

5 Lessons Learned from Ken Follett

by Chazda Albright -

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This entry is part 4 of 5 in the series [Buchmesse Experience 2015](#)

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It's a rare thing to be able to speak with a famous author, and during the October Book Fair in Frankfurt I very briefly met Ken Follett. This best selling author, whose books have been adapted into various feature films and a television series, is currently working on a new manuscript.

What's special about the new novel he's writing is that it will be published in tandem with something else, something rather special and something about which Ken Follett was frequently asked during the Fair.

That hot topic? -the upcoming adaptation of his 1989 novel "Pillars of the Earth" – not into film, but into a video game. [Daedalic Entertainment](#) is developing and publishing the game, and a new novel set in that same world will be published at the same time, in 2017.

Which means [Ken Follett](#) is returning to his fictitious town of Kingsbridge once more, after 26 years.

From the Daedalic site:

The video game developer Daedalic Entertainment and Bastei Lübbe AG, shareholder of Daedalic and publisher of Ken Follett's novels in German-speaking markets, are teaming up to create a multimedia experience of one of Follett's masterpieces: to develop and publish a game based on Follett's best-selling novel "The Pillars of the Earth".

The project – an adventure game – is scheduled to be published in 2017 on all leading platforms.

This is the first time a computer game of this scale will be published with a new book, and certainly the first time anything like this has involved a best-selling author. The international release of the game will be available in ten languages - or more.

I stood nearby as Ken Follett was interviewed for a televised BBC show. This was one of three interviews Ken Follett gave during the Frankfurt Book Fair. Then I waited afterward as his fans clamored to get his signature. I did that too (ahem), and then I decided to be a little audacious. I spoke with him!

It wasn't a grand thing; in fact it was rather small and cramped. But it happened and I didn't make myself too much a fool.

Here's what I learned in my observations and exchange with the author. 5 lessons learned from Ken Follett:

1. Don't worry about the media.

A lot of writers have their eye on the market trends and wonder about film rights and video game scripting. Interactive ebooks! Do I now need to learn how to program an interactive story? What would that even look like?

With publishers like [Nosy Crow](#) becoming more recognized for their apps than their books, it's easy to get wrapped up in worry over whether or not you should write a story or learn to write material for an app or computer game.

After listening to Ken Follett, what became very clear to me was that it doesn't matter. None of that stuff matters to the writer.

Well, ok – it does. But it doesn't affect *our end*. Just get down to writing a great story. Focus on that. If adaptations of your stories are something you want to pursue, then you [need an agent](#) – or you need to hire a programmer to create a smart app of your book (or whatever it is you envision for your story).

2. Don't ever stop using Social Media.

Several writer friends of mine and I have had discussions about whether or not to continue with social media – and if so, how much, how often – and whether or not it's ethical to have a personal assistant handle some of that for us.

Why? Because social media can be addictive and too, even if you aren't addicted to it, it can take several hours of your writing time – which translates to hours not writing manuscripts.

I know that a best selling author like Ken Follett doesn't have to do his own laundry. Does he do his own social media?

I asked him. Here's how the dialogue went down:

Me: You mentioned earlier that you like to use social media like Twitter and Facebook.

Ken Follett: Yes.

Me: So, if I left you a comment on Facebook, would you actually read it and possibly comment or would it be your Personal Assistant who does that?

KF: Well, I mostly Twitter, but it isn't ever my assistant...

Personal Assistant #1: I am Mr. Follett's Personal Assistant-

KF: One of them.

PA #1: One of them, and I can tell you personally that it's really him. I don't write any of that.

KF (smiling): No, that's right.

PA #1 stood sort of behind me and at my right. He was very tall and young and wearing a suit. I thought these were nice qualities. If Ken Follett has more than one personal assistant and neither answers his social media, this suggests a lot to me.

It should be noted here that many authors (and others in the public eye) who have a presence in social media are not always, in fact, the person online. Follett is really there – no substitute.

3. Always remember your fans – and mean it.

Ken Follett talked quite some time about critics and fans and how he perceives both. He himself has been a book reviewer, someone who is paid to criticize someone's writing, so his perspective is that of a professional and a fan.

Follett pointed out that if someone is paid to review something, of course they're going to find something that doesn't work – because they're paid to look for it. But if a fan says, "I loved everything about the book except for this part," that's when he really sits up and listens.

He explained that, "This is when I want to know what it is I did wrong," because a fan would know this better than a critic. A critic is looking for errors. A fan will genuinely and organically find them.

I think there's a lot of truth to this. What I find especially interesting though is that when Ken Follett says he pays attentions to what his fans think of his work, he isn't just giving lip service to a nice, fan-friendly sentiment. He genuinely means it.

He didn't just say that he's interested in what his fans think. He said that his fans tell him where he went wrong. That's a meaningful distinction and I think it also explains to a certain extent why he is such a successful writer. He listens to people's criticisms.

4. Try to be humble, even when you have a posse.

It's very easy to forget your humanity when you no longer have to take out your own trash, do your own laundry, or write your own manuscripts. I know this because I've witnessed it first hand with many writers.

I'm sure you've seen it too, where someone hugely famous and stinking rich was interviewed and what shone clearly was how abnormal they seemed. I don't mean they behaved poorly – exactly. But they behave as though they haven't had to worry about anything more than their hairstyle for quite some time.

It creates a sheen of otherness, a no-longer-quite-human odor to everything they say and do, and to a certain extent, it's absolutely authentic. They really are no longer part of the human tribe. They left us behind because they no longer have to smell what they are. Someone else cleans them up and cleans up after everything they say and do, too.

You can probably think of a few abnormally wealthy people who have a wide spread reputation for behaving – at the very least – like an ass, because they can't seem to help it. Charlie Sheen. Paul McCartney. Steven Seagal.

Then there are others who have also reached a certain level of crazy success and manage to keep their heads. This is no easy task. Ken Follett is one of them, and it's my impression that he has made this choice conscientiously. He wants to remain part of the human tribe, despite his entourage.

5. Give full, round responses in interviews, even if you're shy.

Many writers are not what anyone would call social butterflies. In fact, many don't really handle being the center of attention very well at all. In an interview, this is what happens to a writer. The quiet person who usually sits alone in a room with writing implements is suddenly thrust on a stage with lights and cameras rolling and an audience.

And there's some person wanting to know answers, to questions. Things you might not know yourself. Like where you got an idea.

Live-interview audiences don't know this, but many of them are terrible. They don't realize that the person being interviewed can actually see them pick their nose or yawn or check their cellphone &/or watch (I've seen it all, and frequently). For a writer, this experience can be devastating.

Some compensate for this by acting like a big shot, and others just show how uncomfortable they are because they don't know what else to do. I've seen some interviews go painstakingly bad, where the author answered every question with a "yes" or "no." Haltingly hellish.

Ken Follett gives wonderful interviews. He speaks clearly and eloquently, and at great anecdotal breadth. It's an interviewer's dream.

I don't honestly know how I would handle a televised interview. I've only ever been interviewed for the

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newspaper, which was an interesting experience. While I wasn't ever actually misquoted, everything I had said was put in such a context that it seemed like something I would never say.

It was all nice, nothing negative, but not really about me. It suggested an idea or version of me that doesn't quite exist. If you are a writer, there is no way to avoid interviews. They happen.

So when it comes your time to be interviewed – for the radio, or television – or maybe here on Great Storybook, don't worry overly much. Just be conversational (not defensive), be anecdotal (without bragging), and be thoughtful (without saying “um” all the time).

Keep creating, no matter what.

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