

Welcome to the Write Publish Market podcast. If you're an entrepreneur considering writing a book to serve your business, you're in the right place. Or maybe you've already decided — that's even better. I'm your host, Jodi Brandon, book publishing partner for entrepreneurs and 20-year veteran of the book publishing industry. On the Write Publish Market podcast, in addition to learning from me, you'll meet entrepreneurs just like you and hear about their experiences as we explore all facets of writing, publishing, and marketing a book that will help your business grow in ways you might not even have dreamed up yet.

Our guest today is AJ O'Connell. AJ is a full-time freelance writer and author. She's been working as a freelancer for seven years working in both journalism and in marketing for technology companies. Her latest book, *A Permanent Facebook Life*, was released in 2021 by Woodhall Press. Her journalistic work has been published by NPR, Book Riot, The Establishment, and Electric Literature Magazine. She's had two novellas published and earned an MFA in creative fiction from Fairfield University. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, son, and too many animals.

JODI: Welcome, AJ. I'm so happy to have you today.

AJ: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

JODI: I'm excited to talk to somebody who's written multiple books. Usually my book guests have written their first book. And not only have you written multiple books, but you've written both fiction and nonfiction. So I know your latest book is a little bit different from your fiction books. Can you talk to us a little bit about how that came to be? What made you decide to try something different this time?

AJ: Well, I feel like all of the books that I end up getting published end up being side projects that sort of explode into something. My current book is called *A Perfect Facebook Life*, and it's a collection of like micro memoirs and poems. They all started their life as Facebook statuses, which I know is a bit odd, so I'll explain how this happened. Normally, I write for businesses for work, and then I write fiction. But when my family moved far away from everybody when my son was born, I started using Facebook to keep in touch with people, just like people do, but I started also sort of joking on it. Like, I made a lot of jokes. I started getting more followers because I was funny on Facebook. And one of the people that I'd gone to grad school with, because I gone to grad school for my MFA, had started a publishing house. And one of the guys associated with them got in touch with me and was like, "Hey, we're having a contest. Just put all your Facebook statuses into a book — like all of them." He had just read *Heating and Cooling*, which was a book of micro memoirs. He's like, "I think that you're funny. And you could do this. So you have a weekend. Make a manuscript." I spent a weekend sitting next to my son, while he watched *My Little Pony*, or whatever it was that weekend, just trying to grab the funniest, and the Facebook statuses that had the most engagement, and make them into something that someone want to read on a page, and like copying and pasting them into a Word document. And I mean, I'm not a poet. At least I haven't been since I was a teenager and writing really angsty stuff. So I created a manuscript. For the first time in my life, there was too much

material. I had to chop it down to submit. And then they told me to add it back later. And I didn't win the contest. I got into the finals of that contest. I didn't win. I was like, "Well, that's okay." It's kind of a weird book. And then I got a phone call saying, "We love it. It's experimental, like a parenting book. But it's also a book of kind of funny vignettes. How would you like to add a few chapters back? And then we'll publish you?" And so I was like, "Sure. Yes." And then I was faced with the problem of how to explain the book. And it also taught me that even though I might be consumed with writing all day, and not feel like I have the attention for my novel, I'm still being creative and producing too much content. There's still an abundance of content that I have been creating for the first several years of my son's life. I felt like I couldn't write anymore, but apparently I was already writing. So that's the book: *A Perfect Facebook Life*.

JODI: I love that because I hadn't even thought of this angle for what I was thinking about what we were going to talk about today. But repurposing content is something that's huge for the listeners of this podcast, and business owners in general. So what a great exercise in, like you said, having that information, and then sort of retooling it a little bit. I love, too, that you cut so much and then they ask you to put it back in

AJ: I know. It was like, "Oh, my God, it took me so long to cut."

JODI: But it's easier to cut than add, I find, most of the time. Not to be general, but most of the time, it's easier to cut than add. So okay, like you said, this is an experimental type of book. So how are you getting it out there and talking about the book? Like you said, you were wondering, "How am I going to talk about this book?" What have you settled on there?

AJ: Fortunately the publishing company, Woodhall Press, is very, very good about helping us get out there. But some of the good things about having a social media presence that has grown, is that the people who are following me on social media often are in a position to be like, "You are funny. Come and talk to us." So I've been able to reach out to some of the people that I work for I talked to on Facebook, but also we were talking before we started recording about local libraries. I reached out to my local library and said, "Hi, I'm a local author." Usually, when a library hears from a local author, they are happy to support you. They're happy to buy your book, set up a signing, set up a reading. In our case, we did an outdoor author fair with a bunch of local authors, because there's about 10 of us in town. And it was, you know, pandemic times, so it was outdoors. And that was, that was a really great event, because it brought a lot of people in. One of the biggest problems for librarians — and I know this because my mom was a librarian when I was growing up — is programming. How do you get people in? So by finding a hack, like we'll get a bunch of authors, or we'll do something associated with food, or we'll do an activity, usually the event people that libraries have great ideas for boosting engagement. And that'll get more people in the door who don't know you and your book, to be introduced to you.

JODI: And I imagine library programming, especially during the pandemic, was more complicated, just like everything else. So that's a great idea — a great event. You haven't used the phrase "author platform," but that's basically what you've been alluding to, for the last couple minutes talking: building that author platform and then using it, and then it's sort of cyclical. Like

you're saying, you've got these followers on Facebook, and then you've got the book, and then they're recommending this, and then they want you to come and speak, and all of these things kind of work together, which is the way it's supposed to work. And it's great when it actually does work that way.

AJ: Yeah, I mean, it's very different than my first releases, which I could not get out of my circle. I find that that happens a lot in creative writing circles, where you just can't break out of the circle of people who are going to buy your book. You know, it's mom and mom's friends, and I love them but, you know, a wider audience . . .

JODI: Yeah, a little wider.

AJ: So really it is leveraging your platform, you're absolutely right. You want to go through and see who you might not suspect has a connection that you can use, but a lot of the times people who are doing book programming, once they know you're an author, will come to you because they need someone. This is gonna sound like luck, but it's really not; it's just expanding your network and expanding your network and expanding your network, and sometimes you'll find unexpected connections. My former yoga teacher — pre-pandemic I used to go to a yoga class — works at the Mark Twain House all the time in programming. She's also a writer. She saw that I'd published a book. I'm a Connecticut author. She needed a speaker to fill a time slot for their virtual writers' weekend in July, and asked me to speak about balancing creative writing and writing for work. And so you will find that when you start moving and writing circles, that you're also going to find that they're just connections, and they're, you know, your dad's neighbor or whatever. When I started trying to promote books, I didn't know any of this. I was like, "I don't know anyone useful."

JODI: Everybody thinks not.

AJ: But it's not true.

JODI: And I think sometimes people — if it doesn't happen right away — think, "See, I don't know anybody. I knew I didn't know anybody." But a lot of times those connections come — like you're saying — out of left field. You wouldn't think, "oh, I should mention my book to my yoga teacher." No, you wouldn't think that naturally, but then next thing you know, here you are not only at an event, but at the Mark Twain House. For the creative writing community, that's pretty great. That's a big deal.

AJ: So then I did call my mom, but even within — because this is a podcast for people who are also writing for business — even within my business contacts, I always mentioned my creative writing, because I'm afraid — and I know this is irrational — that is going to devalue the work that I'm doing for them in some way. Like I write goofy things about, like, almost putting on chapstick, but realizing it was a glue stick. Like, why are they gonna want me to write about their technology? But I mentioned it to one of my contacts and she had also written a book, and we exchanged books. And now that's another point of contact we have with each other. It's

important just to talk about your work. It sometimes feels uncomfortable. Post about it. Don't be shy. People have to see — I think my numbers are going to be wrong here — your book about seven times before they say, “Yeah,” so you have to get it out there. You have to talk about it.

JODI: It does get easier. I know a lot of us are introverted, and so it's hard. Like you're saying, though, you just never know who knows who and who that person knows, and who that person knows and when something unexpected is going to come up that you would be perfect for you or your book would be perfect for. And then next thing you know, you're off to the races. I do want to talk a little bit about your day job versus the creative writing that you do. One of the things I teach is that writing uses a different part of your brain than editing. Editing uses a different part of your brain than revision — all of those different ways your brain works to get to that final product. But how do you find the day job — the tech writing — and then the creative writing? Is it easy for you to move back and forth between those? Or does it depend on the kind of creativity?

AJ: Okay, so the Facebook stuff. I think of it like, you know, when you're in school, and you're supposed to be paying attention, but you start writing in the margins of your notebook. It's sort of like quick, quick blurbs that I write down — like something irreverent comes up, while I'm writing I better write this down, not in this document. So that is how I feel those interact. For my day job, just to explain what I do. I am a technology content and copywriter. I write for ed tech clients and cybersecurity clients. I have one physical security client right now. I have a couple of other business processes clients. So I've got a wide group of clients, and I'm putting out between five and seven pieces a week for these, so it's a big volume of writing. So I don't know I really have the brain to then move to character development and careful plot development, but I do have the brain to come up with very small pieces of writing. And that's what I can do right now. I do have a writing group where I've been workshoping a novel for a long time, but the novel has slowed down as this work has picked up, and there's always I think, going to be a trade off with that with me. When I was a newspaper reporter, in the earlier part of my career, I found that after turning out two to three pieces a day, I just couldn't go home and throw myself into character development either. I need to set aside chunks of time for that. Okay, so that's kind of how the two interact. This week, I wrote an ebook for a client and it was a lot and it was long, so I like to give myself a chunk of time. It's actually kind of lovely to work on an ebook for a client because it doesn't have my name on it and I can really just, you know, throw myself into the research. Then it's done. Then it goes into design, and then is in my portfolio, and that's the last I think of it. And that's actually kind of a lovely feeling that I've learned about as I've done this work. Yeah, but the other stuff just sort of builds up a little bit at a time.

JODI: Along the same lines, then, what are your favorite pieces of the writing/publishing/marketing puzzle? And then what are the pieces you don't like as much?

AJ: Do you mean for my day job? Or do you mean for my books?

JODI: For the books

AJ: I like writing, like the actual writing. I read Shonda Rhimes's *The Year of Yes*, and she described it so beautifully. The creative process is a door that you have to get to, but the door, there's like five miles in front of the door littered with your kids, your snacks, your chores, your house, and you have to get through that. And once you get to the door, you're flying. I love that feeling. I'm addicted to the feeling of just finally getting through the door and just going and writing. And that is like just the unfettered creativity, when you're finally in it, was my favorite thing ever. And it's the reason I keep doing all of this. I love having written also. I think I used to hate editing, but after going to my MFA program and spending a couple of years realizing that not everything that I write is going to be perfect immediately, I enjoy the editing process. I like going back and making things stronger. Coming from journalism, where you write it, and then people read it, and they tell you what's wrong with it, but it's already in the paper. Yeah, it's not that. It's being able to go back and make it better and stronger. Find the pieces where I almost had it, and then just really being able to fit the pieces together seamlessly, or more seamlessly, is a wonderful feeling. I like working with other people too. I find that in publishing, you do have to work with people who compliment you. I was able to work with a team this time. I had an editor and publishers who handled the business parts. I hired an independent PR person for a few months to help me do things that I hate, like send out press releases.

JODI: Fantastic.

AJ: Yeah, not every writer has the budget for this. A lot of times you'll hear you have to invest, if you're going to be putting a book on Amazon, even if you're laying it out yourself you have to invest in an editor. I didn't have the budget for that a long time ago, and people might not have it now. But if you have the budget, do it. And if you have the budget, yes, get a PR person. There are plenty of people who do that kind of work, which I had never thought of — plenty of contract PR writers out there who will work with you. I couldn't have gotten I think the amount of publicity I got in the beginning without the woman that I hired. She was amazing.

JODI: A lot of business owners think this too: that they either have to invest tens of thousands of dollars or bust. And that's just not the case. You have to prioritize where you need the most help, and then figure out how to do it within your budget. But it absolutely can be done. That's fantastic that you found somebody to take that PR off of your plate.

AJ: It was another writer who had hired her and said, "You should hire the woman I'm working with right now." And I was like, "Oh, really?" It's something that's not going to break the bank and it's something that, if we do it, it will help.

JODI: Why would you feel like you have to do everything that you hate, right? Because then you're never going to get anything done, because it's moving to the bottom of your to do list because you don't want to do it. And then next thing you know, your months have gone by and you're wondering why no one has heard of your book. It's because you're not talking about it. You're not doing anything to let people know that it's out there.

AJ: Yeah. The first time that I published I didn't have, as I said, I didn't have a budget. I had a very small publishing house. And I could not understand why my blog was just not — like I'm doing blog tours, that's how long ago — why nobody's buying my book. It really is that simple that you just need to get the word out. And if you can't talk about it, hire someone to talk about it.

JODI: Absolutely.

AJ: I mean, that's their job, you know, so they don't have that angst that you have talking about your own work.

JODI: Absolutely. Well, everybody has what I call your zone of genius. And if you stay there, and build your team around you of people in their own zones of genius, a lot of times that works much more smoothly.

AJ: I love that.

JODI: This was such a fun conversation. I could talk to you all day about how your your book journey has gone so far and what's coming next. But I don't let anybody leave the podcast, AJ, without giving me a reading recommendation, or several, whatever you have handy, something that you're reading now that you're enjoying that you recently read and loved.

AJ: I read a lot. I'm currently reading Naomi Novik's Scholomance series. It's fiction. The second book just came out last month is about a magical wizarding school that's trying to eat the students. So take Harry Potter. Remove all the teachers and put a bunch of young wizards in this building that they have to study in. And they're put in this building for their own safety because there's bad things that eat magical young people. But those things are always trying to get into the school. And the school itself is trying to consume at least half the graduating class every year. And Naomi Novik has written some very beautiful retellings of fairy tales. She has some really lyrical books out there, like *Spinning Silver* and *Uprooted*. She does gorgeous prose. She's written a very long series of historical alternate realities with dragons. She's really, really good. This book, though, is just a romp. So I look forward to her releases every year. I would suggest that if people like fiction, they should check her out.

JODI: I am not familiar with her but that sounds like something that I would enjoy, but not something I typically would be drawn to. So that's a good recommendation. That's just the kind of recommendation I'm looking for. We'll put that in the show notes, so people can check it out. The second book just came out, you said?

AJ: Yep. The second was called *The Last Graduate*. I think *Deadly Education* is the first one.

JODI: Ooh, I like the title. Awesome. Well, thank you again, AJ so much. This was such a fun conversation. I look forward to the listeners getting to hear it.

AJ: Thank you so much for having me. I can't wait to promote this.

JODI: I appreciate that.

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Write Publish Market podcast. I know just how busy entrepreneurs' schedules are. I'm grateful you've taken some time out of yours to journey into the world of book publishing with me today. If you enjoyed this episode, take a quick screenshot and share on social media to let others know you're listening. Use the hashtag #writepublishmarket to spread the love. Until next time, friends, happy writing.