



Unfortunately...
You'll Fall Down

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Hosts: Mona West and Courtney Floyd

Guest: Saratoga Schaefer

Theme Music: "Bad Scene" by Podington Bear. Licensed under a

Mona West: Welcome to *Unfortunately*, a podcast about fiction, failure, and moving forward. I'm Mona West.

Courtney Floyd: I'm Courtney Floyd.

[Music: A bluesy piano progression with a distinctive drum beat]

Mona: Today, we're talking with Saratoga Schaefer. They have a background in PR, marketing, content creation, film, and art, and have been writing stories about murder for as long as they can remember. Saratoga's debut novel, *Serial Killers Support Group*, is an adult thriller that will be published by Crooked Lane Books on March 18th, 2025, coming up soon. In addition to telling stories and acting as an alcohol-free ambassador, Saratoga climbs rocks, teaches yoga, and hikes mountains. Welcome. Thrilled to have you.

Saratoga Schaefer: Thank you so much. I'm excited to be here.

Courtney: That's such a cool bio. Every time I hear or see your title, I'm just like, "Yes, sign me up." March 18th can't come here soon enough.

Saratoga: Thank you so much.

Courtney: To kick us off with an icebreaker, today our question is, "what is a failure that you're proud of?" I will go first, just for fairness' sake. I was recently working through my copy

edits, and as a neurodivergent person, sometimes I get a little bit hung up on things I *should* do, rules, or expectations. So this idea of correct grammar comes up in copy edits a lot. But I stuck to my aesthetics and kept my Oxford commas, which are not grammatically incorrect but are against the house style.

But also, just my sentence fragments, my onomatopoeia “oohs,” and whatever, my random all-cap letters in some of my ghost conversations. So failed to maintain correct grammar, but succeeded with my aesthetic. What about you, Saratoga?

Saratoga: I love that. I love yours. I will go to the moon and back for the Oxford comma, so I really feel that deeply and strongly.

Mona: Oxford comma crew representing. Awesome.

Saratoga: I can't even deal with not having it. It really freaks me out, so I feel that deeply. I guess my failure is not 100% writing-related, but it kind of is because I wasn't able to fully commit to writing and publishing until I got sober, which was a whole process that involved lots of starts and stops and hills and valleys until it finally clicked about five and a half years ago.

When I look back at that relationship with drinking, part of me wants to call it a failure, but I can't fully because getting sober is the best thing that's ever happened to me, and it's something that I'm obviously very proud of, even if it took a while. SO when I was drinking, I guess we could maybe consider that a failure, but I feel like there's no failure in struggles, just like there's no failure in choosing yourself. That's my largest, biggest one.

Courtney: I love that.

Mona: Thank you for sharing that. Congratulations. That is a big accomplishment, and I think it's amazing to hear people talk through it and give themselves compassion as they're going through it and also working towards that light at the end of the tunnel. Awesome. Congrats.

Saratoga: Thank you.

Mona: My failure recently that I am proud of is coming to this realization that it is okay to fail at things I can control. It's really hard to fail when it's out of your hands, like receiving a rejection from a magazine, but there's all these rules that are self-imposed, like you have to write every single day, you have to do X, you have to do Y in order to really be a writer, and you have complete control over that. Sometimes you're just not going to do it.

I don't write every day. I don't write a certain number of words each time I sit down, even though that's what a lot of the rules say you should do. And it's actually okay. It hasn't negatively impacted my love of the craft, and it hasn't negatively impacted the quality of the work. It's okay to fail at those things that you think you're expected to do if it doesn't actually

end up aligning with your workflows or your personality or your neuro-spiciness. It's okay, and it's good to give yourself that permission.

Saratoga: I love that. I feel like so often it's like, "Oh, let's let go of the things that we can't control and really focus on the things we can control." Sometimes we can't even control those. It's good to give ourselves grace in those times.

Mona: And I think we can absolutely reframe it, too, as it's actually still a degree of control. I am choosing to reprioritize other things, or I am just choosing today I'm not in the mood and I'm not going to do it. It can feel like you're failing and you're out of control, but you're making a choice that is to your own benefit. It's good to listen to those voices in the back of your head and really respect what they're trying to say because they know you best.

Saratoga: Yes, totally.

Mona: We're in an industry where so many of our efforts and failures are invisible, where it's easy to think of people as overnight successes when it may have taken decades to arrive. In the interest of making some of that invisible work more visible, can you briefly tell us where you are in your writing journey and what you did to get here? You did share a little of this in your icebreaker, and we would love to hear more.

Saratoga: Definitely. My debut novel is being published on March 18th, 2025. That was a very long process. I started writing when I was a kid. Writing and stories have always been a part of my life in a big way, but I lost sight of that for a while when I was younger. Like I said in my icebreaker, I was more focused on drinking than I was at writing during that time, but I was able to come back to it.

Although *Serial Killer Support Group* is my debut, it's not even close to being my first book. It's actually my seventh. I had three books die on sub with a previous agent. I've been working at getting traditionally published for over six years, and I've been pretty steadily writing full-length novels for a decade. I am not one of those people whose first book sells at auction within one week after 45 offers of rep.

I had to work really hard to get here, all while also working a full-time job at day jobs and just hustling to make ends meet. I think I'm one of those writers who has a long career trajectory, maybe like a slow burn, but I'm okay with that because I'm nothing if not persistent.

Mona: It's paid off, I think, and really looking forward to your debut. One of the things that you mentioned in your interest form when you expressed interest in coming on the podcast was about your framework for failure and this idea of falling forward in the context of this experience you've had where you've actually-- there's so much that's happened prior to *Serial Killer Support Group's* acquisition and getting ready for publication. Tell us more about this framework and what you mean by falling forward.

Saratoga: A while ago, I decided to remove the word and concept of failure from my vocabulary because failure sounds really heavy to me, really final. I've always been someone who struggled with mental health and embracing that idea of failure feels dangerous to me. Instead, I think of "falls." Falls don't sound as scary, especially as a rock climber. You get used to them. You're like, "Great. Okay, I fell." Once you hit the ground, you have a chance to get back up, dust yourself off, and keep climbing.

For me, that reframe of "failures" to "falls" helps keep me motivated instead of getting stuck in that finality of failure. In falling forward, that's a phrase that I had used in the recovery community, was something that was shared with me pretty early on that was helpful because in the concept of like, for example, if you're trying to stay sober and you slip and you drink, framing it as a fall forward – so something to learn from, even though it's maybe not so great - is more helpful than being like, "Oh, God, I failed. There goes all my hard work. Everything is awful. Everything went down the drain. Woe is me."

Same thing with writing. Like, okay, you got rejected. Your book flopped. Your agent fell down a well or something. It sucks and it hurts.

Mona: That's a fall that does hurt but-- [laughs]

Saratoga: Yes, it's not great, but if we think of it as just a failure, what are we really gaining there? Whereas if we can reframe it, think of it as a fall forward, we can learn to take something useful from the experience to inform future decisions. In that way, we're turning something negative into a positive and being able to move forward. Reframing it in that way has been incredibly helpful to keep me moving instead of just staying stuck in that failure.

Courtney: That's really cool. One reason that I love this podcast so much is because I realize how different people's perspectives are. I'm realizing in the moment, and I don't know if I was making faces or not, but that I've never thought of failure as final. I think of it as something really iterative, but that makes so much sense that it's sort of this stamp that happens, that decides your fate forever, that people might be approaching it that way.

This reframe is such a cool way - it also made me think of roller derby, which I failed to be a roller derby person in part because I can't process information as quickly as the roller skates work, so that was terrifying - but falling is a really important part of your training in roller derby, and I guess in lots of sports, how to fall safely and falling is this inevitable thing that happens, and it's just part of the process of doing the thing. I think that's such a cool approach to something that happens to all of us in the writing career, but the words we use for it can be really powerful in enabling or preventing us from moving forward.

Mona: I am fascinated by this. I love this philosophy a lot because the way I've often thought about failure is as a bunch of just discreet moments. A story gets a rejection, that is a snapshot of that story's life in that context that is now a failure, and I'm going to move on to the next snapshot and maybe that will also be a failure. Even so, even if there's no finality to

it, I'm still stacking those failures, one on top of the other, and eventually they start to become so heavy that it really starts to get you down.

Reframing it like that can make it feel almost like-- to take the metaphor even further, when you're falling, you still have momentum. You're still moving forward and you still have momentum in whatever direction you're trying to go. Every time I've taken any kind of physical class-- like, I tried doing aerial yoga and it was horrible-- but the first step was teaching us how to fall. We are taught to do it. It's a principle that it's important to know how to do this to protect yourself.

I think maybe if we did a better job of teaching it in this way to people early on, it might not be so hard down the line when you start experiencing failures. Especially when you're doing a lot of this writing on your own-- it's interesting, I think we all default to thinking things are failures and then we have to work to reframe them into different things, if that makes sense. Saratoga, you had to reframe it from failure. I wonder why we always start at the most extreme and have to train ourselves out of it.

Saratoga: It's not really something that's built-in. Like you said, with the sports analogy here, it's like when you're learning how to boulder, you learn how to fall, like you said, so how to fall safely. The first time you fall, you don't throw up your hands and you're like, "All right, well, I failed. I'm done. Time to leave and never do this again." It's part of the process of learning how to do it. I think it just becomes so large in our minds that we struggle to really, I don't know, bring some kind of grace to it for ourselves.

For me, I tend to feel things very intensely and I have a very black and white way of thinking of things, so I *had* to learn how to reframe that because otherwise, it was like, "Oh, I really failed. This is it forever. Nothing will ever get better. This is the failure. I am the failure." It became necessary for my survival as a person to make that change. I totally agree that, I think if there was a version of that that's more accessible for people earlier on, it would be way-- maybe not easier, but a little bit gentler on our systems when we do experience those falls or failures.

Mona: I wonder what that would look like because in order to learn how to fall, you have to practice. How do we teach writers how to do that? Do we [give] mock rejections? I wonder what-- If we were to take this to its logical conclusion and have this hopefully be a new way of thinking about this thing that affects all of us in such a negative way, I just wonder how we go about teaching it because it's going to require negative things to happen to be able to learn how to learn from it and live with it.

Saratoga: I think it's built in a little bit in the industry, too. I wish there was maybe a more streamlined, maybe kinder way to do it, but I do think querying as a process is like that. You are going to get rejections. It's pretty rare to be querying and never get any rejections or immediately get an agent. It happens and we hear about it, but it's rare. I think the average writer is kind of learning that as they go.

Then I think of things like [r/PubTips](#) on Reddit where you're having a little bit of that mock rejection. You're posting your query letter on there and other writers or other people in the Reddit are-- maybe sometimes kindly-- but ripping it apart a little bit. I think that's the version of that, that [the work] it's not complete yet. You're still workshopping it, but it's before it goes out into the real world, so there's a little bit of that mock trial aspect to it too, but it's hard. It's the industry where you just have to start failing to learn.

I think because of that, you have to know that going in, because I think a lot of people maybe don't because they do see all the success stories and maybe their friends have a different experience than them. So when they go in and they're not having that same experience, it's like, "Oh, oh, this is bad." So I think maybe more of that leveling the field, making this stuff a little bit more transparent and just getting in there and doing your research and knowing what to expect can help too.

Mona: I would love to see more transparency and openness about failures. We're doing our little part here with the podcast and are so appreciative of everyone who's come on and shared their stories, but it's hard to find. It's hard to find people's rejection numbers. It's hard to find people talking about the real struggles. So you can feel like there's these rose-tinted glasses and for some reason, you can't see the rose tint and everyone else can. In reality, we're pretty much all in the same boat.

I hope that people continue to share their stories and continue to talk about the realities of what this is like so we can normalize it and learn from each other. This falling-forward philosophy, I think this is going to help a lot of people. I would imagine they're going to hear this and it's going to make a big difference in how they perceive the negative things that come out of this work. I think that's just really, really cool.

You mentioned before too how this whole process has affected your mental health and how switching your perspective to falling forward helped a lot, but this is the seventh book. That is a long journey and you have also been through a lot with the history of alcohol use. How has all of this taken together-- What impact has this had on your mental health as you've gone through it and if you don't mind sharing, where are you now compared to along the way?

Saratoga: Mental health has always been a challenge for me, but I, at this point, have been through so many different types of therapy that I'm pretty self-aware. Knowing my response to these types of things and how I calibrate that is really helpful. I know how to temper my responses now. For me, everything's about protecting my mental health and the work I've done to get healthy. That doesn't mean avoiding risks or ignoring those falls and failures, it just means I have to do the work to process them and move through them in a healthy way.

I tend to feel things, especially like rejection extremely deeply and intensely. The more you know about yourself, the more you can mitigate that response or at least give yourself the space and time needed to move through it. I think all of my experiences and everything that I've been through have lent themselves to be fairly helpful at this stage of my life, but I do

think, especially with being a debut author, that level of stress and anxiety can sometimes be extremely overwhelming.

Courtney: Agreed. I think that might be a good segue into my first question for you. This is something that I'm really looking forward to having conversations about this season as I debut myself this year. It's such a moment of huge success, especially from an outside perspective, but I think there are hidden pitfalls or struggles. Could you talk a little bit more about how you've navigated that and what did you expect going into your debut year? What have been maybe the surprisingly hard or challenging aspects that you didn't know might be coming?

Saratoga: I think there are a ton of pitfalls that people maybe don't know about before you become a debut. The constant advice I see from already published authors to [debut authors] is to try to let stuff go and really enjoy your debut year because you only get one, which is absolutely great advice and really hard to do. Really, really hard to do. I see people, including myself, losing it over reviews, ratings, marketing, social media, a million other tiny things we could never control and shouldn't hope to, and there's so much pressure.

On top of that pressure, some don't get paid enough for the work they did to write the books and then continue to promote them afterwards. To be an author nowadays, especially to be a debut or emerging author, you have to be a social media expert, a marketer, a publicist, an event coordinator, an HR director, a little bit of a tax accountant, and of course, an author. You need to write more books and hopefully sell more books. It's a lot of work just for someone to rip apart your book while hiding behind a computer screen.

All of that pressure and all of that work, both internally and externally, is enormous. I think that's why a lot of emerging writers and debuts really struggle with navigating those pitfalls and navigating things like mental health. For me, it doesn't mean that it's not all worth it. It's definitely all worth it for me because this is what I want to do, this is my dream, but I do think it means that you have to either have or learn to develop a certain type of mental fortitude because it can get really intense.

Courtney: Nobody will see this because this is not a video podcast, but I've been nodding intensely this whole time. Mona has a hand raised, so I'll pause.

Mona: Oh, no. You go first and then I'll add my thought.

Courtney: The thing that struck me was that the resources that I was given as a brand new [author] right after my book deal was signed for debut year, were all marketing-focused. There was nothing about managing your well-being or wellness or taxes, for example, which threw me for a huge loop and I'm still in the process of figuring out. There are so many pieces of this that you have to learn as you're doing them. Also, it all feels like life or death. If you don't get it right, will you still have a career?

The thing that I have been doing is collecting examples of people whose careers I really

admire who did not hit it big in their debut year because I just need that reassurance. I think finding those ways to really take care of yourself and prioritize your wellness and ease the pressure has-- I think if I hadn't been prepared to do that by past extremely stressful circumstances, grad school, for example-- I don't know how I would be doing. Even with that experience and knowing how to take care of myself better than I would have 10 years ago, it's hard. It's incredibly hard behind the scenes.

Mona: That answered my question, basically. Do the publishers, the agents, and the editors provide any psychosocial support as you're going through all of this? Do they give you even just a list of what to expect? "Here's a checklist of the things that you're expected to learn about and expected to know now that you're in this position." It sounds like, Courtney, for you, that's a no. Saratoga, did you get anything like that from your publishers? If you're comfortable sharing.

Saratoga: Yeah, my publisher did give me a checklist. It wasn't necessarily like a "This is now your state in life" checklist. It was more of a "welcome checklist," a "marketing checklist," like, "here are some of the things you can be expected to do." It was a pretty comprehensive document, and I'm someone who wants all the information so I found that really nice and really helpful. In terms of emotional support, I have lucked out that I have an extremely amazing agent. She is really helpful and stuff like that. I feel like part of a good agent's job is talking your writers down off the ledge when they're getting very amped up and activated. I think that can be some support, too.

I do really think that to a certain extent, it's not really your editor or your agent or your publishing house's job to manage your expectations or your mental health. I think that's really on you as an individual. I'm a big proponent of therapy of any kind, and I think if it's accessible to someone, especially someone going into their debut year, really, really just find a therapist. That's what you need. You can get support from the career side of things from the people you've partnered with, which is awesome, but you need to take care of yourself as well. The way you do that is through mental health professionals.

Courtney: 1000%. I should say that my editor has been fantastic about explaining things as we get to them and when I ask questions, and my agent is incredibly supportive. I 100% agree, 1000% agree, as I said already-- numbers are not my forte, as you can tell-- that your emotional well-being is not your publishing team's responsibility. Ideally, they care about you, recognize that you're a human and don't speak or interact with you without regard to your feelings, but also, it's not their job to make sure that debut is an emotionally fulfilling experience for you.

Mona: I actually disagree a little bit on that point. I think you are being welcomed into this big new world that can be really scary, and I think it's easy for the people who are already in it to maybe even forget what it might have been like. I don't think that's a reason not to try to offer support. I'm just speaking-- in my job, I work in healthcare, so it's a very different world. But in

healthcare there is a lot of mental illness among the people who are working there in addition to among the patients, of course.

It's always a big contentious point when the healthcare organization doesn't offer support because so many people really struggle in the job and feel like they're tossed to the wind in order to find their own support because it's hard to find a therapist. Insurance is weird and mental health services are often not covered. I think having organizational support, even in the form of "here's a list of therapists" or "here's a list of resources that you could use," might actually be worthwhile.

It's not their job to make sure that your mental health is one way or another, but I think that there's nothing stopping them from at least providing explicit mental health resources for people right out the gate. I can't imagine there are very many people who start in this new world and don't struggle to some degree. It would be naive to think that's not something to consider when bringing someone in. I don't know if that's a controversial opinion, but I do think that there is a little bit of responsibility when it's so likely that this is going to be something that people struggle with.

Saratoga: I agree with that. I think that it's also indicative of a systemic issue in publishing because it's so challenging for the people coming in. But I think it's also challenging for the people who are working at that level in publishing. Many publishing houses and so many editors are just so overworked and slammed and underpaid. I think it's difficult to even think about that mental health aspect of like, "Oh, we should offer this to our authors," where it's like everybody's drowning in manuscripts and paperwork and contracts and everything.

It's not that it's not important. I think it's just so hard to get any air to even think about doing that. When you look at other industries, they'll offer employee assistant programs, or they'll offer mental health benefits, or something can be done individually that can help people. I think it'd be great to see the publishing industry start to work with some of that. I wouldn't be surprised if they have that internally for some internal employees, but to a certain extent, the author publishing house relationship is a relationship, it's also a partnership. It would be good to see maybe some of that get extended to authors as well.

Courtney: I think what you're describing, Mona, is something that I think would be amazing to move forward. When I say it's not somebody's job to make sure that I, in particular, I'm having a good mental health experience in my debut year, I think I was thinking about that burnout and the fact that very few people that I'm interacting with in the publishing world are making living wages or if they are, it's taken them so long to get there and they're probably incredibly burnt out.

I also think further complicating this is that talk therapy in particular, it couldn't be the only resources getting recommended because that can be, like, for autistic people, for example, that can actually be incredibly harmful, or if you have specific kinds of trauma, specific kinds of talk therapy can re-traumatize you instead of helping you. There's so much nuance in this

that I think raising awareness and normalizing the fact that you should be seeking support and that there are resources for it, I guess I would like to see people exploring ways to do that in a supportive way.

For me, I think at the agency level is where it makes a lot of sense because you do have such a closer relationship with your agent potentially in an age where the concept of the “house author” that you publish with the same publisher forever is such a rare thing. Sorry, I'm rambling today.

Mona: No, that makes sense. You're right, it's an idealized idea of what kind of changes might be most advantageous for everyone involved, but it is ideal state. Healthcare in this country is a nightmare. We don't even have to start that conversation regardless of who you are. It also makes me wonder if those resources exist, maybe not linked to any particular agency or publisher or whatever, but we have query websites with lots of resources for querying [like [M. Stevenson's site The Querying Hub](#)]. We have the [Submission Grinder](#) for lots of information about submissions. Is there a writer wellbeing website that just collects information and lists it off? Like, if you need a psychiatrist who can prescribe medicine; if you need a therapist, these are the types of therapies that are available; if you're having a hard time, you can just click there and at least get an idea. The other thing that I think happens among folks who are in artistic work, it's even harder to access healthcare because often people aren't associated with a particular employer. A lot of people are working on their own. Any resources we could provide I think would be beneficial. Maybe that's something that someone somewhere can start considering doing, just aggregating all the information that we can because we're all struggling.

Saratoga: I love that idea. As you were saying that, I was also thinking that I've seen a lot of writers asking and/or looking for therapists who specifically understand the publishing industry, which I think would be another great thing to add to that aggregation of information, is people who specifically work with creatives or work within, or at least understand some basic level of the publishing industry.

My current therapist doesn't, but she's wonderful. She's still supportive, but I'm also having to explain things because she doesn't have an understanding of this industry. I think having that specialized lens is super helpful too.

Mona: Absolutely. Actually, now the wheels are turning. I think we should just start a Google spreadsheet and start dumping information. Anyone who's listening, who has any information or interest in participating, just reach out because so many people are going to benefit from this. You've, Saratoga, spoken a lot about your personal experiences, your personal mental health journey. For full transparency, I've been in therapy, I've experienced depression. Lexapro is my favorite thing on the planet. I think it's a very almost universal thing both because of the state of the world in general and because of the nature of the work that we're doing.

Saratoga: I'm not sure I know anyone who's just like, "I'm totally chill about this." If you are out there, let's be friends and give me some of your energy. I think in general, that's not really the case.

Mona: If you're out there, I want to know what weird genetic mutation or something you have to be able to exist like that. So jealous. I think just shedding more light on the mental health impacts of this is so important because it's isolating enough to be a writer as we've discussed multiple times on the podcast, but it's even more isolating to be experiencing mental health crises and having anxiety, having depression, even having neurodivergence, being autistic or having ADHD and trying to navigate this world.

It just makes things harder. I know that these populations, they're highly represented in the creative communities. We've got to find ways to support each other and help each other get through. I love this conversation. This is really, really important.

I do though, want to switch gears a little bit. We have talked a lot about failure, falling forward, mental health. Do you, though, feel successful? What are the things that have to you been a success? How do you mark your successes? Also, I'm curious because of how you frame failure as falling forward, do you have different ways of looking at success as well or defining success?

Saratoga: That's a great question. I think with writers, the goalposts are always moving. Add to that generational imposter syndrome and maybe struggles with your mental health and you get an inability to luxuriate in success or even acknowledge it. Again, this is something I am actively working on with my therapist because my initial instinct to good news or any kind of success is immediately, "Don't celebrate, don't get too excited. This can all go away in the blink of an eye," which is of course a defense mechanism.

If we don't allow ourselves to learn to celebrate the good, soon all we see is bad and that is exhausting. It's really important to flag successes even if you have to start small with them, which is what I'm currently trying to do. I give myself a timeframe to essentially celebrate or allow myself to feel hope or excitement or happiness. Then when that timeframe is up, I compartmentalize it and put it away.

In that way, it's a safe way of almost like micro-dosing success for myself so that I'm able to access some of that without getting really, really overwhelmed or without going really far the opposite direction and immediately diving into my innate natural instinct, I guess, to be very jaded, and afraid, and negative.

Mona: That makes me think about the time that we spend in these different frames of mind. You talk about micro-dosing success, but we're certainly not micro-dosing the other stuff. I wonder if we were to somehow take stock of the way we're utilizing time and cognitive energy, what percentage of that is the bad and what percentage of that is the good and how can we expand the good? The fact that there has to be a concerted effort to identify the good and

allow yourself to enjoy it is so telling. Why is it like that? That's my question.

Saratoga: [laugh] It's just a weird thing our brains do. I think it's definitely this self-defense thing we have where we're like still going back into that little primal animal brain where it's like, "But there's danger coming. When's the danger going to come, and how are we going to escape the danger when it arrives?" It's like those moments in the sun are nice, but you can't linger there because there's a saber-toothed tiger behind that tree and you've got to run.

Mona: Gosh. It's so interesting and frustrating that this is how so many of us are wired. You're right, I think it goes back so far evolutionarily that it's almost impossible to break that. The best therapist, the best medications can give you tools to identify it and give you tools to find those good places and allow yourself to stay there, but it's still work. We have to put in work to feel good about what we're doing.

I just wonder if there would be a way to reframe the successes the way you've reframed failure to allow you to see that differently and see that as a more ongoing thing, or at least experience it in parallel to the failures, as opposed to these little interruptions in the negativity. I don't know what that would look like, but I think--

Saratoga: I think that's one of those things that where some of those tools you're talking about with therapy and mental health stuff, some of those tools can come in handy with that, of learning to be in two things at once. Being in maybe a state of discomfort, but also having the space to see the good or see the successes. That's really, really hard. It's super uncomfortable. It's very strange to have two warring emotions or experiences going on at the same time, which is why I think as humans, we tend to default to one or the other because we want one thing because that feels safe and that feels understandable, but that's not always life.

A lot of the times we are experiencing hundreds of different things every day that are all piling up into judgments that we assign, to, "This is good, this is bad, this is success, this is failure." Learning to sit in all of that at once is challenging and really difficult, but is super, super rewarding because you're giving yourself that space. Then this goes into tactics of mindfulness and gratitude.

Gratitude practice is something I try to do every single day to rewire that brain a little bit of not going immediately into saber tooth tiger attack, but more like, I'm so grateful that I have berries today and the sun is out and things like that, where you're trying to actively reframe things and rewire your brain in that way so that you can sit in both and you can experience both, even when it's a little weird and uncomfortable.

Courtney: Absolutely. I think as part of that, at least for me, part of opening up more space for gratitude and for just savoring where I'm at right now has been limiting the negative input. I learned to do this in grad school because I was teaching and student evaluations every term would just completely gut me. Some offhand comment that somebody made because it's the

end of term and they're cranky and it's really nothing about me or my class would just destroy me.

At some point, I realized I don't have to process that. I can have my partner sort through these for me and pass along the constructive things and the good things. Doing some filtering or asking for help filtering out some of that negative input so that you can use more of your processing capacity. Wow, I'm making us sound like computers, but to really focus on the good or at least the growth areas has been a game changer for me.

Mona: One thing that I've done that has been helpful, I'm a very visual person, and I'm also a little bit impulsive and I really like stuff, like knickknacks. When I've had little successes, I have marked them with an object. I get the satisfaction of buying the object, finding just the right one. I'm buying a pin for every story I publish. And actually this year, I started a new thing where I'm buying a sticker to represent every story I get to a publishable state because I've had no acceptances in the last year and it was starting to weigh me down. I needed to find something else to celebrate.

Finishing a story to me is still a success. That comes with other little successes: the feeling of buying it, the excitement of getting it in the mail, and then I have little frames that I stick them in and I can look at them at any time. They're little reminders of the progress that I'm making. Even doing that, having a visual reminder of the little successes can be nice because when I'm really down in the dumps, I can just look over to the side and see the sticker frame of all these things that I've written.

It's like, well, I actually am still moving forward. I actually am still accomplishing things. I found that to be a helpful way to interrupt a little bit of that cycle. I think people finding different ways to do that, it's obviously not going to be one size fits all, but it's an important piece of this.

Saratoga: I definitely agree. I think those are both really good, kind of complimentary but different enough, if you have a different brain to be able to pick one, choose your own adventure, pick the thing that works for you and play around, I think, and find what works and leave the rest.

Mona: It's okay to reward literally anything in whatever way. Finishing a story, sitting down and writing, and rewarding yourself for doing that. If you thought it was going to be hard and you did it anyway, it's okay to feel good about anything that we do, no matter how small it might be. It's okay to take that and hold onto it. Doesn't have to be a big "success" to matter.

Courtney: This feels like a pivot back to-- We're in this happy moment in the conversation. Saratoga, you mentioned that you had experienced changing agents and for a lot of writers, especially earlier in the journey, that sounds like a failure, but I think the further I've gotten, the more it's become a normal thing. It's just part of a writing career. Can you talk a little bit about your experience with that? What it felt like in the moment, how it's affected your falling forward momentum, anything along those lines?

Saratoga: Definitely. I wasn't expecting it. It happened over email and it also happened to happen immediately after the end of something toxic in my personal life. I was just not having a good week. I was having a really intense week of big life changes, but it was for the best. Five to six months after that, I ended up writing *Serial Killer Support Group*, which ultimately landed me with my agent, Amy, who is wonderful. Then obviously that's the book that landed me my debut deal.

I wouldn't have had it any other way. I'm really grateful for that whole first experience that querying, being agented, getting a glimpse at the industry, everything throughout that experience taught me a lot, but at the time it felt like a big failure. I was not well with it. You work so hard to get an agent but then to have books die on sub and then to have to start again and go back into the querying trenches. It was a really intense situation for me. It was very much like, "Can I even do this? Am I terrible at this? Is it worth it? What's going on?"

I know myself and I knew that I needed to give myself that time to essentially just be dramatic and upset and then go, "Fuck it, I'm over it. Time to get going. I got work to do." My mindset then and now is that every part of this journey with all of these ups and downs and all these hills and valleys has led to something remarkable, even if it's not in the direction I wanted it to go. Who am I to start questioning that now when everything has led to situations that ended up being really informative and helpful, even if it didn't go in maybe the ideal way?

Mona: Obviously, we don't know what the future holds. It's incredible that you have this deal and you have this amazing-sounding book coming out, but you didn't know at the time that this was all going to happen. I think being here now and looking back at the journey and saying it all led to this moment is a wonderful thing to be able to do. But in the moment when it was really hard, what were the things that kept you going despite those setbacks?

Saratoga: It's interesting because I kind of had that sense then too where I was like-- I had a little moment where I was like, "You know what, if this is what I have to go through to get to where I want to be, even if this is just the first or second step on a really long journey that's going to be kind of painful and really challenging and it's going to involve a lot of hard work," I was ready for that and I made a little deal with myself and was like, "Okay, I accept it. If this is what has to happen, I accept that, and let's keep going. Let's do the work and let's see what happens."

That mindset is a little unusual for me because like I said, I tend to go a little bit more towards the negative, fearful, not super hopeful side, but I think I was just ready for a change and ready to start seeing some traction in a career I had worked at for a really long time with not much traction. I think I was just ready for that, and holding onto that idea of, even if it was a little woo-woo, or not undefined or whatever, I was willing to latch onto that and be like, "Okay, cool. This is the deal. Let's do it."

Courtney: That's so cool to hear. In a lot of my writing groups recently, the idea of optimism or just being generally just believing that it's going to work out has been coming up a lot. It's

not a popular stance. Writers have embraced this picture of ourselves as cynics or whatever, but I think there's something really essential about just believing that things are possible and that you can get there.

I've just been reflecting on that a lot because I think all throughout the stages of my debut journey, I've just had this, "Okay, this is the book that's going to get me my agent. And if that's all it does, then maybe that's all it's meant to do, but it will still be important."

Saratoga: I totally agree with that, especially about it being maybe not the super popular choice right now. I would also just say for people who find that really, really hard, I go through periods of this too where I can't really root for myself and it's very difficult to be like, "This is going to be the one or this is going to be the moment or this is going to be a thing."

The tactic I tried is a little slight pivot where I put that energy on someone else in the community who I care about or who I want to see succeed. We're like this sometimes. Humans are weird. We oftentimes say things to other people that's a lot kinder than the stuff we say to ourselves. I would transfer all of that hope and goodness and energy onto someone else or a community or whatnot.

That became really, really good for my mental health because I wasn't really able to quite afford that to myself, but still having those happy, good, positive emotions for somebody else in my head ended up transferring over onto me, kind of like rubbing off. Once that started really sinking in, I'm telling you not even like a month later, that was when I got the call that I was going to be published. If it's difficult to do that for yourself, I totally get that, but you can start trying to push that energy out anyway and see what that does and see if that uplifts your mood or your mental health a little bit.

Courtney: I'm nodding a lot in the background, just for those of you who are listening, because I do the same thing. It's like reaching for optimism, whether it's on my behalf or someone else's, just keeps me in the habit of reaching. Some days I can grab it for myself, and some days all I can do is look at the wins of the amazing people that I'm lucky to be part of their community and believe that good things can happen, even if I don't feel like they're happening for me at the moment. It's made it muscle memory almost but in my brain.

Mona: It's like the saber-tooth analogy again. Maybe you're standing in the sun and enjoying that moment for yourself, but you know there's a saber-tooth nearby. But there's also a lot of other people around who can protect you from the saber-tooth. There's beautiful trees off in the distance that you haven't seen yet, but you'll be able to enjoy. There's so much goodness around us and it's so important to, I think, recognize that. I think it's amazing to be able to use that as a tool for helping yourself.

I think you've offered a lot of really, really excellent ways for people to think about these things. A variety of ways that people can reframe some of this negativity in a way that I think will be really, really helpful. Thank you so much for sharing all of this.

Saratoga: Of course. Hopefully, it helps someone.

Mona: It helped me.

Saratoga: That's good. I'm glad.

Mona: I think this is a good place to end.

Courtney: Saratoga, thank you so much for coming on and chatting with us. This has been fantastic. Could you tell our listeners where to find you online and what you'd like them to read or seek out or pitch a thing?

Saratoga: Sure. As I've mentioned, my debut *Serial Killer Support Group* is coming out March 18th. I'm super excited about it. If you like dark thrillers that have that psychological cat-and-mouse vibe with a bunch of creepy serial killing men, I highly suggest you check it out. I also have a couple of horror books that I'm hoping to get published.

If you are looking to connect with me, you can find me on social media. I'm @Saratogishere pretty much everywhere. I primarily use [Instagram](#) and [BlueSky](#) though. You can go ahead and find me there. I love to connect with other creatives. I hope to see some of you in the interwebs.

Mona: Awesome. Thank you, thank you. What a wonderful conversation.

Saratoga: Thank you so much for having me.

[music: A bluesy piano progression with a distinctive drum beat, which fades into the sound of a crashing train]

[00:57:18] [END OF AUDIO]