

Marketing and Discoverability for Fiction Writers

I. Two Kinds of Marketing

Most writers treat marketing as one activity. It is actually two, and mixing them up wastes both time and money.

Pushing your book toward an audience. Ads, cold social posts, unsolicited outreach. You are placing the book in front of people who did not ask to see it. This can work, but the cost per result is high, and most of the people you reach were never going to buy a book from you regardless of the pitch.

Positioning your book to be found. A reader who is already searching for something like your book, on Amazon's also-bought carousel, in a genre subreddit, by asking an AI assistant for a recommendation, finds you because your book is set up to be findable. This is slower to build than a single ad campaign, but it keeps producing results long after you've stopped actively working on it.

Both have a place. But a writer with limited time gets more long-term return from being findable than from repeated attempts to be pushed in front of more people. The rest of this chapter is weighted accordingly.

II. Who You're Actually Talking To

Every book has three distinct audiences, and treating them as one blurred mass of “readers” wastes effort.

Established readers. People who have already read you and trust the next book will deliver. They need almost nothing from you except to know a new release exists and roughly when. This is your lowest-effort, highest-return audience, and the one writers most often neglect once the excitement of a launch fades.

Interested but unconvinced readers. People who have crossed paths with your name or your genre and are on the fence. What moves this group is a strong sample, a sharp premise, and a cover that unmistakably signals the right shelf. Most of the tools in this chapter exist to win over this middle group.

Cold readers with a specific craving. People who don't know you and have no reason to care who you are. They are hunting for a book that satisfies a particular mood right now, tense, funny, heartbreaking, escapist. Your cover and your description have a few seconds to signal that your book is the answer to that craving. Discoverability infrastructure, metadata, categories, keywords, exists mainly to put your book in front of this group at the moment they're already looking.

Knowing which of the three you're addressing changes what you send. A newsletter serves established readers. A blurb and sample chapter serve the unconvinced middle. A cover and category placement serve the cold, specific-craving reader.

III. Your Discoverability Foundation

Think of a wheel. The hub is your author website, the one property you fully own and control, unlike a retail page whose rules can change overnight. Every spoke radiating out, an ad, a guest post, a podcast mention, a review, only does its job if it points back to that hub. Along the rim, holding the whole wheel together and keeping it rolling toward the right readers, sit your metadata and your keywords, plus the SEO groundwork that gets the hub itself found in the first place.

Four pieces make up this foundation.

An author website. The one asset a platform cannot take away from you or restructure without warning. It's also the natural place for every other marketing effort to eventually send a reader.

Consistent identifiers. Use the same ISBN for the same edition on every platform and in every piece of marketing. A book listed under two different identifiers reads to a database, and eventually to a reader, as two different products.

Accurate category and keyword data. BISAC codes tell retailers and libraries what shelf your book belongs on. Keywords are not adjectives describing your book, they are the actual phrases a reader types when hunting for something like it. Get both right and your book has a chance to surface when a stranger asks "what's a book like..." Get them wrong or leave them generic, and it won't, no matter how good the writing is.

A findable website. Other sites linking to yours, and your site being built so a search engine can actually read it, is what brings a

searching reader to your hub instead of leaving them to stumble onto you by luck.

Example: A reader searches for “a slow-burn romantic suspense set on a working ranch.” If your categories and keywords describe that accurately, your book has a shot at surfacing. If your metadata just says “romance,” it competes with every romance ever published and mostly loses.

ISBN, Own It or Use the Free One

This decision affects distribution, not how well the book sells on its own merits.

	Free ISBN (KDP, IngramSpark, B&N Press)	Purchased ISBN (Bowker, US)
Cost	Free	\$125 single, \$295 for 10 (\$29.50 each), \$575 for 100
Publisher of record	The platform (often shows as “Independently Published” on KDP)	You, or your imprint
Distribution	Locked to that one platform	Usable across Amazon, IngramSpark, B&N Press, and your own site
Bookstore and library access	Limited, since the platform is listed as publisher	Full access, since you are listed as publisher
Best fit	A single title, Amazon-only distribution, testing the market	Multiple titles, multiple formats, bookstore or library ambitions

Two mechanics worth knowing before deciding. Kindle ebooks don’t need an ISBN at all, Amazon assigns its own ASIN

automatically, so this choice mainly affects print and audiobook editions. And each format needs its own number, a paperback, a hardcover, and an audiobook edition of one title are three separate ISBNs, which is the practical case for a 10-pack over a single purchase for anyone planning more than one format or more than one book.

IV. The Cover and the Genre Promise

A book cover is metadata before it's art. Before a reader reads your title or your blurb, the cover has already told them what shelf the book belongs on, and readers browsing a genre carry sharp expectations for what that shelf should look like.

A literary-looking cover on a fast-moving thriller pulls in the wrong reader, who bounces and leaves a review saying it wasn't what was advertised, and repels the right reader, who never gave it a second look because nothing about the cover said thriller. The cover's job isn't to be beautiful on its own terms. Its job is to make the correct promise to the correct reader before they've consciously registered doing so.

Category placement and comp titles work the same job. Both are genre signals telling the right reader, before a word of the blurb is read, that this book was built for them.

V. The Blurb

The most common blurb mistake is telling too much of the story. A blurb's job is to sell the sizzle, not the steak. It should make a reader hungry for what's coming, not hand over the meal in advance. That

means keeping it short, and it means leaving real, specific questions unanswered rather than resolving the tension before the reader has even opened the book.

Here's a working comparison, using an original maritime thriller as the example.

Too much steak, not enough sizzle.

Slaughter's Cove. A Maritime Thriller

Jennifer is twenty-seven years old. She's just made lieutenant. She has a new command — thirty-six meters of sleek aluminum patrol boat on the coast of Maine. And in seventy-two hours, a nuclear device will detonate under a bridge in Chicago.

Lieutenant Jennifer Slaughter of the Maine Marine Patrol doesn't know about the bomb yet. She's running routine coastal patrol, breaking in her new crew, quietly managing a complicated long-distance relationship, and trying to figure out what her enigmatic new deputy, the former special operations soldier called Lambert, is actually doing aboard her ship.

Then the FBI shows up. Then Naval Intelligence. Then a man named Smith, representing an agency that doesn't introduce itself. And Jennifer Slaughter's first command becomes something considerably more than a patrol boat.

SLAUGHTER'S COVE is a maritime thriller built on two converging tracks: a tightly rendered procedural of life and command aboard a U.S. coastal patrol vessel, and a multi-continent terrorism plot orchestrated by a former East German

intelligence operative named Harris Nash, who has spent thirty years in patient anonymity preparing for a single catastrophic act. The novel moves between Jennifer's deck and Nash's Berlin dinner table, between a Quebec safe house and a Chicago bridge, between a clandestine midnight rendezvous with a Navy vessel in the Gulf of Maine and the aftermath of an EMP detonation that stops every clock in downtown Chicago.

What holds it together is Jennifer Slaughter — a protagonist whose career precision and emotional realism carry the reader from a quiet morning bathroom mirror to a point-blank naval engagement with a trawler carrying a shoulder-fired missile and an autonomous submarine on its aft deck. She is not a superhero. She is a well-trained, self-aware professional who earns every decision she makes under fire.

For readers who want their thrillers technically grounded, their protagonists human, and their Maine coast exactly as cold and unforgiving as advertised.

This version explains the plot from beginning to nearly the end. There's little left for the reader to wonder about, and the length works against it instead of building anticipation.

Sizzle, with real questions left open.

Slaughter's Cove. *When the sky is falling, do you save the world or your friends?*

A Maritime Thriller

Jennifer just made lieutenant, and with it, her first command, thirty-six meters of aluminum patrol boat and a crew she's still

earning. Routine coastal work, a complicated relationship managed from a distance, and one rookie crew member she can't quite figure out.

Then the FBI shows up. Then Naval Intelligence. Then a man named Smith, who represents an agency that doesn't introduce itself.

Jennifer's first command just became something considerably more than a state patrol boat.

For readers who want their thrillers technically grounded, their protagonists human, and their Maine coast exactly as cold and unforgiving as advertised.

Notice what the second version does. The subtitle alone plants the book's central dilemma before a single line of body copy, and it does that work in one sentence. The body copy names the setup and introduces escalating outside pressure, but never explains what any of the three agencies actually want, what Patricia is really doing aboard, or what choice Jennifer will ultimately face. Those are the unanswered questions that sell the book. The closing line signals genre and tone to the cold reader in a single breath, without spending a single sentence on plot.

VI. Building the List

A social following is rented space, the platform controls who actually sees your posts and can change the terms without notice. An email list is space you own outright. This is the highest-leverage discoverability asset an independent author can build, and it's the one most new authors skip.

A reason to sign up. A short story, a deleted scene, a bonus epilogue, or a prequel offered free in exchange for an email address. It should be strong writing, since for many readers it's their first sample of your work, and short enough that the reader reaches your call to action while their interest is still warm.

Why a series makes the list more valuable. A reader who finishes book one and joins your list can be told the instant book two exists, without you needing to find them again through an algorithm. A standalone sale is a single transaction. A series reader on your list is a returning customer for as long as you keep writing the series.

What to actually send. A newsletter earns its place in an inbox by being worth opening, not by only appearing when there's a product to push. Reliable content that doesn't require a launch as an excuse includes an update on what you're currently drafting, a short reaction to something you've been reading, a research rabbit hole the book sent you down, a poll or question for your readers, an early look at a cover or title before it's public, or a short reflection on a craft problem you solved that week. The through-line is staying present between releases, not selling on every send.

VII. Reviews and Word of Mouth

Word of mouth remains the strongest driver of sales any author has, traditionally published or not. Reviews are what let word of mouth operate at scale, since a stranger's public review does for an unknown reader what a friend's recommendation does for someone who already knows you.

Advance reader teams. A group of readers who get the book before release in exchange for an honest review at launch. The goal is reviews in place on day one rather than waiting weeks for them to accumulate organically, since a title with no reviews at launch struggles for visibility on most retail algorithms.

Professional review services. Platforms like NetGalley put pre-release titles in front of librarians, booksellers, and reviewers actively looking for new work to cover. Most of these are paid for independent authors, and they're aimed more at institutional and professional reviewers than general readers.

A direct, simple ask. The most overlooked tool of the three. A short, genuine request at the back of the book, or to readers who've told you they finished it, produces far more reviews than passively hoping they'll appear.

A review is not marketing copy you write yourself. It's proof, from someone with nothing to gain, that the book delivers on what the cover and blurb promised.

VIII. Low-Effort, Sustained Presence

Some weeks allow for a real marketing push. Most don't, and treating marketing as all-or-nothing is why many authors end up doing nothing at all. Below is a set of tasks sized to whatever time you actually have today.

Under two minutes. Answer a reader's comment or message. Post a single line from the current draft. Note one small thing that went right in today's writing session.

Around five minutes. Swap out your retailer author photo or bio line. Post a photo of your actual workspace. Mention a book, not your own, that you'd hand to a friend.

Around ten minutes. Draft the next newsletter send. Line up a week's worth of short posts in one sitting. Tighten one paragraph of your book description.

Around thirty minutes. Check which keywords or categories are actually pulling traffic. Fix one broken or outdated page on your website. Record a two-minute video answering a question readers keep asking you.

Work whichever tier fits the day you're actually having. A little, often, outperforms an occasional burst followed by long silence.

IX. Reading a Flop as Data

Not every push works, and a campaign that produces no sales isn't automatically a mistake worth agonizing over. Sometimes the audience for a specific book is genuinely small or not actively searching where you placed the ad, and no amount of additional spend manufactures readers who aren't there to begin with. Throwing more money at a campaign that isn't working usually just buys a more expensive confirmation of the same result.

A flop still tells you something useful. It can mean the targeting missed the right audience, the category placement is too broad or too narrow, or the pitch itself, the cover, the blurb, the hook, isn't landing with the readers who did see it. That's direction for the next attempt, not proof the book has failed. Change one variable at a time, the audience, the placement, or the hook, and run it again.

Marketing a book is closer to a long series of small adjustments than a single campaign you're expected to get right on the first try.

Exercise: Build Your Discoverability Foundation in One Session

You can put the core of this chapter to work in a single sitting.

1. Write down your book's BISAC categories and ten search phrases a reader might actually type to find a book like yours, not adjectives describing it, terms a stranger would search.
2. Using the ISBN comparison above, decide whether a free or purchased ISBN fits your current plans, and note which format it affects.
3. Write one sentence stating what your cover currently promises a browsing reader, and one sentence stating what genre it should be promising. If the two don't match, that's your next task.
4. Draft or revise your blurb, aiming for sizzle over steak, cutting anything that resolves a question the reader should still be asking.
5. Decide on one reader magnet you could realistically produce, and where the signup for it will live.
6. Pick one tier from the low-effort presence list you can act on today.

That's a working discoverability foundation. Everything else in this chapter builds on it.

Next

The next Power Tool in this pairing, *Choosing Your Publishing Path*, takes up the decision this chapter assumes is already made, which route into print actually gets your book to the readers this chapter is built to find.