

[00:00:07.210] - Wynne Leon

Welcome to the sharing the heart of the Matter podcast, where we celebrate the why and how of creativity. I'm Wen Leon, and in this episode, Vicki Atkinson and I are talking with blogger, author, and former adman Chris Thelen. We talk about publishing his fun thriller, Islands of deception. He highlights how important it is to have a great team when publishing a book, the goodness that comes from being surrounded by smart and supportive people. We talk about how he incorporates key locations from his home state of Michigan in the book and the lifetime of experiences that made it fun and personal to write about. Chris tells us how he landed on classifying his book as a beach read and how that affected his marketing strategies. And we talk about all the reasons not to publish and the big ones that compel why we should. Anyway, this is a great episode about the journey to becoming an author we know you'll love. Hi Chris.

[00:01:32.400] - Chris G. Thelen

Hello.

[00:01:33.380] - Wynne Leon

Vicki and I are so thrilled to have you on the podcast today. It's so much fun to talk to you. I mean, I think every time I talk to an author that I've read, it's so much fun.

[00:01:43.650] - Chris G. Thelen

It's great to be here.

[00:01:45.170] - Wynne Leon

You recently wrote a delightful blog post about taking on the mantle of an author. Can you tell us your story?

[00:01:54.940] - Chris G. Thelen

The whole concept of writing a book is something I probably had on my mind for decades. I grew up on a farm in mid Michigan, and I think I just always had this wild imagination. As you can imagine, riding a tractor for hour after hour after hour, your imagination kind of runs wild. So I've always had all these stories pent up in my head. And I think throughout my younger years, certainly in elementary school, I had teachers and kudos to those teachers that encouraged me to read and understand the art of storytelling, which I think is really important. And they got me into books. And then I had a really good english teacher in high school who probably nurtured me and got me hooked on writing and playing with words, which I just enjoy that. So when I went off to college, I chose to major in journalism and got my degree in journalism. And ironically, my first job out of college was working for John Deere in their advertising department as a.

[00:03:00.010] - Wynne Leon

Wow, talk about a poignant moment from your youth.

[00:03:03.260] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah. So the director of the journalist department, he heard I was going into advertising. He said, oh, you're going to the dark side. He was a journalist. Yeah. He was hoping I'd go into newspaper business, but it was my farm background that helped me get the job. So knowing that, but from John Deere, I did a tour of ad agencies in Detroit, Cleveland, and ended up in Midland, Michigan. As someone told me when I left John Deere, he said, ad agencies, you're just going to love it. And he was so right, because it's just a creative hotbed. We were in conference rooms with cork board and putting ideas up, and I worked for some amazingly talented people, and I think that's where my craft of writing really began to get polished. So after that, I ended up in the corporate world. And I think here's another aspect, is you start learning about communicating. And so I did a lot of public speaking, writing news releases. So by the time I had spent several decades in the writing business, I had done everything except write a book. So in 2017, I ran across, I had piles of manuscripts.

[00:04:17.120] - Chris G. Thelen

I tried to get them published, and I think many writers can identify with this. It's a tough road.

[00:04:21.980] - Wynne Leon
It is.

[00:04:23.120] - Chris G. Thelen

This editor said, hey, I'll take a read of it. Just see if it's got legs and some potential. And he did. And he said, I think you got something here. So he told me, and I think this was the critical moment as far as publishing the book. He said, if you ever want to see this in print, I would advise you to look at self publishing. So he helped me polish the manuscript and really get it printer ready for publication. And then it's like, well, who do I talk to for self publishing? Because it's pretty overwhelming to think about trying to chase that down. And he fortunately had a publisher that he recommended I work with. And I think that's where I began to learn that publishing a book is a team sport. So not just the editing, but the publisher just had some amazing people. They were used to working with first time authors. They were very patient with all my questions. And really, that's where it happened. Working publisher to get it in print.

[00:05:34.580] - Wynne Leon

Wow. And did he ever walk you through, what about the publishing industry made him think that even though your book had legs, what was his logic?

[00:05:46.600] - Chris G. Thelen

He had worked in the business for 30 years before he went off on his own to do editing, and he'd seen thousands of manuscripts. And he said, you're just not going to get that attention of a publisher. They get hundreds and hundreds of them a month proposals.

[00:06:04.380] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. The barrier to entry is just too high, isn't it?

[00:06:08.130] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah, the gatekeepers.

[00:06:09.180] - Wynne Leon

Yeah, the gatekeepers.

[00:06:11.840] - Vicki Atkinson

But I think even for someone like you, Chris, who know so much writing experience and being in a creative environment, having done writing in a lot of different arenas, for someone like you to hear that and then persevere, right and keep on going. I think sometimes people hear that when they're proud of their work, they've had beta readers, they've gotten some nice lift or some encouragement. Somehow that phrase self publishing, sort of stops everyone in their tracks. So what I love about what you shared is, one, it takes a team, right? And you need to figure out how to persevere through, because really, the goal is to see your work in print, to be able to hold your book however you get there. I mean, you don't want to go crazy and do things that are scary, but I think people have a lot of aspirations that they're going to get a big contract or someone's going to like, win said open doors, but doesn't seem to work that way.

[00:07:14.740] - Chris G. Thelen

Right. I think blogging is really important. Ten years ago, I started blogging and you learn to just put stuff out there. And I think that's a huge step, that just learning to put stuff out there and work at it, continually work at it. So I think that's another piece that helped me. The other side of it too is I had 30 some years experience working writing, but it was compressed writing. I call it that. You're writing ads and you might have 25 words to say something. So doing book publishing, it was always like, no, you need to expand this more detail. There's always a new technique, new writing, even if you got a lot of experience. And I think what I'm trying to say there is, there's always more to learn. So I think I had people that appreciate the craft of writing, and I think when you think of it as a craft, you always want to make yourself better and try to learn new things, right?

[00:08:16.380] - Wynne Leon

So well said. That craft expert, that craft viewpoint of being able to continue to improve. And as you walk through publishing, it's not just writing that you need to practice that, it's the marketing. And it's.

[00:08:37.840] - Vicki Atkinson

And Chris, do you think it's really important when you talked about the blogging part, we hear that pretty frequently. And sometimes I wonder, do some of us do that because it's good for us to continue to refine our voice? It's good practice to write daily. Is it a discipline thing or is it a joy thing or is it both?

[00:09:01.640] - Chris G. Thelen

It's a joy thing. I had these manuscripts nobody had read for decades trying to get them published. And it was really strange for me as far as the book to have people suddenly talking about these characters and they care about them. They want to know what happened. I'm like, wow, you need readers as part of your writing. And I think that's where the joy comes in. And certainly blogging, the interacting with commenting and things like that, it's just such a joy to know people are reading and that you can actually have a discussion about it.

[00:09:35.040] - Wynne Leon

Yeah.

[00:09:35.830] - Vicki Atkinson

Love that.

[00:09:36.910] - Wynne Leon

It makes it more real and you get to enjoy the process a little bit more.

[00:09:42.420] - Chris G. Thelen

Right?

[00:09:43.380] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. You use the words audacity to publish a book or call myself an author, and we can really relate to that. Can you tell us what has provided the fuel for you to continue with that effort and audacity?

[00:10:02.240] - Chris G. Thelen

It part of it, what we were just talking about is readers that came to me after my first book was published and said, are you going to do a sequel? Okay. And having the whole concept of a following and readers is really new and a little intimidating. Sometimes people are wanting more, and so there's that side of it. I have to be honest. When I had a lot of experience in editing, and there were times like, why am I doing this? When they were in the middle of, I get the manuscript back and they wanted more changes and more changes, and this isn't believable. This should be changed. I think just having that goal, I want to see this in print and see it through is what really drove me.

[00:10:54.040] - Wynne Leon

Yeah.

[00:10:55.100] - Vicki Atkinson

And having readers that once they've read your first book, that are clamoring for more, that it's both wonderful and daunting at the same time, because I'm sure you're someone who's got really healthy humility. Right. And you're so happy that you've done it and it exists, but then all of a sudden, you're back on the treadmill going, oh, shoot, I got to keep this going.

[00:11:19.300] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah. Someone had said, well, when's the sequel coming up? And I go, oh, yeah, I guess.

[00:11:25.300] - Wynne Leon

Yeah.

[00:11:26.820] - Vicki Atkinson

It doesn't appear overnight. Right. You have to put your nose to the grindstone, and then you get all that feedback again. And was there ever a moment when you thought, I don't have it in?

[00:11:38.440] - Chris G. Thelen

Yes. Yeah. Several moments. Just the edits coming back and, like, I don't know if I want to go through with this.

[00:11:49.580] - Vicki Atkinson

What got you through, Chris? What would get you back doing what needed to be done?

[00:11:57.440] - Chris G. Thelen

There's, like, writer's block. And that's true, I think, in the creation, but also in the editing, when you look at the whole book, is all these edits coming in hundreds, sometimes words or paragraphs, when you jump into it piece by piece, one page at a time or one day at a time, if you're writing and you say, oh, okay, this is making it better. I can start to see how this is really making the story better. It's going to be more readable, more believable. So when I dive back into it and just focus on change by change by change, I think incrementally that got me through.

[00:12:33.640] - Vicki Atkinson

Got you?

[00:12:34.670] - Wynne Leon

Yeah. That's such an interesting point that you make there. Not looking at all the red lines, but looking at this page and this edit.

[00:12:42.870] - Chris G. Thelen

There might even be a life lesson in that.

[00:12:45.660] - Wynne Leon

I think you're right about that.

[00:12:48.960] - Vicki Atkinson

For we that are easily overwhelmed. Right. What is that expression? How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a.

[00:12:54.850] - Wynne Leon

Right? Yeah.

[00:12:55.970] - Chris G. Thelen

One word at a.

[00:12:57.860] - Vicki Atkinson

Like it. I like it.

[00:13:00.500] - Wynne Leon

So you're a Michigander. Did I say that right?

[00:13:03.610] - Chris G. Thelen

Yes.

[00:13:04.330] - Wynne Leon

Okay, good. I'm a Michigander. Is. Anyway, so this book brings in so many delightful touches from your state, Beaver island, which we understand from your blogging is real, to Callie's church and the Michigan state capitol. How fun is it for you to add these real life touches to a.

[00:13:31.100] - Chris G. Thelen

Know, a lot of people have asked where did the ideas come from? Why did you set it Michigan? Why did you use those places? And so when I just kind of look back on that, so many of those scenes are from my childhood or just traveling in Michigan, the Capitol. For I, in college, I interned at the Capitol with a state representative and my cousin is also a tour guide. And so he took me up to the secret room that is in the book in the Capitol. So that really exists. Yeah. And then Detroit. I worked in an ad agency in Detroit. So there's a lot of about Detroit that's in the book that comes from that experience in certain Lansing, where I worked many years in Lansing, in the capital as well. And then Beaver island, when I married my wife, grew up camping on Beaver island. So that's where I got introduced to Beaver island when we went there to camp. And actually the idea for the book came when I was riding the ferry boat from Beaver island back to Charlevoix to the mainland. And that's where the whole idea of the book was hatched so much in the book.

[00:14:45.370] - Chris G. Thelen

You can take the ferry boat, it's real. You can go to Beaver island, you can go to the lighthouse on the south end of the island, you can go to Welkie airport. That's in the book on Beaver Island. Blackbird Brewery is fictitious, though. You will not find that in Charlotte.

[00:15:03.740] - Vicki Atkinson

Good disclaimer there, right?

[00:15:05.570] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah.

[00:15:07.260] - Wynne Leon

Well, I love that for a couple of reasons, because ferry rides are big where I'm at, too.

[00:15:13.660] - Chris G. Thelen

And there's correct.

[00:15:14.910] - Wynne Leon

Something that's so good about when you leave the mainland. And it doesn't have to be a long ferry for that process to sort of detach you from reality. So I love the point that you just made about the idea of this coming on a ferry ride.

[00:15:35.300] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah, that's so true. You have that quieting moment. You leave the mainland. It's almost like you're shut off in the world. Yeah, that's a great description. Wow.

[00:15:45.770] - Vicki Atkinson

I love it. And full of inspiration. Right on a right. You and your thoughts. But I wonder, know, when I was reading about your book, you've had book clubs and readings that you have know, on Beaver island. It must be a real treat for readers to be able to go to some of the places you just mentioned. It feels like that's an extra layer of richness for connecting with the story, even if the brewery is fictitious.

[00:16:15.370] - Wynne Leon

Right?

[00:16:16.130] - Vicki Atkinson

All the other places aren't. Do you think when you were writing, was that something that you were thinking about what that reader experience was going to be as you were in marketing mode and talking about your book?

[00:16:27.220] - Chris G. Thelen

Well, one of the big tests was doing a book talk on Beaver island, at the Beaver island library with people that have lived there all their life.

[00:16:34.890] - Wynne Leon
Yeah.

[00:16:35.820] - Chris G. Thelen
The big question was, did I get it right? And I passed the test.

[00:16:40.280] - Vicki Atkinson
Yay.

[00:16:41.800] - Chris G. Thelen
In fact, the only complaint I had was someone said, could you put more about Beaver island in the next.

[00:16:47.660] - Wynne Leon
Oh, and are you.

[00:16:51.820] - Chris G. Thelen
Beaver island is still in the sequel? Yes, it's still made.

[00:16:56.080] - Vicki Atkinson
All right. Little spoiler there, right?

[00:16:59.600] - Wynne Leon
Yes. We can't wait to find out more about the sequel, but we're wondering about marketing this book. And does your background in corporate communications and advertising, does it help with the effort to do that?

[00:17:16.340] - Chris G. Thelen
I had never marketed a book, so I did have a marketing person I work with to orient me towards that. And she said right out, it's fiercely competitive. So the one thing about marketing that holds true, I think, in all aspects, no matter what your marketing is that you have to have a target market. There's something to try to help you stand out from the crowd. And so early on, I had a book launch team and kind of worked on a positioning that this would be a good beach read for summer vacationers. So the target for me know, of course, there's the whole online presence and that aspect of selling. But I targeted books along the coast of West Michigan, Lake Michigan, and positioned it as a bee trade and tried emailing them and starting a conversation with the bookstore owners, but decided to just get in my car and show up in person. I think that's important. When you're face to face with someone and you have a copy of your book, you have to give them a sample. It's hard to say no. So pretty much 90% of the bookstore owners at least took a copy of the book and talked to me about it.

[00:18:36.480] - Chris G. Thelen
And several called me back after they read it, said, yeah, can you do a book talk? Can you do a book signing for me?

[00:18:44.080] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah, that's awesome. But it's that boots on the ground, feet on the street, meeting the author. And it's that personal touch. It sounds like that really helped or it made it productive for you or meaningful.

[00:19:04.660] - Chris G. Thelen
Yeah, that personal touch is important.

[00:19:07.160] - Wynne Leon
Yeah. But I love the way that you got there through knowing what that target audience was.

[00:19:12.510] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah.

[00:19:14.300] - Wynne Leon

Because obviously you can't do boots on the ground or feet on the street, as Vicki so wonderfully just said, without knowing where you're going.

[00:19:24.140] - Chris G. Thelen

Yes, that's important. And then the locations, too, were, I had a couple of bookstores in Lansing, for example, that are stocking. So because the book has some scenes in Lansing. So I think location played a big role in the marketing.

[00:19:38.580] - Wynne Leon

Yeah.

[00:19:39.430] - Vicki Atkinson

Well, and Chris, you mentioned, too that you had kind of a book launch team and you had a marketing person who was giving you some wisdom, some cautionary advice, telling you up front it was going to be challenging. Do you think that finding, however you define your team, it seems like as when and I talk to writers and from our own experiences, you need to have those trusted friends, whether you call them teammates or how you define it. But you need those people that you can really lean into. Because the other thing that we hear is that you can go off in a bazillion directions and drive yourself crazy trying to market, and you really need to preserve your energy, but also think about what's meaningful and what's practical. So having a team makes sense, but you also need to be really thoughtful about picking and choosing. Would you say that's true?

[00:20:31.700] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah, exactly what you're saying. Because while you're marketing, you're not writing either, so make use of your time trying to target where you want to sell it. And the launch team, too, is really to get good feedback from people you trust. But I even found there in the launch team, you have differences of opinion. And I think that's a tough thing, too, that there comes a point. You just have to say, we're going to go in this direction, because sometimes people can't agree on what's the best way to go, and that's a hard decision. Sometimes.

[00:21:11.680] - Vicki Atkinson

The last thing you want to do is offend someone who's helping you. But just with my little baby experience, I've seen that a little bit, and the last thing I want to do is mediate between helpers. All input is good input, but in the end, the writer needs to choose. It just needs to be that way.

[00:21:32.660] - Chris G. Thelen

Yes, and I have a really good team of people that just provide valuable feedback. They're honest. They'll read and say, no, this isn't believable. My wife certainly is the best editor. She beats a lot of crime thrillers, and she has given a lot of good direction on how to improve my work.

[00:21:55.660] - Vicki Atkinson

Yay. That shout out to the misses.

[00:21:58.410] - Wynne Leon

That is great. We want to ask about the sequel, but I'm wondering if you could give us an elevator pitch for islands of deception. How is it that you describe it when people are asking or you're selling it to a bookstore?

[00:22:14.740] - Chris G. Thelen

This book has everything you could want in a thriller. It's got not only criminals, but government officials who are corrupt. And probably more importantly, it's got people who are trying to do the right thing, but they're getting stopped at every turn. And best of all, it takes place in mean, what a fabulous place. Where else would you want a high speed boat chase but on Lake Michigan? Or where else would you want to hide out in the deep forest of Michigan? It's a whole package that makes it a great beach read.

[00:22:47.600] - Wynne Leon

And I love that you just mentioned the boat chase, because that's one of the things that I loved, is the description of the chriscraft beautiful boats.

[00:22:57.060] - Chris G. Thelen

Oh, yeah, they're gorgeous. And that's actually based on an experience from my childhood.

[00:23:02.670] - Wynne Leon

Can you tell us that story?

[00:23:04.250] - Chris G. Thelen

Yes. We had been, had a picnic in a park, and it was along a river, and my dad had a boat, and we went to this park with this boat. And then when we went to leave, there was this Chris craft just pulled up to the beach there, and the guy talked to us. He said, it's a whiskey runner. They used to use this during prohibition to run whiskey around the state. And talk about getting your imagination going.

[00:23:34.700] - Wynne Leon

Oh, yeah.

[00:23:35.940] - Chris G. Thelen

Seeing that boat varnished, just glistening in the sun on a summer day. Yeah, my imagination ran wild. So that's how I got into the book.

[00:23:46.560] - Wynne Leon

That is beautiful.

[00:23:48.560] - Chris G. Thelen

And my grandfather had a speedboat in the upper peninsula on a lake, and he took us for rides, and he was a hot rodder, so I had experience riding in boats at high speed. So when you hear the character Fallon in the waves and everything, that's personal experience. And I'll say that the grandfather he alludes to is probably the image of my grandfather, although he never made illegal whiskey. Note on that.

[00:24:21.280] - Wynne Leon

That you know of.

[00:24:22.480] - Chris G. Thelen

That I know of, yes.

[00:24:27.600] - Wynne Leon

So what can you tell us about the sequel?

[00:24:31.280] - Chris G. Thelen

It goes to the publisher next week.

[00:24:34.080] - Wynne Leon

What?

[00:24:35.060] - Chris G. Thelen

Yeah.

[00:24:35.830] - Wynne Leon

How lucky.

[00:24:37.100] - Chris G. Thelen

I am. Actually just finishing up, and fortunately there's a deadline because you could keep writing it forever. So next week it goes to the publisher and hoping to have it out in October.

[00:24:52.840] - Vicki Atkinson
That is fantastic.

[00:24:56.360] - Chris G. Thelen
If you've read the book *Islands of Deception*, a lot of the characters come back and you'll learn more about them, a little more about their background. But I do have a new character that I'm introducing that will create even more chaos.

[00:25:11.980] - Wynne Leon
Character of chaos.

[00:25:14.480] - Vicki Atkinson
It's funny.

[00:25:15.260] - Wynne Leon
Good, because we threw out that question about the sequel, not expecting such a concrete answer.

[00:25:23.280] - Vicki Atkinson
Yeah. But now some of us can hurry up and get through *islands of deception*.

[00:25:30.430] - Wynne Leon
So we're all ready to go, waiting to read it.

[00:25:34.660] - Chris G. Thelen
That's your advantage. You don't have to wait as long for the sequel.

[00:25:38.060] - Wynne Leon
That's right. Tell us about naming the book. Is that the first thing you do or the last thing you do?

[00:25:47.320] - Chris G. Thelen
It's the first and the last. How do you summarize a book in a few words? That is really hard.

[00:25:54.860] - Wynne Leon
Yeah.

[00:25:55.760] - Chris G. Thelen
And there was quite a debate about what to name it, and that was probably one of those decisions. You said, we're going to go with this. But early on, one of the titles we tossed around is *archipelago* because that plays a role, that name plays a role in the book, but I can't remember for sure. But someone on the launch team said there is a lot of deception going on on this book. And so that's kind of where *islands of deception* came in for the title.

[00:26:25.820] - Wynne Leon
Right. That's good. Well, I would imagine that your career in compressed writing, as you called it, helps a little bit with titling things.

[00:26:34.780] - Chris G. Thelen
Yes.

[00:26:38.360] - Wynne Leon
So tell us where we can find the book, where we can find you, and we'll, of course, link to everything in the show notes as well.

[00:26:45.570] - Chris G. Thelen
Right. Chrisgthalen.com. That's my author website. There is a website, islandsoftdeception.com, which lists the bookstores that are stocking it. There's also a contact page if you want to reach out to

me, and it's certainly available online. Just search by, you can search by Chris G. Thelen Islands of Deception. And that'll take you to the book online if you want to purchase it that way.

[00:27:12.410] - Wynne Leon
Wonderful.

[00:27:14.580] - Chris G. Thelen
Yay.

[00:27:15.640] - Vicki Atkinson
This was fun.

[00:27:17.090] - Chris G. Thelen
Yes, very fun. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate the opportunity.

[00:27:20.980] - Wynne Leon
Thank you so much for talking with us. Thank you for listening. Our music is composed for sharing the heart of the matter by the exquisitely talented duo of Chad Canvora and Rob Koenig. For show notes and more great inspiration, please visit our site@sharingtheheartofthematter.com.