

Becoming Published with Brett Harris

Episode 402 Transcript

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, do you know how you say our writing program can help students who are very reluctant, or you know what I'm trying to say. How do you say that?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, in the beginning of the seminar, I say one of the problems of teaching writing is you've got such a wide spectrum of aptitude. On one end, you have kids who would literally rather scrub the floors twice than have to put one whole paragraph on paper. And a lot of parents, they chuckle and grin like, yeah, you know my kid.

And on the other end, you have the girl who's eighteen pages into our next novel, and you don't know what to do. How do you teach that? So yeah, that is that aptitude of course. We believe that the Structure and Style approach stands squarely in the middle, giving tools, both ends and everyone in between on how to collect up, organize and present ideas in an effective way.

Julie Walker: Right, exactly. And we have many opportunities to teach students to become more confident and therefore more competent in their writing. But there is a certain group of writers that once they go through a Unit 3, which is our story...

Andrew Pudewa: Retelling

Julie Walker: ...retelling narrative stories, they want to do so much more. And well, quite frankly, other than expanded models that we have in Unit 3, we don't really have a novel writing program.

Andrew Pudewa: And there are a few things out there that I will sometimes point people to the, what's the?

Julie Walker: NaNoWriMo.

Andrew Pudewa: Write a novel in a month challenge, and then it's a couple of curriculums. Why do you ask me this today?

Julie Walker: Because we have a friend of IEW that can do this very thing, that can help students become more proficient and therefore prolific in their writing, possibly even getting published. And that friend is Brett Harris. So welcome to our podcast, Brett.

Brett Harris: Thank you so much, Julie and Andrew. We are such fans of IEW and have so many students who have gone through your curriculum, and so it's a real thrill for me to be here with you today.

Julie Walker: Well, you teach about how to get published, but you yourself are a published author at a very young age.

Andrew Pudewa: Of a bestseller

Julie Walker: a bestseller.

Brett Harris: Yes, well, my twin brother Alex and I were blessed with the opportunity to write a book as teenagers that got published from a imprint of Penguin Random House and sold over 600,000 copies so far. And that sparked all sorts of questions from other young people saying, this is my passion. I want to write, I want to be an author. How did you do it? Can you teach me? And that's kind of where all this started.

Julie Walker: And that book, of course, is *Do Hard Things*, which that in and of itself was probably a hard thing for you to do.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it was so big. It still is really. I mean, it's somewhere on one of my many bookshelves because it just took us all by storm. Wow, teenagers can do a whole lot more than the general population expects. And I think that was the subtitle, what was the subtitle of the book?

Brett Harris: Yeah. A Teenage Rebellion against Low Expectations.

Andrew Pudewa: Rebellion Against Low Expectations. So good. So good. So now you have a new enterprise, your organization. And it is called Author Conservatory, is that correct?

Brett Harris: Yeah, we actually have two programs. We have a high school program called the Young Writer's Workshop, and then we have our college alternative career program, the Author Conservatory.

Andrew Pudewa: I love that name, Author Conservatory. It kind of is a mix between the game of Clue, an ideal that you would like, and kind of a melody in the background. The name evokes well, I would say.

Brett Harris: Yeah, well conservatory is a school that focuses on one of the fine arts and writing fiction, writing creative writing is a fine art And we're trying to raise up the the next generation. As we would say it, we want to raise up the next C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Andrew Pudewa: What inspired you to make this a thing to actually start an organization, get websites, start a curriculum? You've done a lot of curriculum planning, I'm sure. What was the spark that caused you to say, Okay, this is my next big thing in life. This is my next hard thing.

Brett Harris: Yeah, the story really begins with getting married to my best friend, Anna, and Just a few months after we got married, she got really sick. And so within a few months of our wedding, she was bed bound and would go on to be bed bound. We thought we were going to lose her several times over a five year period.

So we're talking about a really substantial journey through chronic illness, all the doctors, all the specialists not being able to figure out exactly what was going on. And also all the

medical expenses that come with that. I'm sure a lot of families who faced any sort of it. Health issues, unexpected medical bills. They know what I'm talking about. So for me as a husband and as a really a full time caregiver, I needed to figure out a way to support my wife financially while also being present as a caregiver. And so I had to find something that was more flexible than your typical nine to five job. I couldn't take a conventional job.

And so I had to start asking myself, well, what do I have a value to offer the world and that people would pay me for? And the thing that came up in that time was there was all these young people who come to me asking for help with writing, for help with publishing because of what my twin brother Alex and I had done as teenagers to publish our books and launch our career as authors. And so I started helping. And I helped a few people helped a girl land a 100, 000 book deal with Zondervan, an imprint of HarperCollins. I helped another girl land her dream contract with her dream publisher, hit the bestseller list, win awards. I was like, Hey, I'm pretty good at this. So maybe this could be it. And so that's kind of the seed of launching into writing programs. And of course, it's just grown quite substantially from there. I'm not doing it by myself. I've got a team of over thirty people, professional editors, award winning bestselling authors, agents and just all sorts of people, homeschool moms, former English teachers. So it's a whole team effort now, but the start was just, I got to provide for my wife and I've got to figure out where, what I have to offer the world overlaps with what people need, where, where there's a gap in the marketplace that people would be willing to invest in this. And that's where all of this started.

Andrew Pudewa: That's great. I see some pretty big names here you have in your network. The incredibly popular S. D. Smith with *The Green Ember*. And Andrew Peterson. And then Christopher Paolini. How did you get these people to join you in this effort?

Brett Harris: Well, I have to just say the credit goes to their heart for investing in the next generation of authors and really can't take a lot of credit for it besides that we asked and they said, yeah, we'd be willing to show up. And all three of those names you mentioned. These are our guest experts who come in and they'll spend time just interacting with our students live answering questions. They're not full time faculty. But they're obviously very successful authors who want to invest in the next generation. And who said yes when we asked them if they would show up, and they've all done so repeatedly over and over.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. That's wonderful. Tiny little bit of useless trivia, I knew Christopher Paolini's parents before they were married. I was working at the same non profit organization that they were working for. So while I haven't actually met him, I have met his parents before they were married.

Brett Harris: That's incredible. He is just such a role model and was a young person who published young, just had incredible success at a young age, was homeschooled, just all sorts of interesting connections. And so he had a real passion for coming in and just pouring into our students. I'm still blown away that he would say yes to that request given the level of success that he's had as an author.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, this is excellent. Okay. So tell us a little bit about, let's say, I'm a young person. I have this vision for writing—I would say 90 percent of the kids I meet—a fantasy novel, but a good one, doesn't use occult and go into happy, nice dragons and all sorts of kind of, I don't know what you would call it distortions. So I want to write a next *Lord of the Rings* type of thing where it's all good and everybody is inspired and loves it, but I don't

know how to do it. I just have a batch of ideas. I come to you, and I have to apply to your program because you're somewhat selective, I would assume.

Brett Harris: Yeah. So our high school program is open to anyone, and we even have a pay what you can policy and scholarships we give out to any family facing financial hardship, whether that's a ministry family living on support or facing medical bills or unemployment, things like that. So that's very accessible to anyone.

And then our college program, the Author Conservatory is selective. Currently we're extending an offer of enrollment to maybe one out of four. And the level of applicants we receive is already quite high. This is the top 5 percent of young writers out there in terms of their experience and their motivation. So we are selective, but we're, we're really like to work with the students and their parents to talk about, here's where you are, here's what we need to see, here's next steps you can take to get where you need to be so that even if we're turning someone away. They know how to keep moving forward on their own in the meantime.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, that's great. Well, let's take the high school program. What would it look like for sixteen year old, well, not me, but someone...

Julie Walker: Your up and coming grandson

Andrew Pudewa: yeah, yeah. What is the process? They enroll, they sign up, then you have a curriculum, you have exercise. How do you help people take their vision, their idea, and start to make it real?

Brett Harris: Well, I think the first thing that we would tell a young writer is that if you start young and stick with it, this is far more possible and far more viable than most people expect. In addition, if you also learn business skills alongside of writing craft, you have a path to make this financially sustainable. Which again, that's a stereotype of the starving artist that a lot of parents and just our general culture has, which is both accurate, but also inaccurate when it comes to those who are really approaching it in a systematic, thoughtful, strategic way, which is not how most writers approach it. Of course, most writers maybe approach it like an artist, and it's just, I'm in my room, I'm creating my art, and that's all I do.

One of the first things we're going to tell a young writer is there's more to writing than just writing. And we're going to teach them the business skills. We're going to teach them how the industry works. We're going to help them surround themselves with community, with mentorship, and we're going to take a step by step approach to publishing and writing an effective novel, just like you would take a step by step approach to be able to write a good essay, to do any career really. You're going to take a more step by step approach and we're trying to bring that to the world of creative writing.

So in terms of how the program works inside, you sign up and then you have access to a content library, which is like a Netflix of writing lessons, interviews with all of these incredible authors coming in and sharing what they wish they knew as a young person, giving feedback and insight into how to grow as a writer, as well as lessons and courses on pretty much everything under the sun. We have hundreds and hundreds of lessons and courses that students can go through with interviews with experts, Q and A, and implementation exercises.

So that's the first piece you get is the learning, the curriculum, but then you also get access to this exclusive private community website led by industry experts. So you're going to be in there with hundreds of other young writers who are equally passionate and excited about pursuing excellence in this area. So you get the positive peer pressure of being surrounded by people who also want to be good at the same thing you want to be good at, as well as a lot of mentorship and leadership by industry experts, instructors, and then student leaders who are more experienced students who might've been in the program now for years at this point. So the combination of a. I have a content library and a community where you can ask feedback, join a critique group, join an accountability group, do writing sprints where you work together to time yourself and make sure you're staying focused and productive, where you can ask your research questions like could you survive falling from a three-story building and still run away afterwards, right? So all of that community support, as well as an ask an instructor space where you can get feedback from professionals, that together is kind of the high school program, The Young Writers Workshop in a nutshell.

Julie Walker: So I think of you talk about C. S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. These are two members of the Inklings. And I love this idea of community because that's what the Inklings did. They got together periodically at the Eagle and the Child, that pub in London and shared ideas and I think probably the dragon Smaug from J.R.R. Tolkien was influential in C. S. Lewis's, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and what is a dragon really like, and can they do these things? And I know that this is primarily an online program, but is there a live component of this where these students would have a chance to essentially peer evaluation of their work and they can discuss what they're working on?

Brett Harris: Well, first of all, that is happening online students are sharing their work, getting feedback there. They're being alpha readers or beta readers for each other's novels. That means either an initial reader reading as, as the project is being drafted or for a beta reader, you're reading after the first draft has been done and giving feedback to help with revisions. So that's all happening online. But then in addition to that, our students are taught and encouraged and prepared to attend writers' conferences. These are really industry professional events where writers and authors and industry professionals gather. It's where you can pitch your work and get feedback from professionals in person. And so we have a lot of students who will show up to these conferences, and they'll spend time together as well as we have our own annual conference for young writers that we host. So there's definitely in person opportunities. And of course we have students and families who arrange to meet up with each other. Obviously, that's something they're arranging themselves and we encourage everyone to be cautious because yes, it's still an online friend and let's be safe about this.

Brett Harris: But we emphasize internet safety, and we have even lessons specifically devoted to that, but this is really a wonderful community of like-minded families, all of whom share this passion for writing and we try to facilitate it online as much of that feedback and interaction as possible. But then it's really been neat to see over the years, the presence of our students at some of these industry events where they're not only interacting with each other, but also with the broader world of writing and publishing.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. Tremendous. Tremendous. Now, the college alternative, that's a three-year program. And does it work in a similar way? What, what would be added or different if you had an older student who said, Yeah, I'll invest a few years and see if I can get this thing going. And either not worry about it at college or delay it or maybe you've got some kids who did dual enrollment and they've got a college degree under their belt at a young age.

So how's that program expanding over what you have for the high school age students?

Brett Harris: So our college program, the Author Conservatory, or I should say college alternative program is really intended for the student who wants to pursue this as a career. So the workshop actually we have students who are college age in the Young Writers Workshop, and we allow students up to the age of 25 to stay in that community and continue to benefit from the resources and support.

The Author Conservatory is really for students, sixteen and up primarily. And the most of our students are in that college age range. So we have students who are, they've graduated from college. We have students doing this instead of a master's in fine arts and creative writing. And so we have students up in their mid to late twenties as well in our, in the author conservatory.

But the main difference you're going to see between the two programs is the one is the high school program and it's a larger community, the conservatory is smaller, it's career focused, and the biggest difference is the amount of personal feedback and mentorship you're receiving on your work. So we have, in the conservatory, you are going to, in just the first year, you're going to develop and draft and get feedback on a full length novel, maybe even more than one. We have students who have done two, even three in the first year as well as you're going to be taught step by step how to launch your own business venture.

So we're teaching our students to be professional novelists who can write something that an agent, a literary agent, a publisher and readers would be interested in. But we're also teaching them to be entrepreneurs so that they actually can make this financially sustainable because we have a no starving artist policy. So our students are trained in writing craft and business skills. And so even in the first year of the conservatory, they're going to write a novel and they're going to launch a business and they're getting hands on experience. They're also getting regular, even up to weekly professional feedback from professional editors, published award winning best selling authors, as well as entrepreneurs who have built their own successful million dollar businesses, and now are investing in training up the next generation.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, you must be very busy. It sounds like you're coordinating a lot of, a lot of people doing various sides of this, and you've developed some course material in addition to the content library. You have some books on how to write books or is it more of a here, read this, do this, practice this. Okay, you look good. Move on to the next lesson, the next level. How does that process work as they go through?

Brett Harris: You described it actually really well. So we have lectures. That can be watched on your own schedule. And so you're going to watch a lesson on how to craft a strong story idea. In fact, we're going to have multiple lessons on that. And then you're going to implement what you've learned. So you're going to put together a list of three story ideas that you can bring to a critique call with an instructor, and then you'll show up to your call. You have one-on-one time in a group format, but each student gets that one on one attention on the call where you're getting feedback on your assignment and the assignment was reviewed in advance. So you're just meeting to talk about it now and you're going to be told, okay this is good. Let's fix this. Let's add in some of this; it's missing an ingredient here. And you'll do that as many times as it takes to have it really be strong because we're not just saying, okay, here's your grade, move on to the next step. We really are trying to raise students up closer and closer to that professional level. So they're going to get as many rounds of professional feedback as they need. Then they'll be graduated onto the next step. So they're going to learn, they're going to implement, they're going to get feedback, and they're going to try again if they need to until they get it right. And then they'll move on.

Next lesson, implement that, and we do the same thing on the business side. So come up with your business ideas. Now you're going to go and do market research and pricing research, and you're going to start working on some initial branding and an elevator pitch and your key distinctions. And then you're going to do some additional market testing. And then you're going to launch. It's step by step. And you're learning, you're watching a training, you're implementing, and then you're getting feedback from professionals on each of those steps.

Julie Walker: I love that model. And I love that you're including entrepreneurship as a part of your course. And I feel like Andrew, we should have him back just specifically to talk about this piece of it because I know you're a huge fan of entrepreneurship and seeing young people start their own businesses.

Andrew Pudewa: There's pretty much nothing like being involved in a home business or starting a business as a teenager to kind of create a long time aptitude. And there's so much out there that wants to sell you something. Like for \$595, we'll sell you this whole course to teach you how to write a book or to teach you how to start a business. And I just think probably a very small percentage of people have much success with that simply because it's missing the part that it seems like you have, which is the personal coaching, hands on mentoring that is, to me, it seems like it'd be almost economically unviable. Like, how do you find excellent mentors who have the time to meet with individuals one on one and in groups and not have to charge too much that makes it cost prohibitive? You must have figured out a pretty clever business plan for your business to make this thing fly.

Brett Harris: Yeah, well, I think the real key, and this is something that you see in the world of the arts, is that there is a lack of business training and experience. There's also a really big lack of valuing what you've created. And so one of the first lessons our students will go through in our business training, the fundamentals of making money. And we teach them the three fundamentals are: one, create something of value. Number two, value what you've created. And then number three, exchange that value for money. And where a lot of people get tripped up is in that second step of actually valuing what they've created enough to charge for it or to charge what it's worth.

So one of the things that we've been able to do, I think successfully, is to truly value what it is that we've created. We recognize the life changing impact of what we can offer. And now we have the success stories of our students to prove just how valuable it is. And so we've been able to charge what that's worth. And I think the key to that is that we're really being able to anchor ourselves in comparison to college. There's 120,000 students a year who will go to school for an English degree, an emphasis in creative writing. These programs are, have exploded in popularity over the last decade. And yet, a lot of these students want to be published novelists. They don't want to be an English teacher, necessarily. They want a career as an author. And yet, a lot of those programs are just not designed to prepare you for that. That's not to say they're bad programs. It's just not what they're designed for. They're not going to have you writing genre fiction. They're not going to have you in most cases ever working on a full length novel. You're going to be writing short stories. You're not going to get professional feedback from published authors and professional editors. A lot of it's going to just be peer feedback.

And so we've tried to create something that's far superior, but at a price point that's actually a steal compared to what you would spend on a college education. And then we throw in addition to that, the fact that our students are actually learning entrepreneurship, not just

learning it, but launching their own business ventures. And we now have students who have earned back their full tuition for the program through their business income before they've graduated. So all that together, I think, makes it appealing, even though it is a substantial investment and a true college alternative program.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I know that. Our listeners, many of them, are waiting to find out, where do they find this? I do have one other question that someone might have, which is, what are the youngest students that you take into your high school Young Writers Workshop coaching program?

Brett Harris: Yeah. So for the Young Writers Workshop, we primarily work with students 13 and up. We can make exceptions for students 12 years old and a little younger. That may mean that they don't get access to the community component until they're a little older, but they can get early access to the content library. But that's definitely the range that we start with. And for students younger than that, we love to point people to S. D. Smith, the Green Writer course, which is just a fantastic resource he's created and excellent for those younger writers who aren't quite old enough for the workshop but who need some support on the creative writing side of things. So his course is called the Green Writer.

But 13 and up is what we work with in the Young Writers Workshop. And then for the Author Conservatory, we have had students start as young as 14, 15, some little prodigies, but generally speaking, we're talking about students who are doing this towards the end of high school or after they've graduated high school.

Julie Walker: So we have an incredible podcast team here and one of the things that they do is put together a pretty extensive list of show notes so that our listeners who might be walking like I would do or riding their bikes or listening, they don't have to quickly write all these things down. So link in the show notes for everything that Brett has mentioned. But Brett, do tell us how to get in touch with you and what kind of things can they expect to receive from you right out the gate.

Brett Harris: Yeah. So one of the things we'd love to suggest, especially to parents and teachers is a free resource, a printable PDF that we have available on our website that unpacks each key storytelling element with discussion questions. You can ask as a family, as you engage with your favorite stories, either books or films, this is something you can also use to give feedback to your children on their own creative writing.

A lot of parents and teachers think, well, I'm not a fiction writer. I'm not a novelist. How could I give feedback? But the reality is we all deep down, especially if we've engaged a lot with stories, which we all do, we know what a good story feels like. And what we're often lacking is the vocabulary needed to point out what we're feeling about the story. And so this is a guide for parents and teachers that allows you to have that vocabulary. Ask good questions and then help your students or your child be able to improve their own writing as well as kind of identify what's going on in their favorite books and movies. So you can find that resource by going to theyoungwriter.com/IEW. Well, we've created a page just for you guys theyoungwriter.com/IEW. And that's a free printable PDF download. In addition, you can find our programs at theyoungwriter.com as well as authorconservatory.com.

Andrew Pudewa: Easy, easy. And you mentioned to me before we started talking here that you had done a few homeschool conventions in the past. Are you expecting to be at some shows, different parts of the country this coming 2024 convention year?

Brett Harris: Yes, we have team members, including myself, who will be showing up at different homeschool conferences, writing conferences, etc. And we'll have a page on our website with a list of where we're planning to show up next year.

Andrew Pudewa: Excellent. Well, hopefully you and I will be in the same place at the same time, at least once, and then we can meet in person and get a cup of tea or whatever. And I can continue to learn because I feel like we've got a glimpse of the vision that is probably much more magnificent than we're able to unpack in this short time. But I congratulate you on doing this. There's certainly a need. We're always happy to hear when people say, Oh, this IEW trained kid grew up, and now look what they can do. So we love to hear those stories.

Brett Harris: Well, IEW lays such a strong foundation and we've seen that in our students. So many of them have been through the IEW curriculum, and this is just an extension of that kind of taking them, you know, taking those foundational skills and structure and style and being able to apply it in a real world way to impact our culture.

Julie Walker: Wow. That's incredible. Brett, thank you so much for being on our podcast.

Brett Harris: Thank you so much. It's been a joy.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.