

Amazon's Kindle Scout Program

Presentation for Upper Peninsula Publishers & Authors Association

Jim Jackson

30 May 2015

OVERVIEW

Kindle Scout is American Idol meets Amazon. It opened its doors at the end of October 2014. Readers are able to “nominate” preselected titles.

Kindle Press (a new Amazon imprint) offers a contract with \$1,500 advance on royalties for Kindle ebook and Audible audio book. Print rights stay with author. Offer is based in part on reader nominations during a 30-day period while your book is eligible.

Fiction Only, specifically Romance, Mystery, Thrillers & Suspense, Science fiction & Fantasy, Literature and Fiction (added 3/2015 and includes contemporary fiction, action and adventure, and historical fiction)

Readers who nominate a successful book receive a free ebook of their nomination

Turnaround time between submission and contract is less than 45 days

Publication between six weeks and three months after selection.

THE PROCESS

Qualifying Authors

- ❖ Over 18
- ❖ US tax and banking information
- ❖ Have an Amazon.com account!

Qualifying Manuscripts

- ❖ Must be in the defined genres
- ❖ Must be a complete, nonpublished manuscript
 - Self-published is published, however, having some or all up on Wattpad would not disqualify you. The key is whether someone could buy it.
 - English
 - Minimum 50,000 words
 - Copyedited
 - Prefer use Chicago Manual of Style
- ❖ Must have a completed cover design

What You Submit

- ❖ The manuscript as a Word Document
- ❖ The book cover

- JPEG or PNG
- Suggest 4500 pixels high and 2820 pixels wide [1.5:1 ratio – note that would be 3000 pixels wide, go figure]
- Maximum size 5MB
- ❖ One liner for the book (maximum 45 characters)
 - “Where would you go if nowhere was safe?”
 - “A Thriller with Heart”
 - “Will Zophia escape from the Nazi who knows her?”
 - “What if Cinderella didn’t want her prince?”
 - “Scattering his mother’s ashes by motorcycle”
 - “Is your curiosity worth dying for?”
- ❖ Book description (maximum 500 characters)
 - Think book jacket blurb
- ❖ Your bio (maximum 500 characters)
- ❖ Your photo
- ❖ A choice of questions to answer
 - Allows readers to get a feel for you
 - Maximum of three
- ❖ A thank-you note to people who nominated your book (maximum 500 characters)
- ❖ And, you’ll have to sign the Kindle Press contract, which means that if they select your book, you can’t back out

The next step:

- ❖ In the next two or three business days Kindle Press reviews your submission to make sure it is complete and meets some (undefined) minimum standards

The Contract

- ❖ Legal & Binding
- ❖ Exclusive for 45 days
 - Gives Kindle Press a cushion for weekends & holidays
- ❖ During the period Kindle Press can use any and all of your submitted material to solicit nominations and gather feedback
 - An excerpt of about 5,000 words is displayed as part of the nomination material
 - “Super Scouts” can receive the entire book
 - If not successful, need to request to have material removed
- ❖ The remaining terms become effective only if your book is selected, in which case they become immediately effective
- ❖ Rights Granted
 - “worldwide right to publish e-book and digital audio editions of your Work, in whole and in part, in all languages, along with those rights reasonably necessary to effectuate those rights”
 - “ the rights to develop, license, sublicense, reproduce, publish, distribute, translate, display and transmit, your Work and any other materials you deliver to us in connection with your Work”
 - “create condensed, adapted, abridged, interactive and enhanced editions of your Work, and include your Work in anthology or omnibus editions”

- “All rights not expressly granted to us in this Agreement (including the right to publish print editions) are reserved for your sole use and disposition.”
- ❖ Rights Reversion
 - After five years, if you have not earned \$25,000 in royalties may request rights return
 - Five-year terms automatically renew
 - After six months if book is not available for purchase
 - After two years for the audio rights
 - Any time after two years if during the previous twelve months royalties earned are less than \$500
 - Foreign language rights can revert after two years if they have not been used, subject to any signed third-party licensing agreements
 - Kindle Press may terminate at any time and rights revert. No notice required.
- ❖ Royalties
 - \$1,500 advance paid after completion of financial paperwork
 - Most were paid within 10 days
 - Mine took nearly a month, perhaps due to my LLC?
 - Royalty rates
 - 50% net revenue on ebooks
 - 25% net revenue for digital audio
 - 20% net revenue for translations
 - 75% revenue from unaffiliated sublicenses for foreign language
 - 50% revenue from unaffiliated sublicenses for all other
 - Net revenue includes subscription services (like Kindle Unlimited)
 - Accounted for monthly; paid within 60 days after close of month
- ❖ Copyright
 - May register, but need not
- ❖ Promotion
 - Up to them including pricing
 - You may use up to 10% of your work for promotion (e.g. sample chapters on website or blog)
- ❖ Warranties & Limitation of Liability
 - The lawyers have covered Kindle Press’s butt if you don’t own rights to the work or they get sued, etc.

This has been a layman’s summary, and in no way provides legal advice. Before signing this or any contract make sure you understand all the terms and conditions and consult an attorney if you choose.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Kindle Scout versus Self-Published

Disadvantages

- ❖ Extra preparation
 - Logline, short blurb, etc.
 - Already had to have manuscript and book cover for self-pub
- ❖ Loss of pricing control

- Kindle Press sets the price
- Eliminates ability to have free days or reduced price days (unless they decide)
- ❖ Loss of Timing Control
 - If you aren't selected, you lose six weeks relative to self-pub
 - If you are selected, publication is delayed three-four months relative to self-pub
- ❖ Kindle only ebook
 - Give up all other electronic outlets besides Amazon (so potentially 25%-33% of sales)
- ❖ Loss of Audio book control
 - Whether or not it happens is Kindle Press decision
 - No control over narrator
- ❖ If everyone you know nominated the book and will get it for free, who is going to buy it?

Advantages

- ❖ Advance
 - \$1,500 up front defrays editing and book cover design costs
- ❖ Amazon Promotion
 - This isn't a loss-leader business for Amazon, which means they plan to make money
 - With their "if you liked this, you'll like that" suggestive selling, Kindle Press books will receive extra weight (I expect and have seen evidence to support that from the first published books)
 - Note, however, total 2015 publications from all Amazon imprints have been reported to be about 1200
- ❖ It's early in the program and Amazon wants it to succeed
 - Kindle Press continues to provide excellent copyediting
 - Amazon wants the program to succeed, and is putting resources behind it
- ❖ Free Publicity during the 30-day nomination period
 - Book cover and excerpt available for readers to see
 - Social media engagement during the period can generate interest in that book or others
- ❖ If campaign is successful, those who nominate will get free copy of book
 - Generate more reviews?
 - Generate more buzz?
- ❖ Clear exit strategy should things not progress as planned
- ❖ Can still publish print version in whatever manner you prefer
 - Many of the early authors self-published print
 - Some have received offers from small publishers
 - Some have chosen not to provide a print version

How to Stay Sane during the thirty-day Nomination Process

- ❖ Kindle Press notifies you of acceptance and (generally) gives you two days before your nomination is live
- ❖ All Amazon's algorithms are undisclosed, so what follows are my interpretations

- ❖ Choosing Key Categories
 - Books show up under each genre to which they apply
 - If you have a serious romance aspect to your mystery, consider having the book listed as both
 - Similarly with a fantasy element and mystery or romance
 - The more places people can find you, the better
 - Within categories are subcategories
 - similar to what you find in Amazon “best seller” lists
 - allowed up to four categories
 - for example, I chose
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Crime Fiction/Murder
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Mystery/Series
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Suspense/General
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense/Thrillers/Financial
- ❖ Hot and Trending
 - Approximately 20% of the books in the nomination process are listed as “Hot & Trending”
 - These are highlighted with their own category
 - Hot has more to do with collecting recent nominations, although the trending part allows Amazon to tweak their algorithm to reflect longer trends as well
 - Therefore, it’s helpful to remain Hot
 - And success breeds success as people hop onto a winner
 - Hot is not the end all and be all.
 - One friend’s book was Hot about 50% of the time and was selected
 - I’ve seen other books be almost continuously Hot and not be selected
 - *Ant Farm* was Hot about 95% of the time, only falling off on parts of days 27 & 28
- ❖ My Strategy – Spread Out Nominations
 - Most books go Hot when they first appear (make sure yours does, it sets a trend)
 - Books that have done well during the 30 days (as measured by being Hot) will be Hot the last two days
 - Because “Scouts” (Readers) can only have three nominations active at any time, some number of people wait until the end to nominate “Hot” books so they can get a free ebook and not use the slot for a long period
 - Authors make a final appeal – and the dawdlers finally act
 - Use the two days before the nomination to make a plan
 - List all the groups of people you have contact with
 - Writing groups
 - Facebook friends
 - Church
 - School
 - Neighbors
 - Clubs
 - Fellow employees
 - Schoolmates
 - Anyone for whom you have an email address

- Jailmates (if literate)
- Determine the best way to contact each group
- Determine who to ask when
 - It's a marathon, not a sprint
 - Stick to your schedule
- For F2F asks, have a handout with direct link to your book
- Do not forget to ask your friends to tell their friends
- Make sure a link is prominently displayed on your website
- Have direct link to your book for any online promotion
- Don't make your Social Media interactions all about me, ME, **ME!**
 - Ask friends to post on their FB accounts
 - you can like and thank them
 - fellow authors with street teams are golden
 - If you happen to know other authors participating at the same time you are
 - Promote them – yes, you are in “competition”
 - But there are multiple winners
 - They'll return the favor
- Provide valuable content that can include the ask
 - I had three blogs about Kindle Scout that people found helpful
 - One education on the Kindle Scout program and why I chose to participate
 - A second on Six Rules for Self-promotion
 - A third on lessons learned about Kindle Scout (released two days before my nomination closed)

You Won! Now What?

- ❖ Early stuff
 - One last chance to correct anything you've spotted that was wrong in your manuscript
 - Add any front or back material (Dedication, Acknowledgments, etc.)
 - Complete financial information so Kindle Press can pay you the \$1,500!
- ❖ Editing
 - Kindle Press need not provide any editing
 - First 10 books selected received copyedit and some story edits
 - Next ~ 15 books received in house copyedits
 - Very thorough
 - Every author has been pleased
 - Next group is receiving copyedits outsourced to Kirkus editors
 - First few are back and those authors are also pleased with the thorough work
 - Those edits are happening MUCH more quickly than in house edits
 - Kindle Press wants edits back from author in a week (although you may take longer)
 - I had the ability to approve the final document, but that may be because I asked
 - That did delay things a week

- ❖ Layout
 - Typical seems to be about a week's time
- ❖ Ebook is available for preorder (worldwide) and publication date set
 - Scouts who nominated the book get a link to their free ebook
 - Timing
 - Previously
 - Authors found out about preorder when it happened
 - Launch date was one week later (on a Tuesday)
 - Most Recent
 - Getting several days advanced warning for pre-order
 - Pre-order period is for two weeks
 - Might be reacting to author's angst about not having time to plan release parties, etc.
- ❖ Audio books have not been developed for any of the selected books
 - Not yet clear what Kindle Press's plans are for digital audio

Results so Far

- ❖ Currently (2015-05-21) 57 books in nomination process.
 - My sense is that the average has been around 50
 - So roughly 300 books have completed their nomination period.
- ❖ Selected: 53 Books in just under six months
 - Averages about two a week
 - About one of every 6 or 7 books
 - That seems like a lot. However, I don't know how many books are rejected from entering the nomination process
 - Primary Genre (my guess and a number had multiple categories):
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense: 22
 - Romance: 15
 - Science Fiction & Fantasy: 12
 - General (only open for 2 months): 4
- ❖ Published so far: 22
 - Primary Genre (my guess and a number had multiple categories):
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense: 9
 - Romance: 8
 - Science Fiction & Fantasy: 5
 - General (only open for 2 months): 0
 - Best one-week ranking (All rankings sampled Wednesday mornings)
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense: 592
 - Romance: 363
 - Science Fiction & Fantasy: 6,711
 - Average "first" and "second" week rankings
 - Mystery, Thriller & Suspense: 54,302 / 17,892
 - Romance: 3,582 / 7,983
 - Science Fiction & Fantasy: 82,114 / 70,784
 - Average Amazon Rankings

- Mystery, Thriller & Suspense: 18,785
- Romance: 11,604
- Science Fiction & Fantasy: 70,832

❖ Reviews

- March 3, 2015 Group: Range 18-189, Ave. 61
- Rest of March Group: Range 4-47, Ave. 20
- April Group: Range 21-42, Ave. 31

❖ Print Editions

- Ten with print editions
- Half CreateSpace
- Others Self or small imprints
- Best rank (5/23/15) 191,000

Converting sales rank to books sold is not precise. Here's a graph that shows one person's suggestion:

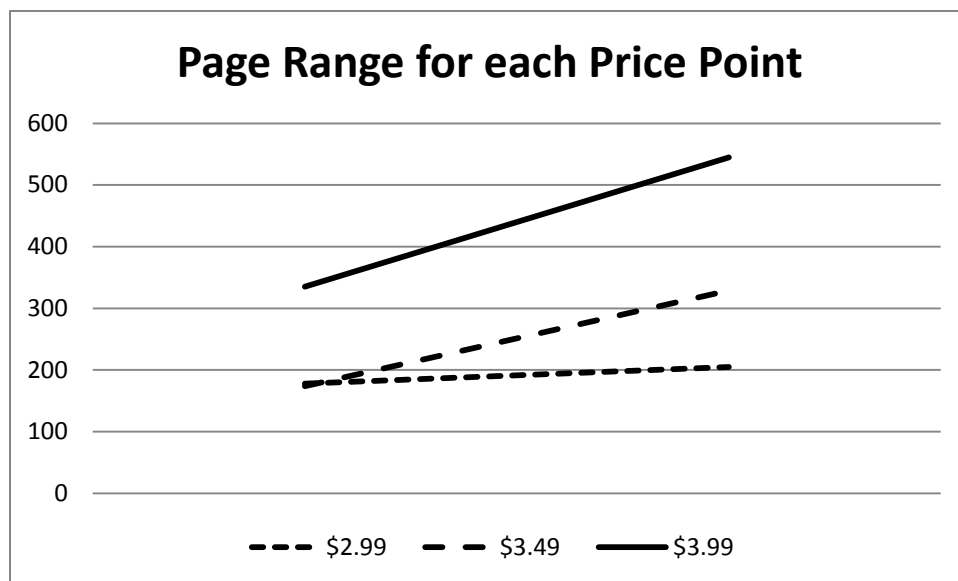


Anecdotal

Experiences of the Kindle Press authors

- Everyone has thought the copyedits were great
- Of those previously published, most were seeing increased sales in comparison
 - One who switched genres saw decreased sales
 - Unclear whether sales for other books has substantially increased
- Asked if they planned to use the Kindle Scout program again answers were mixed
 - Some were enthusiastically planning to participate again
 - Others had second and third books in the series ready or soon-to-be and were planning on self-publishing
 - Only one said definitely not
- Coattail Effect
 - Small positive effects seen by several authors when in same genre
 - None for those switching genres
 - I noticed a slight increase in sales in the month *after* my nomination period
 - Small sample size and short duration
- Pricing
 - Ranges from \$2.99 - \$3.99

- The \$3.49 price recently dropped minimum pages from ~ 225 to 174. Those books did not sell well, and two weeks later the next batch of books had several at \$2.99
- Time will tell if that was an experiment or something else



Helpful Links:

Official About Kindle Scout: <https://kindlescout.amazon.com/about>

Official Kindle Scout guidelines for submission:

<https://kindlescout.amazon.com/submit>

Official Contract Terms: <https://kindlescout.amazon.com/agreement>

Kindle Scout Selected Books: <https://kindlescout.amazon.com/selected>

Jim Jackson authors the Seamus McCree mystery series. ANT FARM (Spring 2015), a prequel to BAD POLICY (2013) and CABIN FEVER (2014), recently won a Kindle Scout nomination. Ebook published by Kindle Press; print from Wolf's Echo Press. BAD POLICY won the Evan Marshall Fiction Makeover Contest whose criteria were the freshness and commerciality of the story and quality of the writing. Jim has published an acclaimed book on contract bridge, ONE TRICK AT A TIME: *How to Start Winning at Bridge* (Master Point Press 2012), as well as numerous short stories and essays.

His website is <http://jamesmjackson.com>.