range of prices and designs and uhm, you know, as she also mentioned, you could also work directly with him and hire him to make a custom-made cover. But I think you'll be impressed with some of these designs. I'm excited! That's a great resource.

Brit:

He's really great! I've already purchased, I've purchased four covers so far and I'm definitely planning to do more with him.

Angela:

That's awesome! Yeah, so okay let's talk a little bit in the time we have left about writer's block. I wanna talk about some of the techniques 'cause you've got a big writing agenda for this year - three books in a series you're cranking up this year. So what is your, what's your writing process and how do you deal with writer's block or even just not feeling like writing one day?

Brit:

Well, I think almost before you start the writing process, I think it's important to pick a book or pick an idea that you're excited to write. I think that that's really the first step because this series of three books, I wanted to write it when *Gin and Brimstone* was half over. You know, I was enthusiastic ... and that makes everything easier. I would say it's more important to be consistent with writing than to do a lot of writing at once. I mean I think we've all had those glorious afternoons where we sit down and then we write five thousand words in one go and we feel fantastic, but then we don't write again for another month. And that's horrible for me. Exactly, and you know, that's great because I mean I've had some of my best work come out of sessions like that. But I'd rather have weeks and weeks where I write 500 words in one session but do it consistently. Because you always, it's, you'd always rather be wanting to write more than to be completely burned out and not wanna look at it maybe for ...

Angela:

And so what are some of your other, do you have any writer's rituals? Do you have certain places or times a day that you feel like you're more productive? What have you learned about yourself as a writer?

Brit:

I have learned that a standing desk will save your life. I just...

Angela:

Come on, you're one of those people.

Brit:

I'm definitely, I'm not a fitness nut, but for me to have the option to sit down or stand up is great. And I often find like, you know if I don't feel relaxed, if I feel restless, just having the option to stand helps things move a lot better. I've also learned that I'm still not a morning person. I love writing in the, I'd rather start writing in the early afternoon and continue into the night than start in the morning. I've tried, there's certain work that I can certainly get done in the morning but it is not writing.

Angela:

Mhmm. I'm exactly the same way. And yet so many people I know are morning writers and that's where they feel more productive.

Brit:

Right, it's like those people who, it's like those people who only need six hours of sleep at night. I wish I was those people or was one of those people, but I'm just not. And I think there's a lot of freedom that comes from just accepting that you're not.

Angela:

That's awesome. So when people ask you uhm, which I'm sure they do, for advice, what is the advice you give people who wanna write a book but haven't done it yet?

Brit:

I would say, check yourself to make sure you really want to do it. And that sounds mean but my father actually wrote a book before he died and he wrote it piecemeal and just on airplanes when he was commuting for his job. Like it was so important for him that he gets this book out in the world that he was willing to be uncomfortable to do it. So I think, I hate to sound reductive, but I think if you want to write a book, you will do it. So if you look inside yourself and say, "Well, this is really important to me. I think I'll make some changes to do it." Then you really wanna be an author.

Angela:

And have you made changes to your life in order to be able to write?

Brit:

Absolutely. Being an author has changed my life so much. I mean I had a, this is one of those stories, I had a job at a startup, because my day job's in the social media. I love it. But I was so upset at not having time to write at my startup jobs which I loved, and I loved the people there, but just, I felt that without the freedom to write, I wasn't going to do what I really wanted to do. Money or no, I would be very unfulfilled. So I started my own virtual assisting business so that I could have time to write and have that flexibility and be able to meet and work with authors and creative people just because I wanted it so badly. And I feel like that's honestly what it takes. Even if you wanna keep your day job, are you willing to write during your commute? Are you willing to take a sick day and write a lot on one day? You have to think in terms of, do you want this to be part of your identity? Because it will be.

Angela:

Mmm. Right. Absolutely. I think those are some fantastic tips. Uhm, the one last thing I wanna ask you about in the last minute we have is, I know for you, you always thought you would publish traditionally, which so many of our listeners have that feeling. They wanna find an agent and go the traditional route. And you've gone through a journey over the last couple of years where you really switched your mindset to focusing on publishing and you've also switched from having the one big book to really having a career as a writer and there are lots of books. This is the beginning of a long line of books for you. I just wanted you to take a minute to just share that journey and what your philosophy is as a writer now in terms of publishing and how you wanna do that and why?

Brit:

Absolutely. Well, first of all I wanna say that if your dream is to be traditionally published, that is fantastic. I never want to ... on traditional publishing because in many ways that's still the big dream for me. But when I had my book and I wanted to present it to people, I was faced with the reality of, you could spend ten years trying to get an agent, trying to find a contract that works for you, promoting this and pitching this to publishing houses. The process will be longer than the time that, than almost the hard part of writing the book itself. And so I was forced to make a decision. Was I prepared to take that journey and maybe get one book published but have no guarantee of financial success? Or did I wanna go the independent route and have a much more expedited journey but maybe feel, thought of it as a bit of a frontier person, just be prepared for maybe not as much prestige initially. And I had to really look internally and say, "You know what? I'm at the very beginning of my career. I'm ready to start it." So I took a leap and went into independent publishing, and found a couple of mentors. And I learned that there's an incredible freedom that comes from letting go of the big, big hunken dream because it means that it's all up to you. Success or failure is all up to you. And while that's terrifying, it's also freeing because it means that there's less steps of approval to meet along the way. So that's what really thrills me about it.

Angela:

I love that. Success or failure is always up to us but self-publishing makes it really real. So, well thanks for being our guest today, Brit.

Brit:

Of course, thank you so much for having me.