

QQQ Sandra Block

[00:00:00] **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 today of public. I am your host author, Sarah Nicholas and literary agent, Sarah N. Fisk. Sandra A. Block graduated from college at Harvard, then returned to her native land of Buffalo, New York for medical training and never left.

She's a practicing neurologist and proud Sabres fan and lives at home with her husband, two children, an impetuous yellow lab. Her work has been published in the Washington Post. Little Black Lies is her debut, a finalist in the international thriller awards. And the girl without a name in the secret room are the other books in the Zoe Goldman series , and What Happened That Night her standalone. Girl Overboard is her first young adult thriller. So please welcome Sandra to the show. Hello. Hi. I stumbled through that intro, but that's what editing is for All right. So we're gonna talk about your journey to publication today, and we're gonna start by going [00:01:00] all the way back to 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? I happen to know you got serious about pursuing publication at two different times. So feel free to talk about both of those.

[00:01:16] **Sandra:** Yeah. So I knew always is pretty much the truth. I sometimes, give this talk where the first line is. I always wanted to be a writer, so I became a neurologist. So doesn't make a lot of sense, but I took some detours along the way, but honestly, when I was maybe six and I was sort of writing poetry without knowing what it was, I knew I wanted to be a writer.

In college I was an English major, but I was also prem. So I kind of straddled it for a while. One summer I was working at the Buffalo news and I was also shadowing a psychiatrist. I was straddling it, you know, really for a long [00:02:00] time. And basically just decided kind of out of partly out of fear and partly out of interest to go the medical route..

I really did find the brain fascinating. though I thought I would be a psychiatrist and I ended up being a neurologist, which was a better fit for me, but still brain related. And I just had a hard time really just turning it off. So I would say around age 26, 25, somewhere in that range, I started writing again.

I wrote a book called Scalpel, it's kind of funny because it was a book that took place in Buffalo, medical, thriller, and the big, like huge part of the book. The whole premise of the book was that there was an anesthesiologist who was selling drugs from his. And now that's like a Tuesday in Florida, right?

That's like [00:03:00] nothing. So I just think it's funny how things have changed, but that back more than 25 years ago, I thought that was like that would've been a big deal. But anyway I tried to get agents and I was the old kind of fashion days when you would actually send out. SAS, you know, you put it on your, I did have a computer at least, so I wasn't handwriting them, but and I sent out probably literally a hundred of them and didn't do it totally scattershot.

I mean, I did take the advice of looking at books and reading who they've acknowledged and if it's kind of book that's in your genre, maybe write to that agent. So I, I did that. I got a couple of, you know, positive responses in that I got one person that said, my colleague may be interested and I sent it to the colleague and they were like, Well, we'd have to do a line by line rewrite and I don't really wanna do that.

And I thought, well, I didn't really [00:04:00] wanna do that either.

[00:04:01] **Sarah:** no,

[00:04:02] **Sandra:** so it was probably good that we didn't hook up as a agent pair. And then the other one who I really was hopeful about called and said, you know, I'm not gonna represent you, but I just wanna tell you writing's really good, like hang in there, which is a really good thing to hear, but it was still.

You know, you hear there's an agent on the phone and really exciting, and then it's not what you wanna hear. So basically at that point, I was like it was very difficult and I had a new baby and, you know, decided I'm just gonna kind take my ball and go home. So I did. And over the years, I mean, I, I would write and I would write three chapters of something and I'd write a chapter of something else. And there's just all of these old kind of half, not even half novels, maybe an outline in four chapters [00:05:00] or 5,000 words, something like that in a bunch of computers over my life here that never really became a book. And then around age 40, I became more serious again, where I was like, you know what? I was doing this yoga class at the time, which sounds like completely unrelated. And it is kind of, except that it was my husband's 40th birthday present to me. Was it yoga, hot yoga class. Have you ever done hot yoga

[00:05:30] **Sarah:** nuh uh. no

[00:05:31] **Sandra:** It's really hot, really hot. And I managed to injure myself, which is kind of amazing in yoga, but I did, so I don't do yoga anymore, but at the time I was really into it and there was this sign in the room and it said something like it was from Bikram yoga. And it said like, you're never too old. You're never too broken. You're never too tired to start over from scratch and try again.

[00:05:58] **Sarah:** Hm.

[00:05:58] **Sandra:** And it really [00:06:00] kinda spoke to me, because a lot of the excuses I had were like, oh, you know, that that's past me. I'm so tired. I don't have the words anymore. I'm not really, you know, that just isn't who I am, that the ship's sailed, but in the end I decided to just give it another go. And that's where I became kind of serious again.

[00:06:22] **Sarah:** Once you decided to. You know, try again. How did you learn more about the publishing industry? Like how it works and how to go about querying and all that different stuff?

[00:06:30] **Sandra:** So, as I said, I was an English major from Harvard, right. So I was like, oh, you know, I'm like the best writer ever. I know everything I'm doing, you know? And then I thought to myself, maybe that's just not true. And maybe you have talent, like God given passion, but you may not really. Know what you're doing when it comes to writing a book.

So I read books on writing. One of which I really recommend it's [00:07:00] called, like should probably look it up exactly. Thanks, but this isn't for us, it's a not so gentle guide to getting off the slush. pile I think it's called and it really went over a lot of things. I mean, it talked about plot, three act structure.

Sensory details to pull readers in talked about, you know, what's a scene, what's not a scene. She had this whole thing called deal breakers, which would be like just let's say the killer was really obvious from, from day one, you know, that just wasn't gonna fly or the hero was really boring.

Like, well, do you really wanna hang out with that person? Three 50 pages and kind of just went over a lot of things, which I wish I had read in the first time. Cause I read, I looked at a lot of my mistakes and so I did that and that's kinda what helped me write a better first manuscript. And then [00:08:00] from there another thing I did, which was kind of funny is I just happened to be writing it,

reading another book. Forget what it was called. It's really about, it's a book about queries more. Exactly. You might know since you're definitely zeroed in on that, but it talked about one of the questions was to agents. What do you not want in the first scene or the first like first paragraph let's say

[00:08:26] **Sarah:** mm-hmm

[00:08:26] **Sandra:** and everyone was like, don't write about the sky.

Like everybody writes about the sky. Don't do that. Or. And it was one other thing about the winter and then there was another thing that said, oh God, don't do a dream scene, no dream

[00:08:41] **Sarah:** mm-hmm

[00:08:42] **Sandra:** don't do a dream scene, like 10 different agents. And you know what, my first scene was a dream scene. So I really like, again, I could have been like, but it's such a good scene.

I have to keep it in there. But I said, you know, I think if 20 agents are saying they hate dream [00:09:00] scenes, Maybe I'll move that to chapter three and, kind of doing more en media res. And I'm saying that wrong I'm sure. But so I, the first line was she picked an invisible bug off her face and it's just about a patient that's, you know, like on amphetamines and think he's just got bugs. So that was definitely I think, a help. And then I sent out query letters, but this time I only sent out two because I sent out one for the agent for Tess Garritson because, you know, medical thriller kind of idea. And then I sent out another for Rachel Ekstrom and, , that one, there was like, I was just Googling it.

And it was one of these new agent alerts kind of thing. And it said, that she was looking for someone who could make her heart beat faster than riding through Brooklyn traffic on a bike or something. So anyway, I decided, [00:10:00] well, you know, why not go there? And really quickly after she asked me for a manuscript, I think it was a full manuscript.

She has you send a partial to begin with. So that's why the second time around it took two letters. Which was very lucky. And also I think, because I just knew a little more.

[00:10:22] **Sarah:** And were

those emails at that

point?

[00:10:25] **Sandra:** Yes

Yes.

yes, it was.

[00:10:28] **Sarah:** yeah, definitely a change. can you kind of break down for us your journey from that moment to signing your first book contract?

[00:10:35] **Sandra:** Yes. I was going to a cruise. And she left a message on the machine while the voicemail saying, I loved your book and I really wanna represent you. So of course, that was like one of my best days ever. And I'm going on a cruise with my family. And I was just like, I was thrilled. It was just a wonderful time. And we come back, the book was [00:11:00] initially called Psych Ward and she said, that's too horror, which, you know, at the time I didn't really have any clue, but. Retrospect definitely was too horror-y so we changed it to the Memory Thief, which is what it, the working title was. And we sent it out and we got a few, we want a second read on this and Hachette Grand Central was the most interested, but they were not sure. And what they kept saying like, you know, maybe let's have you redo 30 pages and see how that looks. So like on spec. So I did that and then they said, how about you redo the whole thing on spec, but our editor will make her edits. So in a way they were doing me a favor because they were writing on spec too.

I mean, an editor's time is valuable. And we had a really good discussion, the editor, myself and Rachel. Alex [00:12:00] Logan is her name, the editor. And then, I put it in again after the edits and then I had them and another another publisher also made an offer then two.

So I had two and then we worked it up and I, I worked with a better one, which ended up for that book being, uh, grand central.

[00:12:20] **Sarah:** All right.

[00:12:21] **Sandra:** So it took me a year.

[00:12:22] **Sarah:** Yeah. You had like a partial R and R and then a full R and R.

[00:12:26] **Sandra:** Yes.

[00:12:28] **Sarah:** It is time for the first Q of the podcast. Can you read your successful query letter?

[00:12:34] **Sandra:** Dear Ms. Ekstrom, word is out that you are looking for a novel that will in quotes "make your heartbeat faster than when you are biking through Manhattan traffic" end quotes. Get your pacemaker ready. I am writing to seek representation for my medical mystery The Psych Ward, which takes place over a snowy winter in Buffalo, New York.

Our heroine is like every other psychiatrist, a little crazy and [00:13:00] looking for her mother. Zoe Goldman is a psychiatry resident who sees her own psychiatrist for ADHD. In parenthesis think young female, Woody, Ellen, end parentheses, and is haunted by childhood memories of a fire that killed her mother. When she meets her newest patient, a sociopath who killed her own mother at age 14, Zoe's fixation on her mother blooms into obsession.

She resolves to unravel the mystery of her mother's theory, death, but ends up unraveling her whole world instead with a harrowing discovery. Her adoptive mother has been lying about the fire all along and her matricidal patient is far more than just a patient. And now has a brand new target. Dr. Zoe Goldman, her psychiatrist.

I'm a practicing neurologist and former English major at Harvard. I've been published in both medical and poetry journal journals. My novel [00:14:00] fits in the medical suspense genre with a humorous edge of Gillian Flinn or Kate Atkinson. I do hope you consider representing me sincerely

[00:14:09] **Sarah:** Awesome. Thank you for sharing. So how has your experience been since signing that first contract? Especially let us know if there was anything that really surprised you along the way. Hmm.

[00:14:21] **Sandra:** It's been full of up and downs. I think my biggest surprise is how out of control you feel with the whole process? You give your baby in a way to, up to on sub, which to me. It's just dreadful. It's like saying all, having all these people come and say, yeah, you know, your baby's kinda ugly, but I'm sure as someone else thinks it's pretty, you know what I mean?

I think it's just more difficult than I thought it would be. I'm not a patient person. That's become abundantly obvious. I wish I were more of a chill kind of laid back person. I will say I've become more [00:15:00] rolling with the punches because otherwise you just won't survive. You gotta thicken your skin a little bit.

But I would say the biggest surprise is just, that it's difficult. It's a lot of ups and downs and it's a tough business.

[00:15:13] **Sarah:** Yeah. It is time for the quick round. I call it author DNA. I know that you are a neurologist has nothing to do with actual DNA. Just classifications that we like to put writers in.

Are you a Pantser or a plotter?

Sandra: Pantser

Sarah: Do you tend to be an over writer or an underwriter?

[00:15:33] **Sandra:** Underwriter,

[00:15:34] **Sarah:** Do you prefer to write in the morning or at night?

[00:15:38] **Sandra:** um, morning.

I am a night owl and that was one of the reasons where why I didn't write really for 20 years is. I just assumed I'd have to write at night, but I was too exhausted at night. And when I made that one big change to writing in the morning at age 40 or so, that was definitely a big shift to making me more productive.

[00:15:59] **Sarah:** [00:16:00] Interesting. When you start a new project, do you typically start with a character or plot or concept or something else first?

[00:16:07] **Sandra:** I'm gonna say all of the above I've done it all different ways for different books.

[00:16:13] **Sarah:** do you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:16:15] **Sandra:** Coffee silence.

[00:16:17] **Sarah:** When writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound?

When writing the first draft, are you more of a get it down kind of person or a get it right kind of person.

[00:16:29] **Sandra:** I'm a get it down kind of person, probably to my detriment. Uh, but yeah, I gotta just at least try to get it down.

Although sometimes I will say that, you know, you'll come back and say, oh, that really wasn't so bad. Like what I put in there. So that's, it works sometimes.

[00:16:46] **Sarah:** What tools or software do you use to draft?

[00:16:50] **Sandra:** I work in an iPad and I have Microsoft word 365 or whatever on the iPad. So if it ever gets lost, I'm not dead.

[00:16:59] **Sarah:** Do [00:17:00] you prefer drafting or revising more?

Do you write in sequential order or do you hop around.

[00:17:07] **Sandra:** Mainly sequential. If I get really stuck, I may jump to somewhere

[00:17:11] **Sarah:** And final quick round question. Are you an extrovert or an introvert?

[00:17:17] **Sandra:** introvert.

[00:17:17] **Sarah:** Now 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 were they realized, or did you overcome them or how did they shake out?

[00:17:29] **Sandra:** Qualms was sort of the same thing that I had said about the, difficulties along the way of the lack of control. You know, maybe like what an editor would do, would it, would it come out okay?

and I found in general, More than okay. I mean, it's a much better product usually after you've worked with them. Um, sometimes maybe not in the knowing if the covers will be okay when you don't have that much control again, I think it comes down to lack of [00:18:00] control, but I think overall those qualms were not too bad.

[00:18:06] **Sarah:** mm-hmm

and now for the third queue, do you have any writing quirks? Is there anything about your writing process that you think is kind of different or interesting or unique.

[00:18:15] **Sandra:** I would say, and I don't know if it's unique or not, but I really have to be looking outside when I'm writing.

[00:18:22] **Sarah:** Oh,

[00:18:22] **Sandra:** I mean, I can do it if I'm forced to and I'm in, I don't know, waiting for my kids at a pool or something like that. But in general, I sit in a similar place, kitchen table looking outside at the birds bird feeder.

if I'm on vacation, I'm usually looking at an ocean, I don't live by an ocean, but, sometimes in the warmer weather, I'll be on the porch, but I'm always looking outside.

[00:18:44] **Sarah:** Interesting. When you were in the lowest parts of your journey, whatever that may have been for you, what kept you going and why did you stick to it?

[00:18:54] **Sandra:** yeah, I mean, there were definitely low points, like before my newest book, you know, [00:19:00] I went a couple of years with some misfires there where, yeah, a couple of the books. You know, one of them, I, I really felt like didn't turn out right? I don't know. You put all this time into a book and then you think, wow, this is just not a good book.

You know, you can put all these, I'm writing 750 words a day, but if they really don't add up to much, you haven't done a whole lot. So that was, you know, that was difficult. how did I get through it? I will say a couple of things. One is that I was kind of kind to myself, like, all right, well, if you're not in the mood to write today, don't write today.

It's okay. You might need to just get some more water in the well and do some other things and just, you know, when you are ready to write again, start writing again, and then, just having faith that you will be able to, you know, get published again. I was really even worried, like, would I even publish again?

Which I feel like every book you never know in a way, unless [00:20:00] you're a very successful author, but, just kind of having that faith that you know how to do it, you've done it before and, and you can do it again.

[00:20:08] **Sarah:** Yeah.

Do you feel like you made any mistakes along the way to publication that maybe you'd like to share with listeners so they don't make the same one?

[00:20:18] **Sandra:** I would say, you know, read some books on crafting and some books on writing. You don't necessarily have to read a book on like the philosophy of writing or even just like, go get him. You can do this. I, I think just really some specific knowledge about plot points, about different types of narratives about, you know, where to add tension and how you make the, you know, chapters shorter as you're going along if you're doing a thriller and you're adding ratcheting up tension. Really kind of basic concrete things. I think I could have saved myself a lot of heartache along the way. If I had done [00:21:00] that before. Me

[00:21:00] **Sarah:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons that you learned on your journey to publication?

[00:21:07] **Sandra:** If you carve out a little bit every day to write, you can write a book. There's more time in your life than you think. And even just writing for my first book, I basically wrote for a half hour every morning and I wrote a book and, you can steal time when you're.

Hanging out, waiting at a doctor's office. At least if you're editing for me, it's hard to do that in another way, but there are practical things like me changing over from a computer to an iPad, made a huge difference because I didn't really like waiting for it to load and log on. And I didn't like, the battery might not, you'd have to find your cord.

I mean, these all sound really stupid and simple, but you can just carry an iPad around and then. Drag it out and do some writing. So I would say that it's, it's doable. It's definitely not a pipe dream it can [00:22:00] be done.

[00:22:00] **Sarah:** I call this the acknowledgements portion of the podcast. This is not a business that most of us succeed on com most . This is not a business that most of us succeed in completely on our own. So who are some of the people or organizations who helped you along the way and how.

[00:22:18] **Sandra:** I would say the two biggest people is one is ed park. He's a friend of mine from high school. We went to high school together. We were the, co-editors of the Nichols news. So, um, we were, you know, sort of writing friends in a sense back then. He's always been an excellent he's amazing writer. He is a very funny, funny writer and a very kind person.

And he just, you know, he gave me a lot of email advice. I mean, I don't think we really talked over the phone again, but he just was very, just really supportive. So that's one person, Jeff Radkey is another person I know from

Harvard, he did the Tapit brother books. I [00:23:00] think he's done both young adults, both middle age.

And then he's got a newer one about Hollywood, which I haven't read yet, but. I'd say the last person is probably, Martin crew Smith or bill Smith he was, is my college roommate's father. And when I got my first book deal that I was trying to figure out, well, first of all, I talked to him 20 years before that, when I was trying to, you know, get, get a book going and it didn't go anywhere.

But, all those years later when I was debating between the two publishers. He kinda, you know, he kinda said, well, there isn't really much of a choice, is there? The way he put it. And he was right. I mean, I think he was, he was correct, but he was also very supportive and was like, you know, you should be breaking out the champagne.

It's not easy to get a publishing deal, especially nowadays. So, so I thought, you know, that really, he didn't have to take the time to talk to me, you know, and he did. And, and I appreciated it. And his wife too is amazing. She read through some of my [00:24:00] first writing and kindly told me you don't have to use an adverb after every sentence.

So that was nice too.

[00:24:07] **Sarah:** Yeah. Before you go, Sandra, you just had a book come out in may, Girl Overboard. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

[00:24:15] **Sandra:** yes, it is my first ye book. kind of funny story, how that came to be is that my agent sent me an email kind of offhanded. Like, do you have any ye ideas? And I said, sure though, I didn't really, and I came up with like five ideas and one of 'em was about a cruise, which I thought was kind of cheesy and I didn't really, almost didn't even put it on there.

And they said, we love the cruise idea. So can you write 20 pages? So I wrote 20 pages really fast. Which I don't normally work that way, but it really flowed. And I got a book deal. So it is about Izzy, who is a 15 year old being dragged in a cruise to Bermuda by her parents. She makes this friend who's the super cool Jade [00:25:00] kind of influencer vibes really would never hang around with izzy. Can't believe she's hanging out with someone as, as geeky as she is. and they're on this cruise and then one day Jade goes missing and the question is what happened to Jade? She's gotta find out.

[00:25:16] **Sarah:** Nice. Do you feel like you kind of went full circle because you were going on a cruise when you got your offer and then that your most recent book is set on a cruise.

[00:25:25] **Sandra:** That's really funny. I really, I didn't think of it that way, but. Yeah, maybe, maybe my next cruise I'll I'll get another great offer or something like that. But no, COVID, I, we haven't been cruising for a long time, but in the future I would. I'm embarrassingly fond cruises. So hopefully, maybe in the future.

[00:25:43] **Sarah:** Sandra. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your story with my listeners.

[00:25:49] **Sandra:** Absolutely. Thank you for having me. It was fun.

[00:25:51] **Sarah:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries, Qualms and Quirks. You can find the text of Sandra query and the show notes along with links to find out more [00:26:00] about her and her books.

If you enjoyed the show, I'd really appreciate if you'd help me find new listeners by leaving a review on apple podcast or podchaser, telling your friends or sharing this episode on social media. If you're interested in supporting the show, go to patreon.com/pubtalklive. And if you're a published author, interested in being a guest on the show, please click on the home base link in the description or go to sarahnicolas.com and click on the podcast logo in the sidebar that is Sarah with an H and Nicolas with no H. Thank you so much for listening and we'll see you next time.