Being a Writer Podcast—An Indie Perspective with Kevin Duffy

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Kevin Duffy

**Nelima Begum** 00:09

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast from The Literary Consultancy. In each podcast we go behind the scenes of the writing process with a special guest and get to the heart of what it means to be a writer today. Being a Writer is a unique programme of support for writers that prioritises literary creativity wellbeing an emotional resilience. In this episode of the Being a Writer podcast, we're joined by writer and co-founder of Bluemoose Books, Kevin Duffy, to explore an indie perspective. Kevin recounts his earliest experiences with books, landing his first job in publishing, and how the industry inspired him to take a leap and start an indie publisher alongside his wife, Hetha. Kevin shares what an extensive career in publishing has taught him so far about the industry, the Bluemoose Books, editorial process, how they approach marketing and PR and what writers should know when considering an indie perspective for publishing their work.

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast, Kevin, how are you?

**Kevin Duffy** 01:15

I'm fine, thank you, and thanks for inviting me onto the TLC podcast.

**Nelima Begum** 01:19

Well, we're thrilled to have you here. We're looking at an indie perspective, which is all things indie bookshops, and who better to speak to about this than you, Kevin Duffy of Bluemoose Books. So, let's jump straight in. Take me back to the beginning. Tell me about your earliest experiences with books. What were you reading as you were growing up and what kind of books lived on your shelves on your bedside table?

**Kevin Duffy** 01:46

Okay, so in our house there weren't any fiction books. We had two sets of encyclopaedias when I was growing up as a youngster, so that was the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Butler's Lives of the Saints. I grew up in a very Catholic family so I know all the lives of the saints days and, yeah, capitals of cities. My mom read. She read fiction. She read historical fiction. She read Jean plaidy and Georgette Heyer books. My dad never read books, he read car manuals, but he didn't read fiction. And we used the library all the time. So when I was growing up just outside Stockport, we I used to go to a place called Bredbury Library. That's why I'm a huge supporter of libraries still. So, it was books like Stig of the Dump by Clive King. It was adventure stories by Rider Haggard, the Jennings books by Anthony Buckeridge. But the books that really, kind o,f made me think about writing and reading were, I read *Kestrel for a Knave* when I was 12, by Barry Hines, and that was the first book, really, that spoke to me about books and people who were in my community, kind of working-class Northern characters, etc… And that was the first book that, kind of, really fired and got me interested in, and I thought Ah, here are books about me. Because they're kind of, the Jennings books were kind of young lads at public school and things like that, so great books and funny, but not really about me. And then I read *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, which my dad found and threw out because he'd read all the nonsense in the newspapers about [how] it’d started mugging and things like that. And I said to him, and got short shrift from him, ‘The only person I know who burnt books was Adolf Hitler.’ He didn't really like that. But he was, yeah, he wasn't a great reader. And I don't think blokes at that time or, you know, dads at that time, did read fiction, really. I mean, they would read, kind of, car manuals and things. I might be doing a great disservice to other people's parents, but that was just growing up in a house. So it was normal kinds of children’s’ books, lots of Alan Garner, *Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, books like that. Because Alan Garner stills lives in Alderley Edge which is about 20 miles away from where we lived, so we used to ride our bikes to the Edge where all the stories are [set], and pretend we were in the books, when we were kind of like teenagers.

**Nelima Begum** 04:35

That's beautiful. It's a really nice way of just recounting your, like, first, I mean the first step in having a relationship with reading. It sounds wonderful. When you were a reader, or as a reader, had you considered a career in books? Did you know that was a possibility? Because I had no idea, when I was like, you know, I grew up reading a lot, I grew up writing, I graduated from university, and I had no clue that you could actually work with books. That had never occurred to me, ever.

**Kevin Duffy** 05:05

No, not really. It was just a thing that happened elsewhere, wasn't it, to be honest. So no, I never thought I'd, kind of, work in publishing or books, I kind of fell into it, really, even getting a degree in English, I didn't think it was, without sounding too, chippy, you know, for the likes of me, really. It just seemed in London, and it seemed, kind of, very upper-middle-class slash aristocratic, because the only people you saw on telly talking about books were people with RP accents. Even the authors, even the authors.

**Nelima Begum** 05:45

So, what was your first job in the industry when you did come to it? And what were your key takeaways from it?

**Kevin Duffy** 05:52

I moved down, I couldn't get any work in Manchester, so I moved down to London in 1986 and I got a job in a library supplier, a place called Cromwell Books, in Hounslow, and they supplied books to libraries. So that was my first job, and I worked there for 18 months. So that was my first interaction with the publishing industry, with a specific, kind of, library bent, and I'd met reps who used to come in and tout their wares and tell us what books were being published in the next kind of like six months. So that was my first introduction into the publishing industry.

**Nelima Begum** 06:36

So it's something I've noticed, actually, and you've touched on a couple of times already—just libraries in relation to the publishing industry, it's not something that is widely talked about, because when we think about publishing we think, bookshops, like, big, big, heavy-hitting bookshops. What can you tell us about that connection between publishing and libraries? Because libraries are a lifeline for so many when it comes to accessing literature.

**Kevin Duffy** 07:00

Well, that's it. I mean, lots of people don't realise that there are lots of people out there who can't afford to buy books in bookshops, and are, kind of, sometimes, I won't say threatened by Waterstones or, kind of like, Smith's or whatever, but they won't go into bookshops because they might have had a bad experience at school and they think, you know, literature is not for them. And literature is bandied around is this, kind of, great kind of academic exercise. And it shouldn't be because books are about stories, aren't they? So, for me, libraries are probably one of the most important things and most important aspects of publishing for Bluemoose. Because when we first started, we worked, kind of, hand-in-hand with the local libraries and then the libraries nationally, as a way of promoting our writers and authors. And for a long time, it’s changed slightly, but in, you know, ‘86-‘87, the big publishers really didn't, kind of, work with libraries as such, and, you know, it’s obviously a huge part of the buying power of the publishing industry. But they kind of thought, oh, you know, libraries are always going to buy books. So we always work tremendously hard with libraries. In the last six months, we, in June of this year, we, with Leeds Central Library, we took over the whole exhibition floor on the first floor in Leeds Central Library. And it was devoted to Bluemoose Books, our authors, backlist, and we had four events, introducing independent publishing to the people of Leeds, the library users, but also new books that we were publishing, and also our authors. And it was absolutely fantastic. So I just think it's incredibly important that people use libraries, still utilise [them], I'm sure they do. Unfortunately, politically, there will isn't there because I think some people who are in our government, our present government, have probably never been into a library. I know there was one politician who said he hadn't been to a library for 30 years. But for some communities, it's not purely about finding great stories, it is a safe place. It's a warm place. It's a place where you can read newspapers. And for a lot of people, it's a place where they can get off the street if they're homeless. So I think libraries are just such an incredible part of the publishing community and family, and it's not just about books, it's about meeting people as well.

**Nelima Begum** 09:25

Yeah. And there's certain, you know, they play such a key role in the wider industry and just having, you know, being a staple place, like you said, for people to have a safe space for escapism. So, you got a role within the sales team at Headline when it first, kind of, took off as an imprint in 1987. How did that roll and the progression that followed shape the way that you saw the publishing industry as a whole?

**Kevin Duffy** 09:54

I think it's instrumental, really, because Headline… was a really small company. I think there were less than 30 people. I was a sales representative for London and the suburbs, so we did lots of everything. I used to come into London—I lived in Hounslow West—I used to come in once a week, on a Friday. So we'd meet Tim Hely Hutchinson, who founded the company, we'd meet the editors, Sue Fletcher, we’d meet production, we'd meet everyone, we’d meet the press team, the marketing team, and the finance officer. And we would just talking about books, what books were publishing. And it was a very commercial enterprise. We started at the same time as Bloomsbury. Bloomsbury were very, kind of, literary orientated—they’d just started publishing Margaret Atwood in the UK—but they made no money. We made lots of money right from the get-go. So there was a kind of commercial imperative. And one of the things I learnt right at the beginning was that, and this might offend lots of people in the, kind of, ‘literati’, that we were in the entertainment industry. And when we're, kind of, marketing our books, or publishing our books, we have to, kind of, frame it around the fact that we're asking people to give over three, four, five, six hours of their time to read something that we've produced. So you're competing against games, you're competing against TV, documentaries, football, whatever, videos, film, cinema. And that's how we packaged the books At Headline, is that we had to grab their attention and say, ‘Look at this book!’ This is how we're going to entertain you for the next however [many] number of hours. And that's why… at Bluemoose, we still spend an enormous amount of money on what our books look like. I think it's so important. You can judge a book by its cover. I instigated at Bluemoose, sorry, at Headline, getting the editors out of their, kind of, ivory towers. So, once a month, we would take out an editor to bookshops around my patch, which was, kind of, London and the Southeast and Southwest. And the editors would speak to booksellers and customers and talk about books and talk about covers, and just get a sense of what they were producing, what they were editing and what impact that would have within the community of readers. Because for a long time, editors didn't move out of their offices, and there was a complete disconnect between editorial and sales. At one time editorial never spoke to sales, and we just thought that was madness. So we brought editorial and sales together to speak to each other, and that's the biggest thing that I got from working with Headline, I think.

**Nelima Begum** 12:40

Interesting. And I think what you've just spoken about has kind of carried through to today, because I know now [that] when it comes to acquiring a book, or publishing a book, editorial, marketing and sales, all kinds of sit together to discuss that and make one big group decision.

**Kevin Duffy** 12:59

Yeah. I mean, it all changed in 1995, with the ending of the net book agreement, which, if your listeners don't know about the net book agreement, the net book agreement was you couldn't discount the price of a book. So if a book was £10, it had to be sold at £10. After 1995, when the net book agreement when, you could discount books, and that's when the whole industry changed. That's where Amazon came in, you know, after 1997-2007, basically, with kind of the big discount, so the high street could then discount. And then the economics of the industry changed completely. So you look at the discounts now, which are frightening. The bigger publishers have become so risk-averse since 1995, because their pot of money has shrunk, so their economic decisions have to work because they have to satisfy their shareholders. And that's why I think independent publishing is completely different. We're operating in a different publishing universe than the Big Five, and that has its pluses and minuses, but for literary fiction, I think it's really, really important to mention that we do operate in a different, kind of, publishing space.

**Nelima Begum** 14:13

Yeah. And we'll dive deeper into that in just a moment. But let's fast forward from 1987 to 2006, when you and your wife Hetha founded Bluemoose Books, an independent publisher. What inspired that big leap from trade publishing to venturing off on your own, because, as you've said, you know, it is very different. It's a different universe of publishing. What, kind of, inspired that massive change for you and that shift in thinking?

**Kevin Duffy** 14:39

It was things. Part of it was vanity. I won a national writing competition and was whisked down to London to be wined and dined at the Ivy, which is a very swanky restaurant. The prize was a meal at the Ivy but also to meet one of the Big Five commissioning editors, but also an agent from one of the biggest agencies. And I mispronounced the agent’s name, she had a double-barrel name, and she took, kind of, offence at this, and from then on didn't really speak to me during the meal. It didn't go well, it didn't go well, I did a stupid thing and, kind of, thought, Well, I'm just going to drink. And I drank too much and tried to steal a face cloth from the toilets. I went down to the loos, I thought, No one's going to believe I’ve been to the Ivy, so I'll get a face cloth, because it had the monogram on it. And anyway, this hand came on my shoulder, and this, kind of, Eastern European wardrobe said to me, ‘We don't do that here, do we, Sir.’ And I said, ‘No.’ And [he] then proceeded to, kind of, throw me out. I managed to talk my way back in, but it didn't go well, and they didn't want my book, and I just thought, Oh my god. But then, a year later, I read in The Bookseller, which is a kind of publishing Bible, that all the big money was going to Irish writers. So, I changed my name to Colum O'Driscoll and sent the first three chapters of my book… to, I won't mention the agency but it's Lee Child's agent, and they loved the book, but they tried to phone me, but obviously I didn't exist. But the agent wrote me a letter and said I tried to contact you but you’re not in the Hebden Bridge phonebook (obviously, because I didn't exist, Kevin Duffy not Colum O’Driscoll). So I had to phone him up, but I had to pretend to be Irish for a year.

**Nelima Begum** 16:29

Oh my god, did you do the accent and everything?

**Kevin Duffy** 16:32

Yeah, well, a bit of the accent, yeah. But the worst thing I did, and this is the best bit, I lied to my sons. Leo was 10 at the time, and Cal was six, and I said to them, ‘If a posh man from London winds up, I'm Colum O'Driscoll, not Kevin Duffy.’ So I was lying to my children to get a publishing deal. Anyway, yeah, I finished the book and went down to London, and the first thing I said to him was, ‘My name's Colum O’Driscoll, it’s Kevin Duffy, but I do come from an Irish background. And he thought it was hilarious. But anyway, it was a humorous book. And going back to the most important people in publishing, as you said, now [they] are the sales and marketing, [but] they didn't think they could sell 20,000 copies. Well, they pitched it round to, kind of, Penguin and Hachette and Headline etc… and no one wanted to buy it because they didn't think they could shift 20,000 units. So I came back from, kind of, London moaning about this. And at the same time, I’d still got the day job and I was going to one of the biggest library suppliers in the UK, which at that time was based in Preston, and I was talking to them chief buyer and I said, ‘What are the big publishers publishing at the minute?’ and he just said, ‘Well, it's whole blancmange at the minute, there's nothing really stand-out.’ And again, it's that kind of risk-averse publishing. So, I came home and just said to Hetha, you know, it's just rubbish at the minute and she said, ‘Well, let's do something about it. Find new writers who couldn't get their works published for whatever reason.’ So that's why that's when we remortgaged our house in Hebden Bridge to start Bluemoose Books, but I didn't want it purely to be about publishing my book, although there is vanity in there. We published another book by a Canadian writer called Nathan Vanek, called *The Bridge Between*, and we made enough money from those two books to continue. And, yeah, 16 years later, we're still here, and we've only published one of my books. So that's how we started.

**Nelima Begum** 18:29

It might have started off about you. But it wasn't about you for long.

**Kevin Duffy** 18:31

It was to find, kind of, writers from working-class backgrounds or other diverse backgrounds that just weren't getting, as you know, access is a huge problem within publishing, and it's just getting your, and the whole problem with agents and, you know, agents after 1995, you know, the economic imperative to have a bestseller, which means that they might like a wonderful story by a great writer, but that is not going to earn any money. And that's a conversation that is still going on, so that's why we started Bluemoose, to find writers that just weren't getting their books seen.

**Nelima Begum** 19:05

Yeah. And I think, you know, it's fantastic. And the Bluemoose Books list is just off the charts, really. But what you've said about access is so key here, because I find that, you know, with TLC, we still get so many writers who just don't understand how the publishing industry works, or they just can't seem to work out why they're not getting a response or why the feedback is a certain way or, you know, I get good feedback, but no one wants to take it further. I think a lot of writers are unaware that as much as it is a creative business, it's very much still tied to logistics and numbers and you know, the numbers around commercial viability.

**Kevin Duffy** 19:47

The CEO of PRH, Penguin Random House, which is the biggest publisher in the world—they’re 20 billion euro organisation owned by Bertelsmann—their CEO every year says that they want to grow by 10%, which means they have to buy other companies. But also, they have to produce at least 10% profit for their shareholders. So if you're, you know, that huge publishing business, it means you're not going to spend as much money as you might have done previously on finding great new talent that doesn't have a TikTok following or doesn't have an Instagram following, or isn't a celebrity, because you're not going to take those risks, because you've still got to satisfy the demands of your shareholders and stakeholders. And that dominates their editorial acquisitions.

**Nelima Begum** 20:32

Yeah, and I would imagine that's where indie publishers have a little bit more flexibility and freedom, in that you're not answering to anyone else above you, like you, you know, you dictate how things work and who you acquire. And you are led by creativity and like a quality story more than the numbers themselves, I'm assuming.

**Kevin Duffy** 20:53

Yeah, I mean, because we don't have the, you know, the 400ft glass and steel tower on the banks of the Thames or whatever, we have my front room, so we can manage smaller print runs, which means we can fall in love with a story, a beautifully written book, and then find the readers. We don't have to find as many readers as say, you know, Penguin or Hachette or Headline to, kind of, break even. It doesn't mean we're a library and we just publish books and they sit on shelves, you know, we still got to get them into the high street, we still got to get them into libraries. And we manage to do that. And we’ll probably talk later about how, you know, as an indie publisher, we work completely differently, because we don't have the huge marketing budget. We'll talk about that later. But we work very much with the independent booksellers who hand-sell our books brilliantly.

**Nelima Begum** 21:41

Yeah. So, now focusing on the Bluemoose Books team, could you walk us through, like, your editing process that Bluemoose Books when you're working with writers? And, kind of, how that differs from a trade publisher? Because I think that's something our listeners would be really interested to know.

**Kevin Duffy** 21:58

Yeah, I mean, I don't edit, it’s a skill I don't have. I think I've got an eye for a good story and a good book and the quality of the writing. So, the main difference with us and the traditional publishers is that we're open for submissions all year round. The Big Five, or the Big 10, or the Big 20, they won't accept submissions unless they're via an agent, which, again, there's another gatekeeper there, isn't there. So, we're open for submissions, [and] I think indie publishers read more books, basically, or read more submissions. So if a book comes in, the first three chapters and a synopsis, and I think it's got something, I'll talk to, we've got four editors, and then I'll ask for the full manuscript, I like to read the manuscript on paper. So I'll ask for the manuscript on paper. Obviously, printing is expensive, so if people say it's a bit expensive, you know, we'll read it as a PDF or a Word document. And then I'll pass it on to one of our editors and say, you know, what do you think? And I won't tell them what I think. And then if they like it, we pass it around to the other two or three editors. And if we all think there's something, all our relatives have completely different reading tastes, so I just think if all four of us or five of us like something, then it's obviously got something. And then I will offer the author a contract. And it's a standard contract. I always ask our debut authors to run it pass the Society of Authors, and that's the, kind of, trade union for writers to make sure that, you know, we're doing everything properly. And then we will give the author a lead editor for 12 months. We say we will publish the book within 18 months, 24 months, [and that] we'd like to work on an editorial process line-by-line with the writer for 12 months. After those 12 months, we'll bring in two more editors to work with the writer and then to, kind of, really polish it, to crank it up. And that's punctuation, grammar. And then six months before publication, the manuscript is done and dusted in is as it should be. And I think one of the things independent publishers do probably better than the mainstream publishers, although I might be shot down by lots of mainstream editors, is that we spend more time I think, editorially, with the writer, working on a daily basis, weekly basis. That's emails, that's phone calls, to get the book as best it can be, because lots of writers tend to think that once they've submitted their manuscript, that's the end of it. And I always say to them no, that's the start, this is where the hard work really begins. It's like George Orwell isn't it, writing is rewriting and rewriting. Because if we're asking the general public, readers, to spend £9.99 or £15 for a hardback, for a Bluemoose Book, it's got to be the best it can be. And so, you know, it's not a competition between editor and writer, it's a collaboration. And it's a collaboration to get your work out there in its best coat possible. That’s how it works.

**Nelima Begum** 25:18

It's beautiful. I think, you know, the effort really comes through there, because as I said, earlier, Bluemoose Books, the list is out-of-this-world wonderful. And it, you know, you can see that you guys really put the time in with your authors. And I'm sure they really appreciate it too, because writing, to get to that point, is often quite lonely. And then once you finally have someone that you can collaborate with and bounce ideas off of and really speak to about every single word, I think that's a really wonderful environment for writers to be in as well, to have that opportunity.

**Kevin Duffy** 25:52

We always say, and this is not a glib statement, we always say that Bluemoose is a family of readers and writers. And that's one of the positives, I think, that the bigger publishers, purely by their size just can't do. They just can't do that.

**Nelima Begum** 26:07

Yeah. What are the key things the team, kind of, looks for in a manuscript submission? So what is it that you, I'm not saying that it's a tick-box thing at all, [but] are there things that, you know, you love to see stand out to you when you're reading a submission?

**Kevin Duffy** 26:23

I think, I mean we love anything and everything, as you can see by our, you know, our list is really kind of eclectic. It's the quality of the writing, you know, the quality of the writing, great characters, and how a character unfolds within the story. You know, for a long time, in the world of literary fiction stories was, you know, you weren't allowed to mention stories, because it was deemed, and there's a lot of snobbery in literary fiction as well. But, you know, beautifully written books, quality of the writing, great characters that unfold, but also, you know, wonderful stories. And that's been highlighted in the last two years, you know, with the, kind of, pandemic and COVID. When people, everyone thought the world of books was just gonna shut down because all the bookshop shot, but… people wanted the physical book. And they wanted, to kind, of disappear in the pages of a story to take them away from what was happening in their daily lives. And that's what great stories can do. That's what great writing can do, is it can be transformative and take you away into a completely different world just for those two, three, four, five, six hours. And, you know, given what lots of people are experiencing the minute with the cost of living crisis, and everything else, you know, people do resort to, hopefully, buying stories and disappearing into magical worlds.

**Nelima Begum** 27:47

Wonderful. So, we've kind of touched on, you know, the pandemic already, and needless to say 2020 was a very difficult year for a lot of businesses. And within the books industry, I think indie publishers were, kind of, hit the hardest, if anything. One of the few silver linings of that year that really stands out to me, though, and I think this was just before the pandemic began, was bookshop.org coming out onto the scene. How do you think they've changed the landscape for indies.?

**Kevin Duffy** 28:18

They've kind of moved the default position away from Amazon. So, you know, prior to… bookshop.org, if anyone wants a book, the default was Amazon, because they're just this huge, kind of, megalith aren’t they? So bookshop.org, and also donating money to independent bookshops as well. So there was a place within the industry to say no, you don't have to go to, you know, make sure Jeff Bezos goes to Mars or the Moon, you can go to a different organisation, and also the way they curate their listings is wonderful. But at the beginning of the pandemic, we partnered with an independent publisher in Dorset called Little Toller, because as we thought, you know, this is going to be the end. And together with a Little Toller, I asked Benjamin Myers, who was one of our authors at the time, if he would write a short story, which he did, and we edited it and Little Toller turned it into an ebook. And within an hour of launching it, we sold over 660 copies. And that was a way of one, just doing the, kind of, the jazz hands, we're still here. We got mentioned in The Guardian, and in The bookseller, but [it was] also a way of earning some income. And, together with a Little Toller, this year we did a charity about getting 10,000 backpacks of books to displaced Ukrainian children, but that's another thing. So, there are wonderful things that can happen in moments of distress. But, you know, bizarrely, the last two years have been the best two years of publishing for Bluemoose. Not only were people buying Ben's book, but also just by us putting out that, kind of, call to arms, people were noticing our blacklist. And we have pictures from around the world, of people buying our complete backlist and having, like, a Bluemoose bookshelf. And that was really, kind of, heartening in a kind of like desperate time. So we would have pictures from the States, South America, Australasia, Japan, Europe, Africa, of people with their Bluemoose bookshelves, and that was lovely, that was beautiful.

**Nelima Begum** 30:41

That's incredible, that global reach that you guys had. It's also really interesting to hear that the last two years have been some of the best for Bluemoose Books, because, you know, that's so unexpected for a lot of businesses.

**Kevin Duffy** 30:55

It was. I mean, March 2020, when the world fell off a cliff, we were panicking, as was every other kind of independent. Obviously, the bigger publishers, have, you know, deeper pockets. We didn't. And it was a very scary moment. And I have to thank the Arts Council as well, because they helped a lot of independents, with, you know, some grants to help us get through. So yeah, hats off to them.

**Nelima Begum** 31:22

Wonderful. So, I wanted to speak about, kind of, the marketing side of things for indie publishers, because I think that's a really interesting area. So, indie publishers don't necessarily have, as you've mentioned throughout the podcast, have the same budgets or manpower as trade publishers do when it comes to things like marketing and PR. So can you tell us how you market your books?

**Kevin Duffy** 31:46

Yeah, we start really early. So, when we have signed up an author, 12 months before publication, or eight months before publication, we'll have a manuscript. And when I say we work with, kind of, independent bookshops, six months before publication, we'll have a proof copy, which is, it's not the final edited version but it will have a jacket, and we send those out to about 50 core independent bookshops, but also I go into a high street retailer… our local Waterstones in Leeds, [and] there’s a bookseller called Ian, he manages it now, and I’ll be talking about the books with them, and I’ll give them the proof copy. And once they've read them, and liked them, and he hasn't disliked them so far, within Waterstones and within the independent book sector, they then start talking amongst themselves. So, in the independent book sector, booksellers and the book owners will talk to each other about this new book—‘Have you read this book from Bluemoose?’ So they're already starting the conversation six, five, four months before the book is published. And so that's doing quite a lot of the, kind of, heavy lifting where sales and marketing are concerned, because we've got those key important stakeholders within publishing, or book selling, already talking about a Bluemoose Book. And obviously we use social media, we use Twitter—I'm not on TikTok—and kind of Instagram, so we use the social media. And what we do, and it's worked today, is getting the independent booksellers, getting Waterstones, getting the high street, getting the library community talking about our books four, five, six months ahead of a publication, and you can do individual things. One, what we published a few years back called *Pig Iron* by Benjamin Myers, which won the inaugural Gordon Burn prize, a bookshop in Hebden Bridge, I’d always wanted to do a one-book bookshop, so I asked the bookshop owner if we could take out every book in the bookshop. So we took out every book in the bookshop and replaced it with one book, which was *Pig Iron*. So we had 2,500 copies of pig in the bookshop. And we took loads of photographs, and it went viral around the world, and we got a review in The Guardian. I said it was the first one-book bookshop in the world. I don't know whether that's true or not, [but] we put it out there. And so, then we got our piece in the newspapers, and then people started talking about it. And that was great. So you can do different things that some of the bigger publishers probably can't do. Because in 2006, no one knew of Bluemoose. We started locally, so we were talking about our books, say, to, kind of, Rochdale libraries, to Stockport libraries, to Leeds libraries, to Manchester libraries. And then I thought, you know, the ripple effect if we can get those people talking about our books, and those independent bookshops locally talking about books, they will talk to other people, and you can build it that way. Obviously if you're a bigger publisher, you have to, kind of, hit massive sales within three months. We don't we, you know, we're here for the, kind of, the duration of the writer’s career, hopefully. I mean, we have lost several writers to the bigger publishers due to the massive successes we've had. But, you know, again, going back about the sales, we don't have to have those massive immediate sales to keep going, so we can build a readership, and that, we'll probably talk about it later, about the bigger publishers coming with huge cheques for some of our writers, because we've built huge readership, and our books have become bestsellers. So yeah, we start locally, and then we build that way. London catches up eventually.

**Nelima Begum** 35:39

You’re two steps ahead of them.

**Kevin Duffy** 35:40

And obviously, we get our books reviewed as well in, kind of, all the major literary presses, but that took quite a few years because they didn't know who we were. We still have some agents who, when, and again, everything's subjective, and we don't like everything, obviously, [but] I still have agents who, went and I've said, ‘No, thanks but no thanks. It's not particularly a book for us’, they'll say things like, ‘But don't forget, Kevin, you're not a London publishing house.’ And I say, ‘Well, that's why you phoned us up, because you've obviously tried to sell it in London and they don't want it, you know.’ And again, I think that alludes to still, and we might talk about has the industry changed, and I think in some respects, it's got worse than when I started in 1986 because of the economic imperative of the bigger publishers, and the big books are becoming even bigger, the oxygen in the bookshop is dedicated to the big books, the big brands, the big celebrities, and it's becoming even harder for smaller indies to get books onto the bookshelves. But we'll probably talk about that later.

**Nelima Begum** 36:43

It sounds like, with regards to marketing and PR, the lead time that you put in of about six months in advance really pays off, and also the one-book bookshop idea I absolutely adore. And as far as I know, it hasn't been done before. It sounds like a fantastic idea, and it just shows that, I think, the indie publishers [have] a bit more, you know, as you said, freedom and flexibility to experiment, try new things, and it's not so risk averse. And you can try your hand at something different without feeling like there's a tonne of financial pressure on you to deliver.

**Kevin Duffy** 37:17

And also it didn't cost us a penny apart from, kind of, you know, sweat from moving books.

**Nelima Begum** 37:24

You get a free workout in there to.

**Kevin Duffy** 37:27

Exactly. Last about half a stone. Me and Joe Wicks. That's the one.

**Nelima Begum** 37:34

Yeah. We've touched on pros and cons briefly. But what're some of the challenges that come with being an indie publisher?

**Kevin Duffy** 37:43

It's being seen, isn't it? It's like everything else. The biggest issue is getting books onto bookshelves. With the kind of discounts on the high street, again, the bigger high street book booksellers are demanding a bigger discount, obviously, because they've got to exist. So, you know, the main problem is getting books onto bookshelves. But we get emails all the time from readers, but also independent booksellers, who tell me that, kind of, readers are coming into their shops and saying, you know, ‘We're going into some of the bigger high street bookshops and not seeing books that we really want to read, do you know any other publishers publishing great books?’ And that's when they'll talk about independent publishing. So that's why, you know, I would say 80% of our books are sold via independent booksellers, and 20% on the High Street, which is quite a big difference. And also, with review coverage now… somewhat limited, because the review coverage of newspapers is kind of a lot smaller than it used to be. So it's being seen, it's being heard, but you just have to go down a different route. So we go down, you know, collaborations with independent booksellers, collaborations with libraries. Next year, we're doing a collaboration with Manchester libraries, but also Manchester City of Literature, and the Festival of Libraries in Manchester. So we're publishing a book called *12 Words* by three working-class women from Moss Side, so for a month in Manchester, we're going to be doing a whole series of events with libraries in Manchester. But that gets us lots of, kind of, free press within Manchester and the northwest. We've got the mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, we're hiring a double decker bus with *12 Words* advertise[d] on the side of [it]. But we're going to 12 libraries within Manchester, and we'll be doing writing events, reading events. The three women who will be talking, they've never written before, and we've been working with Linda Brogan, who's edited the books with us. We've been working with Linda for six years and the three writers we've been working [with] for two years. And that's how you can get those stories out and about, is working with libraries with Manchester City of Literature. It's those kinds of things that I think are smaller and can be more flexible with. But it's really exciting at the same time.

**Nelima Begum** 40:22

Wonderful. So, bouncing off of that, what are some of your personal, like, highlights and triumphs with working?

**Kevin Duffy** 40:29

Yeah, I mean, I don't want to sound like, kind of, a Miss World contestant, but every book that we publish and put onto a bookshelf is a triumph, because those writers probably wouldn't have had their books published if they had gone the traditional route. I'm not saying they wouldn't have, but chances are, it would have been more difficult. So every book, for me, is a triumph. And I know that sounds odd, but it's true because we love everything we've published. But the big, the three big standouts are Benjamin Myers’ *The Gallows Pole*, which we published in 2017, which is historical fiction. It's about a local story based in Calderdale, about the coiners, David Harley was called the King of the coiner, and they were clipping coins and making their own currency and it brought down the economy of West Yorkshire. And the Bank of England was so panicky that they sent all the king's horses and all the king's men up to the village down the road, Mytholmroyd in Cragg Vale. And they hanged David Hartley in York in 1767. And we published a book, Ben reimagined the story, and it won the world's biggest literary prize for historical fiction, the Walter Scott Prize, and he won £25,000. So that was absolutely brilliant. And then all the big publishers came and offered him huge money. And he kept us in the loop and he's now published by Bloomsbury. And his first book with Bloomsbury was a book called *The Offing*. And *The Offing* sold over 350,000 copies in Germany.

**Nelima Begum** 42:04

Wow.

**Kevin Duffy** 42:05

I think Ben is the biggest non-German author in Germany, and that is just phenomenal. It's just phenomenal. And I'm just really chuffed that we're part of Ben's, kind of, publishing history, because we published *Pig Iron* in 2012, we published *Beastings*, in 2015. And we published *The Gallows Pole* in 2017. The BBC have just filmed *The Gallows Pole*. It's been directed by Shane Meadows. It's a six-part series, and I think it's coming on next spring. So that'll be on the television. That'll be our first TV, kind of, like, it's not our production, but we're part of the whole thing.

**Nelima Begum** 42:42

A part of the writing journey.

**Kevin Duffy** 42:44

Yeah. And then to see Ben move on to, you know, the, the wonderful success with Bloomsbury is fantastic. I did ask the editor of Bloomsbury why they didn't, she said she loved Ben's work, you know, going back to *Pig Iron*, I said, ‘Well why didn’t you published *Pig Iron* in 2012?’ And they came up with their excuses. But I won't go into that (I might do you later).Yeah, and I think that's what in this, kind of, it's not just this, kind of, Bloomsbury, it's kind of like Galley Beggar, Sandstone and Saraband, and there're lots of other indie publishers finding these great, great writers who probably, you know, might not have been published.

And the second one, of course, is our biggest selling book, *Leonard and Hungry Paul*, by a working-class writer from Dublin called Rónán Hession. And that was shortlisted for seven literary prizes, and we published in 2019. And Dublin, which is also a UNESCO City of Literature, they chose it as a One Dublin One Book, and the whole city, together with the library, try and get the city to read one book. So, throughout the month of April in 2021, last year, they chose *Leonard and Hungry Paul*. So every cultural building in Dublin had these banners [saying] “Read *Leonard and Hungry Paul* published by Rónán Hession and Bluemoose Books.” They even had motorway signage coming into the city with these huge signs as well. It became our first international bestseller, got to number four in the Irish book charts. And it was the most borrowed… ebook in Irish libraries in 2021, between the months of January and July 2021, which is just fantastic and you're competing against Booker winners, etc… And that is you know, from Hebden Bridge, that was brilliant. We've sold over 70,000 copies now. The TV and film [rights] have been optioned. So that's another brilliant highlight.

The third one would be Sharon Duggal’s *Should We Fall Behind*, which we published in October 2020. And that was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Prize [and] is the second book—we published Sharon's first book, *The Handsworth Times*, about the riots in Birmingham in 1981. But *Should We Fall Behind* was published in October 2020, and it was also chosen for BBC Two’s book club choice for Between the Covers, which is the biggest TV book club in the country. And they have over a million people watching… when it's on. And when it was on when they interviewed Sharon, and talked about the book for five or 10 minutes, and then they have four celebrities who read the book and talk about the book. All the editors were round in our front room at Bluemoose Towers, and there wasn't a dry eye in the house, it was fantastic. And to see… Sharon, who we know is a great writer, then have a kind of a national platform via, kind of, Between the Covers, was just fantastic and brilliant. And you know, it's gone on to even better things. And we will hopefully be announcing something soon. Can't say too much at the minute. But it's those things that, you know, working with a writer from 2015, you know, seven years later, to see that wonderful, and it's not validation, but it's, kind of, people realising that, yeah, this is a fantastic book, it's a great story, and, you know, she's a great writer, and that’s wonderful.

**Nelima Begum** 46:29

Sounds incredible that you've, you know, Bluemoose Books has obviously done fantastic work. And it sounds like it's a really fulfilling thing to see authors go from strength to strength always.

**Kevin Duffy** 46:40

Yeah, it's great. It keeps me out of prison.

**Nelima Begum** 46:47

Good stuff. How do you, I mean, on, like, a bigger scale now that is more… industry focused, how do you think the industry has changed since you first started working in it?

**Kevin Duffy** 46:58

When I started there were much smaller publishing houses, and… quite a lot of them were run still by their family names. The industry is now corporate, it’s dominated by the Big Five, the Big Five, probably in the UK, represent, I dunno, 65-70% of all books published. If you look at Penguin Random House, which is owned by Bertelsmann, they publish a third of the world's books, a third of the world's books [are] published by one publishing house. They've got 240 imprints within that house but still, the economic pressures and the economic levers would say to me that, creatively, that is not a great thing, when five massive global corporations, and they are corporations, are dictating to a certain extent what we read. Obviously, you know, there's individual choice. But if the choice is dominated by five big people saying, ‘Here are the books, you can decide’, it's not that much of a choice, is it really. So I think, collectively, the range of books has gotten much smaller. And that's why I think readers of literary fiction should be moving to the independent publishers to see a greater range of writers from different backgrounds, different communities, than the bigger five. The Big Five are doing a few things, but not really, I think it's the independents who are going out there and doing most of the heavy lifting and finding black writers, you know, Asian writers, writers from Africa, writers from the Philippines, writers from Indonesia, you know. We're doing all these things that I don't think the bigger publishers are, they're waiting for the, I mean, I've had conversations with three of the Big Five about some of our writers that they have passed over, but because they've won prize prizes, they're offering huge cheques. So they're waiting for the smaller publishers to find their readership, and then they come in, and it's an economic model that works for them. Again, the economic imperative of the big corporations is to satisfy the rapacious demands of their shareholders. We don't have that. And I think that does have an effect on creativity; on what books are being published. Because if you have to reach a certain number of pounds, shillings and pence by the end of the week, you're going to replicate books that have been published prior, you're not going to stick your neck out and say, ‘This is a fantastic book, we're gonna have to spend two, three years with this writer, you know, books two, three, four, and five, before we might get the audience to then… make it economically… profitable.’ They're just not willing to do that. Lots of writers now, at one time would get, you know, two- or three-book deals. That doesn't exist anymore. It's a one book deal, probably two-book deal maximum unless you're, you know, the huge brand name. And the economics of the high street discounting [and] Amazon, those are the huge differences. Amazon, you know, I have a, kind of, love-hate relationship with Amazon because on one hand they are, you know, driving prices through the floor, but on the other hand, for a small independent publisher, especially in the digital world, with Kindle, which they dominate, it provides a lot of income for us. So, there is a love-hate relationship, when I think we should be driving the price up, not down. So again, the corporatisation of publishing, the discount structure, and also Amazon, those are the three main differences.

**Nelima Begum** 50:31

It's really interesting that you mentioned that, like, the bigger publishers have, I guess somewhat of a complacency to just rely on independents to take the risks and to experiment, and then they'll just come along and, kind of, reap the rewards, so to speak, or sweep them up. Lots to think about there. I want to bring it back around to focus on Bluemoose Books now. What do you wish more writers knew about indie publishers and Bluemoose Books as a whole?

**Kevin Duffy** 51:03

I think the most important for us, independents and especially Bluemoose, [is that] we're here to develop you as a writer. And I don't think the bigger publishers are because if the numbers don't work out with your first book with a bigger publisher, you will be dropped unceremoniously. If the sales graph is going in the opposite direction to the advance that they've given you, it's, you know, it’s unmerciless. They will probably like a hot stone. So I think independents, we'd like to think we will [be] with you for the duration of your writing career. We're not so naïve to think that at some point, you know, after the third, I mean, we've published writers, you know, their second, third or fourth books, and with Ben we published three books and then the huge cheque came in and that's not an issue because Ben kept us up-to-date all the way through, and we knew at some point he would be leaving, because what writer doesn't want to have that economic sustainability? That's great. But we, you know, we built his, Hetha and I we built a kind of readership for him, so he wasn't going to lose that by going to another bigger publisher. I think sometimes if writers go to the bigger publisher straight away, and it doesn't work out, it can be crippling for their, one for their, kind of, confidence, but also for their writing career as well. You know, and I think the biggest difference between us and the bigger publishers that we're here to develop you as a writer.

**Nelima Begum** 52:29

Fantastic. And you know, kind of looking ahead to the future, what kind of submissions are you on the lookout for in 2023?

**Kevin Duffy** 52:38

Everything and anything. We don't publish children's, we don't publish YA, we don't publish poetry (because we live in Hebden Bridge and there're far too many poets here). So yeah, um, we’ve just started doing short stories, but just everything in anything. Anything that's, kind of, yeah, you think is a bit different. I always say to writers, ‘Write for yourself. Never follow the zeitgeist because by the time you've finished writing, the zeitgeist will have disappeared and gone down a different cul-de-sac.’ So just write what you want to write. Yeah, everything in anything.

**Nelima Begum** 53:12

Fantastic. So I'm gonna move on to some more quickfire questions now. So for these don't think, just answer [with the] first thing that comes to your head. What are you reading at the moment?

**Kevin Duffy** 53:25

I've just been reading *Chopin in Kentucky* by Elizabeth Heichelbech which we're publishing—I know this sounds a bit glib as well—we're publishing at the end of January. So yeah, I'm reading.

**Nelima Begum** 53:34

Fantastic. Which Bluemoose Books titles can readers expect in 2023?

**Kevin Duffy** 53:41

*Chopin in Kentucky* by Elizabeth Heichelbech, *Breaking Kayfabe* by Wes Brown, *12 Words* by Linda Brogan and the three ladies from Moss Side in Manchester. Also the paperback of *I am not Your Eve* by Devika Ponnambalam, which has just been shortlisted for the Scottish Book of the Year in September, *Sports Club* by Kevin Boniface, which is a collection of short stories by a postman from Huddersfield, which is very funny.

**Nelima Begum** 54:10

Fantastic. Are you working on any creative writing of your own at the moment, and can you share with us?

**Kevin Duffy** 54:17

I am. 20 years after [my book] I'm writing *The Chakra Landfill*, which should be out in 2026. But I'm also doing a how-to-get-published [book]—*The Secret Life of a Publisher*. There's bits of anecdotes in there of my 30-odd years in publishing and, you know, dealing with some upper-middle-class and aristocratic buffoons in the industry in the early days. Yeah, so it's how to get published, but there're a few interesting anecdotes in there. And getting thrown out of the Ivy is one of them.

**Nelima Begum** 54:53

Lovely. I'm glad that we got to hear it here first. Special access! Which book or series do you wish you had written?

**Kevin Duffy** 55:04

There’re two. *Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hones I just think is brilliant. But also there's a book by an Icelandic writer called Sjon called *The Blue Fox*, which is quite small. It's… about 110 pages. Yeah, it's about a guy trying to shoot a blue fox. It's just beautiful. Those are the two books I’d love to have written.

**Nelima Begum** 55:28

Fantastic. And finally, what does working with writers mean to you?

**Kevin Duffy** 55:34

It's ace, it's wonderful. It can be, sometimes, dispiriting when you've got to, kind of, manage their expectations. But every day you get up and you find something different in your inbox that, kind of, excites, interests and gets you thinking, You know, what more can you ask on a daily basis for those three things? Because, you know, if you're not curious, then you shouldn’t be here should you, really.

**Nelima Begum** 55:58

Beautiful. Thank you so much, Kevin, for this wonderful conversation and these brilliant insights as well. I'm sure our listeners are going to learn a lot and laugh in equal measure. So, thank you so much for your time.

**Kevin Duffy** 56:11

A pleasure. Thanks Nelima.