QQQ Allegra Hyde

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[00:00:10] **Sarah:** Welcome to Queries, qualms and Quirks, the weekly podcast that asks published authors to share their successful query letter and discuss their journey from First Spark to day of publication. I am your host, author Sarah Nicholas, and literary agent Sarah n Fisk.

Allegra's newest book, the Story Collection, the Last Catastrophe was published this March by Vintage. She's also the author of the novel ELEUTHERIA, which was named a best book of 2022 by the New Yorker.

And the story collection OF THIS NEW WORLD, which won the John Simmon's short fiction award, she currently teaches at Oberlin College. So please welcome Allegra to the show. Hello.

[00:00:46] **Allegra:** Hi, Sarah. Really happy to be here.

[00:00:48] **Sarah:** So we're gonna talk today about your journey to publication. We're gonna kind of start all the way at the beginning. When did you first start getting interested in writing, and then how long did it take from then before you started getting serious about pursuing publication?

[00:01:01] **Allegra:** I took a, a creative writing class on a whim in college. I wasn't intending to become a writer. That seemed like a career path with many challenges, but I took this creative writing class on a whim and ended up really enjoying, the, the writing and revision process. And also, just the process of being able to, share an inner world with other people and.

When I graduated, I did some environmental work and also did some traveling, but I realized pretty quickly that I wasn't gonna be happy unless I pursued writing as a a main, um, Activity, if not career. And so I applied to M F A programs. I decided to go to Arizona State University in, in part because, they gave me the most funding.

And I, I really didn't want to go into debt for, an mfa. that program was three years, so I had a lot of time to do writing and it was, uh, an incredible gift. I wrote a ton of stories and also the beginning of, what would become my novel

ELEUTHERIA and during that time, I had professors who were encouraging me to send, work out, and so I started submitting to literary journals.

And, was lucky enough to, start placing work. And so I was publishing, short stories. And then, by the time I graduated, I had enough stories that I had a, a collection. I was under the impression at that time that agents just wouldn't really be interested in a story collection. that was kind of the, the general wisdom that was floating around.

So I actually didn't even try to submit that manuscript to an agent. Instead, I decided to take the path of submitting the manuscript myself, to contests. And so my first, book of this new world was a un agented submission to the Iowa Short Fiction Prize. and it ended up winning that, I think that was in, it was accepted in like January, 2016 or so, and then it came out October, 2016.

So I guess the thing about a kind of working with the university press and with that contest is that it, it was like a very short process of kind of acceptance to publication less than a year. there wasn't really any editing, for better or worse. It just kind of was like, this is the manuscript, we'll, we'll copy edit it and then it will become a book.

that was kind of how I, dipped my toes into the, the waters of publishing and, put out that that first collection.

[00:03:57] **Sarah:** So once you started getting serious, how did you learn more about the publishing industry? Like how to query, like how did you learn that, you know, agents weren't really interested in short fiction collections, that kind of thing.

[00:04:07] **Allegra:** I think that was just kind of the, what I would hear people say, in, in my MFA program, that was kind of the attitude of professors. and I think I tried to learn about the publishing industry just through osmosis asking questions, poking around online. Just trial and error to some extent, especially when it came to submitting, short stories to magazines.

That was just a matter of trying to gather data and, making a lot of spreadsheets.

[00:04:39] **Sarah:** So after you got that book through the prize, and the University press, can you tell us a little bit more about your publication journey? Usually I ask this question a little differently, but your story is a little bit different, so I'm just kind of leaving it open-ended for you to talk about your publishing journey.

[00:04:55] **Allegra:** so I had the kind of weird, and in some ways fortunate, experience of, having agents reach out to me to sign instead of, um, me submitting query letters. and that was especially true in the wake of my. Collection. And so I talked to a number of agents on the phone, and I would oftentimes send them samples of what I was working on, which in that, at that time was my novel ELEUTHERIA.

I felt like when I talked to Erin Harris at Folio, we had a really good rapport. And that, she also had editorial notes and suggestions on my work in progress that resonated with me. And so I ended up signing with her I think in 2016 as well. it actually was for, took about four years before that novel that she was planning to represent was, was ready, which is longer than I think either of us were hoping that it would take.

But, it was a, a really challenging, complicated book to complete. And, it was kind of finally ready and she was pretty rigorous with her kind of editorial hand when it was finally ready in her eyes and my eyes and we sent it out, it did not immediately find a publisher, I think, I don't know, probably was rejected 20 times at least.

And that was really demoralizing. probably one of the, most difficult times of my life, because, You put kind of all your time and your hopes and dreams into a manuscript and, to have it, ultimately not find a home is, it can feel like all is lost. And I, I really had that feeling.

When we kept kind of getting kind, but also firm nos. So that was, uh, that was tough. but then, the tides starting to started to turn in part when, we actually sold the film rights to the material before the novel sold. And so that felt like, okay, a, a sign that there's something in this material that is, meaningful, to someone and there's some like, substance to this story.

and then, an editor at Vintage said she was interested in the book, but she wanted me to revise it some more, which I, my, from my understanding is not super common. but she was willing to kind of take a chance in that way. I did that revision. She actually asked for some more revision after that.

Revised some more. and then, against all odds, she ended up, giving me a, a two book deal. and so it felt like it felt like a, a total miracle because it had seemed like all was lost with that book at one point. but, I'm really grateful for my agent for not giving up on it and also just for, having the wherewithal to stick with it and stick with, having to revise it a lot, even more than I was expecting to.

[00:08:04] **Sarah:** Mm-hmm. This is the point when I usually have people share their query letter, but you don't have a query letter, so we'll skip that part. so how has your experience been since signing your contracts? Especially let us know if there's anything that kind of surprised you along the way.

[00:08:19] **Allegra:** I think that since signing my contract, I've, I've learned a lot more about working with a, a larger publisher. Um, I had published that first book, that collection, but it was with a university press that had kind of limited resources when it came to promoting the book. And the publication timeline was, like I said, was much shorter.

so it was a, a real different experience. kind of doing the publishing process on a larger scale and, trying to figure out how to participate in the publicity and marketing dimensions of it. And I think I have been surprised at how time consuming it is. I feel like, oh, so much of my kind of creative energy or just any extra energy at all has been really.

Absorbed by just the, the labor and anxiety of putting a book, into the, the world with this, um, on a, a larger, in a larger way. yeah.

[00:09:19] **Sarah:** All right. It is time for the quick round. I call it author, d n a.

Are you a pantser or a plotter?

[00:09:25] **Allegra:** I'm a pantser.

[00:09:26] **Sarah:** Do you tend to be an overwriter or an underwriter?

[00:09:29] **Allegra:** Overwriter for sure.

[00:09:30] **Sarah:** Do you prefer to write in the morning or at night?

[00:09:33] **Allegra:** Morning.

[00:09:33] **Sarah:** When starting a new project, do you typically start with a character or plot or a concept or something else first?

[00:09:40] **Allegra:** I'm gonna say voice,

[00:09:41] **Sarah:** Hmm? Do you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:09:43] **Allegra:** coffee, but I wish it was tea.

[00:09:45] **Sarah:** When writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound

[00:09:49] **Allegra:** I am all about the instrumental background music.

[00:09:52] **Sarah:** when it comes to the first draft? Are you more of a get it down kind of person or a get it right kind of person?

[00:09:57] **Allegra:** I'm all about getting it down,

[00:09:59] **Sarah:** What tools or software do you use to draft.

[00:10:01] **Allegra:** printing hard copies constantly.

[00:10:05] **Sarah:** Do you prefer drafting or revising more?

[00:10:07] **Allegra:** I think that initial, that initial draft can be really exhilarating.

[00:10:11] **Sarah:** Same. Do you write in sequential order or do you hop around?

[00:10:15] **Allegra:** Probably hop around,

[00:10:16] **Sarah:** And final quick round question, are you an extrovert or an introvert?

[00:10:20] **Allegra:** depends on the people I'm with.

[00:10:22] **Sarah:** so we're gonna talk about the second Q of the podcast. What were some of the qualms or worries that you had on your journey, and do you feel like they were realized or you overcame them, or how did they shake out?

[00:10:33] **Allegra:** I mean, one worry that I've already brought up was just the fear that the, the book wouldn't sell. Um, and, I think I overcame that by just really sticking with the manuscript and, and not giving up on it. I think another worry I had was that the book would be misunderstood in some way, and I think because it's a, in this, I'm talking about the novel in this case.

it's, a novel that's really getting into a lot of moral ambiguity. I worried that ambiguity would potentially be misinterpreted in some way or that people would think that a, a character with a problematic view was my view. And so I think, I really got in my about that.

Part of moving past that was a matter of accepting that when a, a manuscript is out in the world, it's, it no longer belongs to you. And I think it's a, it, there's nothing you can do, no matter what people will make of the material, what they make of, make of it. And you kind of have to just learn to let go as an author.

[00:11:37] **Sarah:** Yeah. Now it's time for the third Q. Do you have any writing quirks? Is there anything about your writing process that you think is kind of different or interesting or unique?

[00:11:46] **Allegra:** Well, I am someone who writes by hand, a lot, and My sense is that that is a, becoming more and more of a. A quirk, out in the world as people, really become merged with their computers. but I just find it to be a really helpful way to, connect with voice, as I said, to really pay attention to my sentences and to really emphasize style in fiction.

Because I'm really invested in writing by hand, I'll oftentimes, Write by hand, type something up, print it out, write it by hand again, and it, it's incredibly labor intensive, but that's just what I do.

[00:12:27] **Sarah:** All right. When you were in the lowest part of your journey, what kept you going and why did you stick to it?

[00:12:34] **Allegra:** I think that it's really important to have a support system and to have people around you who. Believe in you and also who have a, a kind of larger perspective on the situation. because it, as an author in that moment when it seems like a book isn't gonna sell, that can feel like the end, the end times.

But someone who's, who cares about you and who also is kind of a little bit removed from the emotional connection to the manuscript, they can see that, the book not selling is not the end of the world. It's just an experience. You had a learning process and you can move on from that and still be successful, and happy in other ways.

So, I'm, I'm really grateful for the, the people in my life who were able to communicate that to me. And even though the, the book did sell, eventually, I also, feel confident that, it would've been okay if it hadn't as well.

[00:13:38] **Sarah:** Do you feel like you made any mistakes along the way that you'd like to share with listeners? So hopefully they can avoid making similar ones.

[00:13:46] **Allegra:** Hmm. I, on one hand I feel like there's mistakes constantly. but I also am like, that was part of the, the journey. I think that I spent a lot of time really second guessing myself in the, in the writing of the novel and, at times really over researching because I was worried about, getting something so exactly right. I knew too much in a sense.

And so I think there's a, a balance to be found between, Doing your due diligence and putting in your best effort and also kind of going, going too far and, and over researching and procrastinating in a way by, over revising and sometimes as well. And I think if I could go back, I would, communicate that to younger Allegra.

[00:14:32] **Sarah:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons that you learned on your journey to publication?

[00:14:38] **Allegra:** I think that. Community is everything when it comes to, to putting out a book and, in any opportunity that you have to develop writing friendships and connections and, moments of mutual support, is worth doing, doing. I really believe in networking in a non slimy way, you know, um, because to have.

A book go out into the world is, it is, it's so much a, a group effort, a community effort. And, we all really need each other because I think literature is, is not created in a vacuum. So that is my, most urgent suggestion.

[00:15:20] **Sarah:** That was a perfect segue because the next question is about that Exactly. this is not a business that most of us succeed in completely on our own. So who are some of the people who helped you along the way and how?

[00:15:34] **Allegra:** I'm really grateful to Matt Bell. Um, if I'm, if we're naming names,

He, um, was someone who I worked with in grad school at Arizona State and learned a lot from him. And later on when I was, trying to figure out how to, sell this novel, he, he read, a draft of it and.

He gave me a little feedback, but more than anything he gave me that he gave me encouragement and told me that he, he believed in that book and that that

meant a lot. and he also has, blurbed it. So he's someone who I really, I'm, I'm a, I'm a ride or die, Matt Bell Stan, I think I will say. So I really appreciate him.

really grateful to my family. and my, my girlfriend's also a writer, Ariel Delgado Dixon, and I really appreciate that we can kind of talk about, the ups and downs of the writing process together. And, that makes it feel a little, a little less lonely, especially when you're, you're getting rejections from writing residencies and submissions.

I think other writers really under understand what that's like and can kind of cheer you on to keep going.

[00:16:45] **Sarah:** Yeah. All right, Allegra, before you go, can you tell us about the book that just came out in March?

[00:16:52] **Allegra:** So it's a speculative story collection called The Last Catastrophe, and in some ways I think of it as a a cousin or a brother of the novel. It's. it is also looking oftentimes at kind of near future America. It's working with themes around climate change and kind of societal disruptions.

and it's a, a collection that asks what it, what is it like to be alive right now in the, the anthropocene and. Oftentimes using figurative or absurdist or kind of playful approaches to those questions. So I'm really excited about it and I'm, I'm excited to do some events for it as well.

[00:17:33] **Sarah:** Cool. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your story with everyone.

[00:17:39] **Allegra:** Thanks, Sarah.

[00:17:40] **Sarah:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries Qualms and Quirks. You can find more information about Allegra in the show notes, along with links to find out more about her and her books.

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