Midnight Release Thoughts

Whiskey Dogs is out today. Here's what's next.



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This has been a strange waiting game. The eBook was finished some time ago. It's been passed through beta readers and offered up as advanced reader copies to the mighty review gods.

So far, here's what I got for the trouble:



4.75 stars on GoodReads so far?! Holy shit!!

Okay, so maybe people are just nicer when they get an advanced copy of the book. But returning to the fiction world after several years estranged from publishing my writing overall (thanks COVID), I'm being smarter about this. I'm being a little pushy too, as if to say "I'm an adult, and I write what I want, and it deserves to be *read*."

More details on the strategy below. First, I want to wax poetic about something I've been dying to share...

The opening line—what's that about?

Whiskey Dogs opens with two words.

"Midnight. *Shit*."

I'm a big believer in the first line of a book. I'm not rushing to memorize every single one that affects me, but I can tell you off the top of my head that my favorite book begins with "The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone." (*The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle, in case you don't know it.)

Whiskey Dogs is a departure from the opening phrases of *Aimless Sky* and *The Phoenix Express,* but no less thought out. It's designed to throw you right into the chaotic night, to subvert the trope of a character waking up to start the story. But here's a little secret I get to share now: *Whiskey Dogs* had several false starts as I tried to figure out whose story it was and how to tell it. In this final incarnation, it had the working title of "Lycanthropy Now," and thus the first line draws from the movie *Apocalypse Now*, which begins with "The End" by The Doors, followed by Captain Willard's first line: "Saigon. Shit."



Of course, in the development of this novel, it became clear that werewolves didn't emerge until the eighties. Tying the title back to the Vietnam Era wasn't the move. But the echoes of living life, constantly feeling like it's the end, and yet it doesn't end? That anger propelled *Whiskey Dogs* to wild places. I didn't need a war story for that.

So what now?

When I released my first books back in 2016 and 2017, I was, to put it kindly, skint broke. Worse than the First Breathren Court with their nine pieces of eight. There wasn't room to invest in myself right out of college. I was just glad to be out there on my own terms, in a world that was tightening the belt when it came to traditional publishing trends for queer writers and queer topics. (Happy Pride, by the way!)

Because of this, yes, I wrote as a side hustle. Yes, I had my credits. But it wasn't exactly...a business. At best, a sole proprietorship.

No more. This week, I realized that it might never happen, but if I wanted to write full-time or even part-time, I sure as hell wasn't going to get there if I didn't try and get things set up for everything. Writing. Artistry. Music. Merch.

I took a really big step.

And I started a business.

It's called Phoenix Express Publishing LLC. It's named after my second book, which I still consider my greatest work. Oh, and for one week only (6/15 - 6/19), it's free on Kindle to mark the occasion. Get it here!



This business's goal is to produce, sell, and manage *all* of my works and assets. So *The Whiskey Squad* and my books will roll up to PEP, of course. But the games on Coquidados, my Itch.io repository, also fall under the banner. My work as record producer Brother Nico are currently managed here too. And of course, the merch I pull out of my brain, kicking and screaming until it's forcibly plastered to fabric like some Greek tragedy.

There's a couple new To-Dos that come with the territory. We'll cover that at the end. 😉

Growth will come...

...but you've got to invest in yourself. That's been a recurring motif in my Year of Production. That I can't give up. That I got to fall on my feet trying to build myself up, and pivot where necessary, to tweak what I can.

Firstly, as an overall goal, this new LLC will motivate me to get back to conventions, conferances—places where the *craft* gathers. I just bought my ticket to Flame Con in NYC in August, because being queer is a huge part of my work and who I am, and I think it's where I want to ease back into those kind of huge gatherings. (It helps that my sister will be there.)

Second, here and now, I have the means to start running a marketing strategy for *Whiskey Dogs*. The best advice I've gotten about this recently is to start with one thing. Don't go wide, but go refine one thing, like Facebook Ads or TikTok.

Since this book is starting out as solely an eBook, I've chosen Amazon Ads, at a competitive daily spend. This only works if I pay attention to it though, tweaking things as I find the keywords that resonate with target audiences. So it's not a "try and give up" situation, but a "fail and learn" situation. I even have a threshold of what makes it a poor ad versus an ad that makes its money back.

I will...*probably* start TikTok up again. I imagine that BookTok is a little intimidating to start with on this task.

That's okay. The book isn't going anywhere.

Sidebar: will *Whiskey Dogs* ever be a physical book?

Short answer: I don't know.

Long answer: I don't know *yet*, but I'm leaning towards yes. It would take time to format, proof, etc. But since I didn't aim to have a real release party or put this on consignment while starting up again, it's not a priority.

I sure as hell would like to sign a real copy someday. And I hear Amazon KDP offers hardcovers now...

Another question: you mentioned advanced copies...?

Yes! For the past couple of months, I've been conducting campaigns for advanced readers to read *Whiskey Dogs* for free, in exchange for reviews. If anything, for $9 a month, it's always a major confidence boost to see a review come in at four or five stars.

That being said, to build "word-of-mouth" via "reviews online," I will probably run these again, depending on how things are going. But Amazon's terms with KDP Select are very strict about the distribution of the book anywhere else, and I may have enrolled *Whiskey Dogs* in the program earlier this year, before I started leveraging Booksprout. I'll figure that out in the week ahead.

I will update you if free copies are available in exchange for a review. These will effectively serve as copies for those going through financial hardship, no questions asked, no judgment passed. (And if you just can't wait, my DMs are open somewhere. I'll let you know if I can help.)

To Do

Whiskey Dogs is out. My new site's a little cleaner than before. (I had some odd typos and an extra bullet point somewhere.) As part of that effort, my Collected Works page also has as many hyperlinks as I was able to find.

All that is missing is a short story (part of a collection from a defunct Danish company), a poem (part of a literary journal that's missing its online copies), and my free poetry chapbook, *Shepherding Butterflies to the Land of the Dead*.

That last one, I'm evaluating my options for publishing a deluxe version of it on Amazon. It's small, it's only poems and public domain images,

and I do think it worked really well as a free zine I distributed at readings and events. Since indie poetry doesn't really sell, this doesn't preclude the possibility of hosting a free version on my site. That's just a longer task I need to sit down for.

In the spirit of resurfacing old works for potential publication: a long, long time ago, I had a Patreon, which is how *Aimless Sky* was serialized. I also serialized its sequel, *Niagara Falls*. But then Patreon changed its policies at a critical point for my growth, I disavowed the site, and on top of it, I couldn't afford the cover art for a proper release.

So...as much as it hurts me to read old works in my old styles (personal flaw), I'm looking into the possibility of *finally* adding the second book to the Flooded Earth series and calling it a day. Not sure if that will mean new cover art for *Aimless Sky* as a side effect, or a physical release for *Niagara Falls*, but you never know.

(Also, *Human Hawke* is staring at me wondering why I'm ignoring Hawke and Terry.)

As part of fleshing out the simplified Collected Works page, I also added a couple of games to Coquidados so folks could go check them out. They're short and old, so don't expect anything super great. 😜

We Are Wild is a poster with a game laid out on it. It's honestly a bit of a miss in my game design career, but feels like a precursor to *Arecibo*. Part of Game Chef 2015, it went missing on the internet along the way, so I just threw my own copy on Coquidados.

Corn: America's Favorite Roadtrip RPG*, is its own legend, born from far too many drives to GenCon in Indianapolis and refined on the highways of Ohio. It's historically been hosted on my own website, but I'm not doing that anymore for the sake of simplicity. (See my last blog post.) Throw it in your car if you expect corn fields on your trip.

Writing for the Whiskey Dogs sequel is a little stop-and-go. But it's already super good. Winston and Manolo haven't missed a beat.

Currently Reading

I finished *The Weirdness: A Novel* by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It was a fun read, had a great ending that had me howling with laughter, and stuck the landing despite my reservations with the main character. Give it a read if you like inane categorizations of magic and gods in our bizarre daily world.

As for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz, I put it down. I got halfway through, but other priorities emerged with work, and as much as I wanted this to be a good time, something wasn't clicking. It is what it is. Never forget that you have the right to not finish reading a book.

In its place, I'm reading *The JOLT Effect: How High Performers Overcome Customer Indecision* by Matthew Dixon and Ted McKenna, as I work in software sales and was recommended this book by my bosses. I'm about halfway through, and it does read fairly dryly as a sales book, but I'm already leveraging a lot of its learnings about indecision, and it's both made me a better communicator and mellowed me out a little about quota.

Lastly, there's a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien floating around my house that I occasionally lug out like a tome and digest a chapter of. I've never properly read through the whole thing (it's Tome Bombadil's fault) but it reads ever so fantastically, so I like having it around, perpetually incomplete.

Wrapping up this midnight post at 2 AM,
Nico