



**Interview with Judy Piatkus**  
**Author, *Ahead of Her Time***

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KENNEALLY: Building a publishing business and a brand aiming at an audience of women consumers with empowering stories and fresh ideas about personal development. That all sounds so 2021. But for Judy Piatkus, the opening chapter of her new memoir is set in 1970s London.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC. Published this week, *Ahead of Her Time* recalls an era in British publishing history as far behind us as miner's strikes and sold-out shows by Led Zeppelin. Yet the key themes from the personal and working life of Judy Piatkus still resonate.

When Judy Piatkus opened the doors at Piatkus Books in 1979, it wasn't the first business she started. But Piatkus Books was now entirely her own to shape as she saw best. Fundamentally, she wanted to succeed, and that meant nothing more nor less than selling books, which Judy Piatkus did – and plenty of them, too – before Hachette acquired the company in 2007.

Along the way, Judy Piatkus found herself at Buckingham Palace and Number 10 Downing Street. She got there by giving a generation of readers, most of them women, what they wanted most to find in books – a way to see themselves in a new and fresh light.

Judy Piatkus joins me now from London. Welcome to Velocity of Content.

PIATKUS: Thank you, Chris, and I'm really pleased to be here. Thank you for that very generous introduction.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to have you join us, Judy. Really, a book's title sometimes is a giveaway. Sometimes, it doesn't mean much at all. But in your case, it really is on spot, because you're ahead of your time indeed – for the authors and subjects you published, for the readers you served, and for the staff of your own publishing house, where you developed a new type of business culture, one that looks very familiar in 2021. Did you ever think of yourself as ahead of your time in your time?

PIATKUS: In England at the time when I launched the company, I was working from the spare bedroom in my home. It wasn't actually allowed that you could be working from home then, and I had to be very careful that we didn't have too many vans arriving with boxes of



books and get any complaints from the neighbors. I'm talking about the 1980s then, because it sounds so far away from Amazon vans arriving at everybody's home morning, noon, and night nowadays. But it was very different then.

So yes, we were a little bit ahead of our time. Most people expected to work and be in an office. They went out to work. There were very people working from home. And in my case, I couldn't find very many women running their own companies. So I definitely felt something of a loner.

KENNEALLY: You weren't alone for long. In particular, you weren't alone because of the company of authors you kept, Judy. Let's look at them and the books they published. We should remind everyone, of course, that in 1979, you published, as you say, physical books, and you sold them to bookstores and libraries. It is a very different world from our own, where works are publishing, marketed, and sold online in a digital form. So that physical object was really the center of your preoccupation.

PIATKUS: Oh, absolutely. And of course, one thing that was very exciting for me every day was that if a potential author wanted to offer us an idea for a book or wanted to send in their novel, it was all typed out on a typewriter, because this was the 1980s and the early 1990s, and many authors, of course, were using typewriters for quite a while after computers were invented. But all these would arrive as parcels. So nothing came in digitally, and my office was full of great big piles of paper.

And when we did eventually get an office in London's West End, I was always carrying all these piles of paper backwards and forwards until I got the idea of transporting them all in large boxes with a taxi or a minicab. So it was a very different time. Handheld readers in the UK were not really widely available until early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

KENNEALLY: So you couldn't send someone a manuscript by pressing a button. You had to hail a cab. That really gives us all an idea of the difference.

And at the time, Judy, when you started publishing, they were largely romance novels that you focused on. It was a category that the UK would call down-market, but you didn't mind that you were down-market, did you?

PIATKUS: No, I didn't mind. I actually loved reading the books that we published. I was very happy to be publishing what was known in the UK as commercial fiction. We were extremely fortunate in our early years. We were offered a number of very successful American novelists and were invited to publish them in the UK. We also had the opportunity to sell the books in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand – a very big export market. So we were fortunate in that we were offered Danielle Steel, Virginia Andrews'



amazing first novel, *Flowers in the Attic*, a very popular author at the time, Cynthia Freeman, and many more American authors.

In the 1980s, we published a range of books called Gothic. The Gothic novels had women in black cloaks, and the covers showed them set against a background of towers and turrets and forests. And we had a great time publishing those for libraries and for the commercial market.

KENNEALLY: It was your enthusiasm for these books, the connection that you made with the readers, I think, that really built your business. Tell us about who the readers of Piatkus Books were.

PIATKUS: Well, when we started out, all the readers were people who enjoyed easy, escapist fiction. It didn't demand too much. And then I realized that if I wanted to be taken seriously as a publisher, I needed to think about publishing nonfiction as well. And I didn't know a great deal. I was a young woman in my early 30s. I had one child with disabilities, another child on the way when I started the company. Then I had a third child. So we began to do books on subjects that I was familiar with – cooking, parenting – and we also began to explore the area of alternative health, because women were beginning to talk about it. If they went to their doctors, and the doctors didn't have an answer which helped them resolve their problems, they were beginning to turn to aromatherapy, reflexology, tai chi, shiatsu, all those things. So we began to put out books on those subjects.

One of our most popular cookbooks was *Fast Cakes* by Mary Berry, who became extremely well known in the UK. Of course, she's a household name now. So that was a really big coup for us. And that was because I wanted a book of quick cake recipes. That was how it came about. But when I sold the company many years later, *Fast Cakes*, one of our early publications, was still in print, and I was still using it in my kitchen.

KENNEALLY: As you were describing it, Judy, you really had a surefire formula for success. When a bestselling author from the US couldn't find a home at a traditional UK publishing house, then you would publish that author. I have to ask you, what do you think you were seeing in those works that colleagues in London were missing?

PIATKUS: My colleagues and myself always enjoyed a wide range of fiction, and we recognized that a number of authors were not being as well published in the UK, because it is always harder to publish an author, and to establish a novelist in particular, if they live abroad. Because at the time, we didn't have the internet, so it was harder to promote them. You couldn't get to know them online. You couldn't have an author tweeting. Such a



thing was not even in anybody's minds, I shouldn't think. So it was harder to publish American authors if they didn't visit the UK.

And we could see that their books were selling all over the world, so we knew that we would also have the opportunity to do well with authors if we published them not just in the UK, but also in our export markets. When we were offered Nora Roberts and her alter ego, J.D. Robb, we were absolutely thrilled, because we knew Nora had a worldwide readership, and we wanted to try to reach that readership. During the time that we published Nora – and we were still publishing Nora when the company was sold – we got her books to number one in Australia, number one in New Zealand, number one in South Africa, which the larger companies previously had not succeeded in doing. It was possibly because some of their English authors were more prominent with them, and it was not where they were putting their efforts.

KENNEALLY: I want to make a suggestion, Judy, that I hope you don't take in the wrong way, but I think you could be an American at heart. You're a self-made success, after all, a serial entrepreneur, and it doesn't sound like you even fit in very well in the early days in book publishing in London. It was a men's club and probably rather stuffy, too, with lots of literary pretensions and old-boy networks. It sounds like you were there to shake things up.

PIATKUS: Chris, thank you for saying that. Every year, I would come to the States, and I would spend a week in New York, and I would meet publishers. I would meet editors. I would meet some of our authors. And every year, I came to the American Book Trade Fair, and I loved being in New York. And I had this particularly annoying habit. I would be sitting in an office with an American friend, colleague, and I would pick up their accent. After about half an hour, they'd say, are you sure you're not American? Because I'd already be sounding like an American.

What I loved about New York was that people recognized what we were trying to do. When I would meet colleagues in publishing – we published both nonfiction and fiction, and most British people in publishing who they met were usually only buying novels, or they were buying nonfiction, whereas we were always interested in everything everybody was publishing that we might be able to license and publish in the UK and make a success of it. So I had a very gung-ho, enthusiastic way about me, and people in America responded well to that. So I always had a good time, and I made some wonderful friendships.

So yes, I think I might have been an honorary American. And thank you for recognizing that.



KENNEALLY: Another way that you thought about things in a kind of American fashion, Judy Piatkus, was around the company culture at your publishing house. The employees were predominantly women, and early on, you let editors and salespeople work from home. This was the 1980s. Even then, you saw the office as a hub for employees who didn't need to be there every day.

PIATKUS: Well, I was an outsider in publishing. My father was a builder. My mother hadn't gone on to further education, although her younger sisters did. I didn't have a college degree or a university degree. Before I started my own company, I hadn't even held a position in a company where I was at a very managerial level. Therefore, I didn't have any ideas about what I should or shouldn't do, what I could or couldn't do, and I just did what seemed the most practical.

KENNEALLY: Judy Piatkus, in your memoir, you share accounts of self-invention and reinvention over 30 years as a publisher. You spent the last dozen years overseeing a global nonprofit organization, Conscious Café, which focuses on raising self-awareness and exploring new ideas, much the same as you did when you were a publisher.

And now in 2021, you're an author. *Ahead of Her Time* is published by Watkins Publishing, a Penguin Random House imprint that specializes in personal development and mind-body-spirit books. So I have to ask you to close out the interview – is it a struggle, Judy, to keep in your own lane as an author and not want to drift into the publisher lane?

PIATKUS: Well, I have to say it's absolutely fabulous working with Watkins. They're actually an independent British publishing company. In North America, their books are sold by Penguin Random House, which is absolutely brilliant. But I'm actually working with a medium-sized independent company here, and it couldn't be a better experience. And I'm loving being an author, because I had to write the book, and I'm happy to promote it, but I don't have to make all the daily decisions, and they're working really hard on my behalf. So it's my first experience writing a long book, and it's a really fun thing to do. I feel extremely grateful.

KENNEALLY: Well, Judy Piatkus, publisher, entrepreneur, and now author, congratulations on your new book, and thank you for joining me today on Velocity of Content.

PIATKUS: Chris, I have so enjoyed meeting you, and I have so enjoyed this opportunity to explore some of my adventures over the last 30 years. Thank you so much for inviting me. It's lovely to be talking to America and thinking about American readers and Canadian readers. It's really a thrill. Thank you.

KENNEALLY: Well, thank you again, Judy Piatkus.



Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can follow Velocity of Content on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Goodbye for now.

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