



Beyond the Book

A podcast series on the business of writing and publishing

Interview with Patti Thorn, co-founder, [BlueInk Review](#)

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KENNEALLY: Print remains black and white, says Patti Thorn. But the world of publishing is suddenly every color of the rainbow – a rainbow that’s followed on the thunderstorm of independent publishing.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for *Beyond the Book*. The changes rolling across publishing have led to an explosion of titles, a mushrooming cloud of books that can frustrate authors and readers, who are left without direction or the critical assessments necessary for book discovery.

BlueInk Review is a three-year-old online service devoted to reviewing self-published books exclusively. BlueInk reviews are syndicated on Ingram’s iPage and Oasis databases, selectively, in a monthly roundup on publishing perspectives and self-publishing review websites, and in an industry-wide newsletter that is used, among other purposes, for monthly acquisitions by the Douglas County library system, with a circulation of eight million. Patti Thorn is a BlueInk co-founder, and she joins me from her office in Denver, Colorado. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Patti.

THORN: Hey, Chris. Great to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, we’re happy to have you. And we’re looking forward to chatting about this very interesting service. We’ll tell people briefly about your background.

Patti Thorn was a long-time writer and editor at the Denver-based *Rocky Mountain News*, which closed in February 2009. She served the last 12 years of her tenure there as chief book critic and editor of the book review pages. Patti is the coauthor of *Fun Places to Go with Children in Colorado*, published by Chronicle Books, and she has served as an independent editor for both fiction and nonfiction. Along with literary agent Patricia Moosbrugger, Patti Thorn co-founded BlueInk three years ago. So Patti, why do self-published authors need an objective book review?

THORN: Well, I do some speaking. When I do my speech, a lot of times, I start with a description of two books – Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Ernest Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*. What I do is I’ll say, how many of you would read this book? I’ll read a description of *Old Man and the Sea* as, you know, this man who goes out to catch a fish, you know, and on and on. Then I’ll say, well, how many of you would read that book? And I get no hands. Same with Jack Kerouac – how many of you would read this book about some guy who goes traveling in his car and so on? No hands.



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But when I read the reviews that came out of those books years ago, which say things like this is the masterpiece of our time. I can't remember the exact wording on any of them, but obviously, there's a big difference between a description of a plot, or a book description, and somebody verifying that this is a fabulous book.

When I do that exercise, people see, I think, really clearly what a review can do for you. Especially in the self-published world, where there're so many thousands of books out there and their quality ranges from wonderful to absolutely unreadable, I think that a review is really critical for people establishing credibility.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well, it matters to both the authors and the readers. And we have to make the point, I think, Patti, that the mainstream media has largely shut self-publishers out of the reviews process. The reviews process has gotten harder than it ever has been. You would know better than most. There are fewer and fewer newspapers and magazines devoted to doing book reviews. But even those that still are reviewing are very reluctant to review self-published books.

THORN: Right. I'm glad you mentioned that, because when I was book review editor at the *Rocky Mountain News*, I would get phone calls all the time from self-publishers wanting us to review their books. They were quite upset when I said, no, we don't do that. I don't know of any mainstream publications that routinely review self-published books. The reason is that, like I said, the quality is so varied, and no papers or magazines really have the kind of resources to have somebody reading all these books to find the ones that are worthy of mentioning.

People kind of imagine these mainstream publications as having these giant staffs and resources to go through these piles and piles of books, but it's just not true. So exactly what you said – it's getting harder and harder. There's fewer and fewer outlets. And as far as I know – I mean, I know the *New York Times* once or twice, maybe, has done a book review of a self-published book, mostly by people that are already established in the mainstream. Certain bloggers and that kind of thing. But generally, the answer, if you call and ask a newspaper if they would review your self-published book, is going to be, I'm sorry, we just don't do that.

KENNEALLY: Right. And a review – well, there are reviews and there are reviews. There are the reviews that appear on Amazon, for example. Those may be well written and well thought out, and they may be written by the author's friends. So when someone finds a book and wants to get the background on the book – obviously, then, Patti, there is a big difference between a user-generated review and one that comes from BlueInk.

THORN: Yes. There is a huge difference. I've talked to countless authors, and we've done some reviews. For example – I won't name the name of this one, but I was talking to the author of this one book that we reviewed. It got a pretty mediocre – a very mediocre review, actually. The woman has probably 30 reviews on Amazon, and probably half of



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them are five stars and half of them are maybe two to one star. When I looked through the list, I recognized a lot of the names of the people that wrote the five stars. Those were all her friends and contacts.

Just to reiterate that what we do is a lot different than that. We use credible reviewers who offer honest opinions of books that are third-party objective, and also very well crafted. We have editors that go over the reviews to make sure they cover all the bases that they need to, that they substantiate what they're saying. The reviews themselves are edited, which I think is really important as well.

KENNEALLY: Right. And let's name some names, then. These are professionals who worked in mainstream media, for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*. They've been editors at publishing houses and so forth. Just give us an idea of the range of people we're talking about.

THORN: Anybody who wants can go on our website, and we've got all the reviewers listed on the website. We need to update that list, because we've added many more reviewers since then. But we have, for example, a highly placed editor with Random House that does a lot of our religion books. We have people who've written for all those – *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *LA Times*.

Since I was book review editor at the *Rocky Mountain News*, I had quite a nice stable of reviewers there, and then was able to recruit further reviewers from the National Book Critics Circle Association. We only use people that have had their work appear in respected places, I guess you would say.

KENNEALLY: Right. And for authors, getting a nice review is probably something good for their sense of professional dignity and importance. But really what it's about is connecting readers and books. These are books that are worth reading. I guess, really, the point here for you, Patti, is to sort of move us into that next generation of publishing.

THORN: Yeah. I mean, I have a pretty big vision for us. We're still – all this whole thing with self-publishing – it's not new, really, but it's really on the cusp of transforming itself, and everything's kind of – all the pieces are moving. But what I see us being is a source where readers can come and – as the lines blur between traditional and self-publishing, a source where readers can go and just go, well, I really want a great mystery. And they can come to our site.

We also have an app that's great, and you can click on mysteries. On the app, we're only listing the books that we highly recommend, so you could download our app and just click on mystery and get a whole list of books that we recommend there. The ultimate vision is to really provide a readers' service, so that readers can find new authors and kind of bridge this gap that's here between traditional and self-publishing worlds.



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KENNEALLY: Right. And though your customers are readers, you've also got customers in two interesting communities. One – the library community. We mentioned the Douglas County library there in Colorado, which is really leading – they're in the vanguard among libraries as far as acquiring e-books for their reading public. So that's one set of customers, the libraries. The other set of customers are the book buyers. There are still bookstores out there.

THORN: Right. (laughter) Right. There are. Yeah, I think there's no question that a review that we're going to give a library or a bookseller is going to be trusted a lot more than any reviews that people are going to get just on the online forum, I think, just sort of out there and about there.

The librarians at Douglas County use our reviews routinely, and they're in their database, and their users, library patrons, can access those reviews. Yeah, you're not going to find a librarian who's going to say, oh, this book got five stars on Amazon. Let's buy that book.

KENNEALLY: Right.

THORN: They want credible third-party objective reviews that they know they trust.

KENNEALLY: Right. Well, we are talking with Patti Thorn, a co-founder of BlueInk Review from Denver, Colorado. I guess, Patti, what I want to do is ask you to describe the process that authors can take to get such a review from BlueInk. There are two tiers, if you will. There's a standard review and a so-called Fast Track review. Can you tell us what they are? And let's tell people what they cost.

THORN: Sure. So the standard review is \$395. It's a turnaround time of seven to nine weeks. People can just go to our website, and it'll take you through the process. There's a couple of tabs. One says order a review and one says purchase, I think, in different parts on the landing page. It's www.blueinkreview.com.

Let's see – so then the Fast Track is \$495, and that is a turnaround time of four to five weeks. Mostly, people go ahead and place their order on our site. We ask that they send two copies of their book to us. We do accept e-books as well. There's a slight charge extra for the upload of the e-book. It's a little bit counterintuitive, but most of our reviewers still prefer to read hard copies. So when people upload their PDFs, we end up having to print out the book, which is the reason for the extra charge. I assume that that will change as time goes on, just as more and more of our reviewers get comfortable with e-readers and things like that.

So anyway, then they send us their books. We very carefully choose the reviewer to match the content of the book and the reviewers' preferences for reading material. Some people prefer to read memoirs. Other people prefer fantasy, science fiction. We have a pretty large database of what reviewers like and what they are competent to review.

So we match the book with the reviewer. We send the book out to the reviewer. The reviewer has several weeks to read the book and write the review. The review comes back to us. Then, as I mentioned before, we have an editing process, where we read all the reviews and make sure that they seem like the reviewer has been thorough and fair and balanced in what they're writing.

We try very hard not to put out reviews that will humiliate authors. I mean, we're not in the business of being snarky. We just want the review to be honest and fair, but not in any sort of a demeaning way if the critic doesn't like the book. I hope that makes sense. But anyone can go on our site and read tons of reviews that we've already printed and put out there to get an idea of the tone and quality.

KENNEALLY: Right. The website for BlueInk Review, which is blueinkreview.com – it does more than just provide reviews. There's some interesting services for authors and a blog there that people have contributed to. I see a recent one on why a bad book cover blurb can kill a good book, which is an interesting thought, and I hadn't given it much consideration. But for self-published authors, they have to think about that whole package. They have to think about the review. They have to think about the jacket design. They have to think about the kinds of blurbs that they'll be including.

THORN: Yeah. It's so important. I guess it didn't really occur to me much either, until we started getting a lot of these books in. You'd be amazed at how difficult it is to match the right reviewer with the right book when the back book cover blurb is either not there or it's misleading. Sometimes we get blurbs that indicate that the book is a novel, when it's really a memoir. People sometimes don't understand the terms.

I guess the moral of the story is that people really need to go to the bookstore and mimic the way that traditional books do the blurbs on the back cover, because they've done those for years and years for a reason. It helps people pick out the book. It helps them know if it's a book they're going to like. It gives them a little bit of information on the author.

A lot of self-published authors really give too much information on the author. They tell you how many grandchildren they have, and how many pets they have, and things that are kind of irrelevant. So I guess, on that point, I would just really, really advise people to get to the bookstore and do their homework before they design and write the blurbs for their back covers.

KENNEALLY: Well, that's great advice. You know, I like to say that, if you love books, you love everything about them. Studying the way they're made, how they're made, how they're reviewed – you'll enjoy the whole process so much more. Even if you're not a self-published author, as a reader, you'll understand better what's gone into getting that book into your hands.



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THORN: Right. Absolutely.

KENNEALLY: We've been chatting with Patti Thorn, who is a co-founder of BlueInk Review, a new online service reviewing self-published books exclusively. She talked to us from her office in Denver. Patti, thanks so much for joining us on *Beyond the Book*.

THORN: Oh, thanks Chris. It was great fun.

KENNEALLY: *Beyond the Book* is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global rights broker for the world's most sought-after materials, including millions of books and e-books, journals, newspapers, magazines and blogs, as well as images, movies and television shows.

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