

QQQ Sarah Allen

[00:00:00] **Allen:** even if it was that I wasn't good enough , I knew that what that meant was that I just had to keep going and I would improve and my projects would get better and better.

[00:00:13] **Nicolas:** 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'm your host, author Sarah Nicolas and literary agent Sarah N. Fisk. Sarah Allen is a poet and author of Books for Young Readers. Her upcoming middle grade horror, the Nightmare House releases in August of 2023. Her first book, What Stars are Made of was an ALA notable book of 2020 and Whitney Award Winner and her second BREATHING UNDERWATER was a Junior Library Guild selection for 2021.

Born and raised in Utah. She received an MFA in creative writing from Brigham Young University and now lives in the Midwest. She spends her non-writing time watching David Attenborough documentaries and singing show tunes Too Loudly, and she's a lover of leather jackets, grizzly Bears and Colin Firth.

Hello Sarah. Welcome to the show.

[00:01:08] **Allen:** Hi, welcome. Thank you for having me.

[00:01:12] **Nicolas:** I was like, lover of leather jackets. You do not live in Florida. All right, so we're gonna talk about your journey to publication, and we're gonna start by going all the way back to the beginning. When did you first start getting interested in writing? And then how long did it take before you started getting serious about pursuing publication?

[00:01:33] **Allen:** Oh man. I've always wanted to be a writer. I am one of those kids that grew up obsessed with books and wanting to read, I remember the moment, I was 14 and it was in my grandma's backyard on her porch, , and I was like, wait a minute. I could actually write these books that I love so much.

Like that's a job someone has. I wanna do that. And ever since then I've wanted to do it. And I took creative writing classes in high school and middle school. and then I majored in English as an undergrad with the ultimate goal of, of writing. during undergrad and, just after undergrad, I would say, is when I really

got serious about putting words on the page every day and until I had a, my first completed novel, and researching the publication process and, querying and agents and all of that.

[00:02:22] **Nicolas:** All right, so now I'm gonna ask you to expand a little bit more on what you just said. How did you learn more about the publishing industry, like how it works, how to query all that different stuff?

[00:02:32] **Allen:** Yeah. I kind of developed and research, like I kind of came up as a writer in the prime age of blogging . So that was key for me. I followed dozens of author blogs and watched them go through their own journey and they would talk about the writing process all the time. Uh, both the creative side and the business side, the querying side.

So I was kind of seeing that happen for dozens of other authors in real time, watching them go through it and learning from them. And I think that was, probably the most valuable, thing I possibly could have done in trying to teach myself how to do it. I, I mean, I have an MFA and, and it both in undergrad and graduate school, they don't, they teach you wonderful things about writing, but they don't teach you about

the industry itself and the business side of things. I would say I definitely learned that from mostly blogs, , cuz that was the prime thing in my day. And then, and now, you know, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Twitter is huge, for, you know, following writers and, and seeing what they post and learning from their journeys.

[00:03:35] **Nicolas:** Yeah, I definitely came up in the blog time too.

[00:03:38] **Allen:** kind of miss those days sometimes.

[00:03:40] **Nicolas:** I feel like it was more peaceful.

[00:03:42] **Allen:** Yeah.

[00:03:44] **Nicolas:** So then what happened? Can you break down for us your journey from then to signing your first book contract?

[00:03:50] **Allen:** it was a long one. I. Was, I would say probably 21 when I wrote my very first book. it was an adult novel, about a zookeeper named George. And it was terrible. I was, I was very much coming out of academia and

trying to be serious and literary and, and all those things. And there are still things I love about that manuscript.

I love my George, the zookeeper guy. you know, maybe I will bring him back one day, but, I definitely just needed to get that book outta my system. I queried it widely, uh, got nothing. don't, I don't even know. I think I maybe got one request for 50 pages from my query letter. And now out of like the dozens and dozens of, of queries I sent, uh, and that was, that was about it. But I, I knew from my years, cause I had spent years reading those blogs before I started querying, so I, and I still look back and, a little cringey about how over eager and, and too, too quickly I went, through this process. Even, even knowing. But I did know some, I had followed and tried to learn from other writers.

So I knew a little bit about query letters and, and I knew, especially the key thing that I knew was. you gotta start working on the next thing. So I did. And as I was querying this first novel, I wrote, another novel about two girls on a road trip that ended up being breathing underwater. my second novel, , and I queried that one at the time as well.

uh, and again, dozens of rejections. I was probably up to hundreds of rejections from agents at this point. it didn't get anywhere. I think I got into pitch wars with that book. I, and I got a few agent requests, but no, no sealing of the deal . Uh, so it didn't, didn't go anywhere. So I wrote, again, I knew each, gotta keep going, so I wrote a Ya I wrote the next thing and that also didn't go anywhere.

So I had written three novels, just racking up these agent rejections. And that process took probably six or seven years. at that point I kind of thought, so I, uh, was born with the genetic disorder, Turner Syndrome, and I had never seen that in a book ever. I'd known from the very beginning that I wanted to write about it.

but I just hadn't. I was a little scared- mostly scared of my own lack of ability. I am, this was such a, this was a, this was an important thing. If I was going to sit down and actually write about this, I wanted to do it justice. I wanted to do the story right. this was about the time I went back for my MFA and I was studying with, Martine Levitt was a visiting professor at byu.

Anyone listening if you have not heard of or read anything by Martine Levitt, get thee to a bookstore or a library Now. She is amazing. She wrote, national book award-winning books. so I don't know why she's not more of a household name cuz she's fabulous. Her best one is,

calvin. Calvin is my favorite one. Anyway, so she was teaching at this university . and I was like, okay, look. If I'm gonna write this story, I have this professor to help me, now is the time to do it. You know, she can guide me through this kind of intimidating process. In her class, I started working on what stars are made of, and I a little bit cheated.

And I had my second manuscript that I had written breathing underwater. I morphed it into my graduate thesis. So I was working on both of those books in graduate school. I got the first bit of what stars were made of, finished in her workshop and she got me started on the right track for, the next year I finished it up and edit and finished revising it. and then I was ready to take that one out on submissions again. I queried for about a year on what stars are made of. Finally this was the one that I think I, I think probably cuz I was. Now finally writing from like my truest, most authentic experience. And so people were more interested. And so that book, I ended up getting four offers of representation from agents.

so I had four phone calls in one week, which was just like so crazy and surreal and I was like blown away. I had those calls. I picked my agent We revised for another few months. We went on one round of submissions and we got some overall feedback. And so we, we did one more round of submissions.

We went on or one more round of revision. We went on submission again. about a year later, uh, we had a book deal and, you know, best day ever . all in all, I, you know, I started writing my first book when I was, I think 21. And I, think I signed the contract for Stars when I was 29.

So it was almost a decade of querying and failing and, knowing from those blogs that you just gotta keep writing the next thing. And I, you just get, you get better and better as a writer and you. You get more and more experience about the industry and, and the querying process itself.

And so finally things lined up and now the book's on the shelves

[00:08:43] **Nicolas:** Awesome. What year was that, that you signed the contract? Do you remember?

[00:08:48] **Allen:** it was 2018, I signed the contract. and then Stars came out March of 2020, which was its own experience.

I'm on submission again with a picture book this time, so I, I'm curious to see how

[00:09:02] **Nicolas:** And you did switch

[00:09:03] **Allen:** on that as well. I did, mm-hmm. and I'm, I can talk about that if, if we'd like to

[00:09:07] **Nicolas:** talk very briefly about it, cuz I think it's one of the things I like to talk about here, cuz I think it's one of those things that we don't talk about very much in public and it happens to so many people.

[00:09:17] **Allen:** Yeah. I loved working with my first agent. She was a fabulous agent actually, and she did a really good job for me. Her, her contract negotiations were, Amazing. She crucially she found me, my home at McMillan and F s G with my editor, who sadly has also left since then.

I've worked with her up until just, just recently, on all my books, and she was amazing to work with. And so, you know, no regrets. it all worked out. But this agent had some personal things happen in her life and her, her response rate and communication was just really started to suffer.

I waited for a long time, you know, about a year of not hearing things and, and communication just kind of falling apart. and so as gently as I could, it was a very, very hard, hard decision. And I had, I wouldn't have been able to, Go through this without all these writer friends. And one in particular who had gone through multiple agents.

And so she walked me through the process of like, okay, this is what you say in the email. This is how you communicate it. so she walked me through that process. So after I had, for lack of a better term, broken up with that agent. I actually, went back to one of the, a, one of the other agents who had offered before.

even in initially it had been such a hard decision cuz I loved all these agents who had offered I went back to Rena Rosner, who's my current agent, and just absolutely incredible and a little bit, a little bit of, you know, a, a tail between my legs moment, . It was like, remember me?

You offered once upon time. what do you say? We still, you know, are you still still up for working together? And she thank goodness, uh, said yes. so now, now I'm very, very happily with her. And, you know, we just sold the next two books, so here we go.

[00:11:05] **Nicolas:** It's funny you see that cuz, not gonna lie as an agent, there are authors that I've offered to that went with other agents, but I'm just like praying, come back to me.

[00:11:15] **Allen:** That's, that's comforting to hear.

[00:11:18] **Nicolas:** All right. It is time for first Q of the podcast. Can you read your successful query letter for us?

[00:11:24] **Allen:** Absolutely. So this is for what stars are made of. This is, uh, the query I sent to Rena, my current agent. I'm seeking re representation for my 32,000 word middle grade contemporary. What stars are made of. This story will appeal to fans of RJ Palacio, Kate Messner and Gary Schmidt.

I've been fortunate enough to work with Amanda Hill and Cindy Baldwin on this manuscript, and they recommended I send a query to you. Libby age 12 has a rare genetic condition called Turner Syndrome. This means things like being born with an oversized heart, taking daily growth hormone shots, and not doing the monkey bars very well.

But it doesn't mean she won't get an A plus in biology or be a scientist when she grows up. Usually Libby doesn't think Turner's syndrome is that big of a deal. But then Libby's hero, her big sister, comes to town with a gigantic surprise. She's pregnant and she's staying with the family while her husband finishes basic training.

Libby knows all about the many things that can go wrong with a pregnancy like miscarriages or genetic disorders and oversized hearts. So Libby makes a deal with her other hero: overlooked astronomer, Cecilia Payne, who discovered what stars are made of. Libby imagines Cecilia as basically her guardian angel of science.

Libby promises to bring Cecilia the credit she deserves by getting her into the next edition of their textbook. If Cecilia will take care of things from the other side, if she'll make sure the new baby is born safe, healthy, and perfect with an Apgar score of 10. A plus in biology, see. But if Libby's going to get these textbook people to take her seriously, she's going to need more creativity and tenacity than she's ever needed in her life.

She won't give up though because failure means her sister could get hurt. Maybe hurt bad. Failure means the baby could be born damaged or messed up, like her. I have been published in the Evansville review, allegory, writers digest.com, and

have upcoming work in Cicada Magazine. I also received an MFA from Brigham Young University. Like Libby,

I was born with Turner's syndrome, hooray own voices, and the daily shots actually weren't too bad. Thank you for your time and consideration.

So there we have it

[00:13:20] **Nicolas:** you. So how has your experience been since signing that first contract? You mentioned switching agents, but was there anything else that kind of surprised you along the way?

[00:13:30] **Allen:** the key thing that I have learned since signing that contract, and this will probably be woven into my answers for , like for a lot of this discussion, is, You signed the contract, but you are still the driver of your career. So these people are, supporting you and helping you and there're as resources for you.

but when it comes to marketing, when it comes to school visits, when it comes to panels or podcasts or, or any of the other things that come with being a writer, when it comes to, the trajectory of your career, what genres you wanna go into, what age categories you wanna go into, you signed the contract, but that doesn't mean anybody above there is kind of your puppet master.

And, and for a long time, I kind of, honestly, I say that as like, as someone who maybe kind of wanted that. I was like, someone tell me what to do. Someone tell me like how to be an author and nobody's going to do that. you are working together, collaboratively on this project. but you are still kind of the driver of it.

You are still the one making key decisions about your career, putting in the effort on things, and then asking for things that you want and, and seeing if they'll work with you on that. So, and thankfully I feel like I've had, I've had just wonderful people that I've been working with, they are working with you, but you know, I've learned to be a little bit

bolder than I probably initially was as a new writer. And I think that's probably not unusual at all. I think we're all kind of wide-eyed and sparkly eyed when we start that we're like, yay, thank you for putting my book on the shelves. I also don't wanna lose that sense of awe and wonder and excitement about this industry, cuz it can, if you don't hold on to that, it can, it can wear on you pretty fast sometimes.

the hard parts of, of being a writer. But yeah, just owning your career. That's kind of been the main thing I've learned.

[00:15:23] **Nicolas:** It is time for the quick ground. I call it author dna.

Are you a pantsner or a plotter?

[00:15:30] **Allen:** Plotter.

[00:15:31] **Nicolas:** Do you tend

to be an overwriter or an underwriter?

[00:15:33] **Allen:** Definitely an underwriter. I have to add and explain every time

[00:15:38] **Nicolas:** Do you prefer to write in the morning or at night

[00:15:41] **Allen:** Late morning is my prime time,

[00:15:43] **Nicolas:** when starting a new project, do you typically start with character or plot or concept or something else first?

[00:15:49] **Allen:** concept and character pretty tightly wound together. And then plot is always like pulling teeth. That's where I struggle.

[00:15:58] **Nicolas:** Do you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:16:00] **Allen:** I don't drink either of those. I love peach flavored, sparkling water. That's my favorite.

[00:16:04] **Nicolas:** first. I've gotten a couple. Diet Cokes though.

[00:16:07] **Allen:** Yeah.

[00:16:08] **Nicolas:** When you're writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound?

[00:16:11] **Allen:** I like music. I love, uh, movie scores are my favorite to write to

[00:16:16] **Nicolas:** 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?

[00:16:21] **Allen:** I try to be a get it down person and I have to fight some get it right tendencies, but mostly you just try and get it down

[00:16:31] **Nicolas:** what tools or software do you use to draft.

[00:16:33] **Allen:** I have started Drafting by hand, pen, and paper, and then I type it up into Google Drive and then edit in word

[00:16:41] **Nicolas:** Do you prefer drafting or revising more?

[00:16:43] **Allen:** Revising. I love revising.

[00:16:45] **Nicolas:** Do you write in sequential order or do you hop around?

[00:16:48] **Allen:** Definitely sequential order. My brain is very linear.

[00:16:51] **Nicolas:** Final quick round question. Are you an extrovert or an introvert?

[00:16:54] **Allen:** I think I'm an ambivert. I need to swing from one to the other.

[00:16:59] **Nicolas:** All right. 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 do you feel like they were realized or you overcame them or, you know, how did they shake out.

[00:17:11] **Allen:** that's a really good question. I feel like having followed so many writer's blogs for so long, I kind of knew the pitfalls. I knew how many twists and turns a writing career can take. And so I had seen authors whose careers seemed to be collapsing, the next year come out with like five new books and, and pick things up.

And I had seen authors who seemed to be doing extraordinarily well kind of disappear. So I'd seen all these things. having said all that, my worry was that I wasn't gonna be able to write the variety of things that I wanted. I knew I was gonna face a lot of twists and turns, and I knew that it, a lot of it came down to determination and sticktuitiveness and.

That was my big worry when I was querying agents was will this agent let me write in a lot of different genres and a lot of different age categories, . So thank goodness, uh, that hasn't so far been an issue. not every time I have asked or like pitched a new proposal has it been accepted, but overall in general, I've been fortunate enough to work with people who are totally willing to help me do that and work in a lot of different categories.

[00:18:22] **Nicolas:** Nice. 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?

[00:18:32] **Allen:** I have started writing. Like I said, I've started writing by hand and I love moving around throughout the day. So I'll start in my bedroom and then I'll start in the office, and then I'll go to, the couch and then I'll go drive to Barnes and Noble or the library or just bring wherever and I've written at like the zoo before and just bring my notebook, and write in a lot of different places throughout the day.

And I don't know if that's completely unusual. I'm sure a lot of other writers do that, but I just like to change the background of my writing space throughout the day.

[00:19:09] **Nicolas:** That's fun. 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?

[00:19:17] **Allen:** what helped me a lot was seeing and watching other writers journeys around me, so I knew that really there's no stopping point. There's no end on the, the journey of writing, of being an author. Uh, you can go for as long or as short as you want to pursue it, and I knew this was all I had ever wanted to do.

because of watching all these different writing careers, I knew that in some ways it was a numbers game, that even if it was that I wasn't good enough at the projects I was pitching weren't good enough, I knew. . that what that meant was that I just had to keep going and I would improve and my projects would get better and better.

and the other side of that was even, even if the projects that I was pitching were good enough, and I hoped they were, you know, obviously you're not gonna be submitting and querying something you think is just mediocre. Uh, you know, we care about all these things that we're pitching, but I knew from following all

these other writers that A no, didn't necessarily mean that I wasn't cut out to be a writer, or that my writing sucked or whatever.

I knew that it was so subjective and that it really was about kind of the stars aligning and that that just meant that I just had to keep going until things lined up. I'd been told that and had seen that over and over again. And so just holding onto this idea that it really was a matter of time if I kept going, that I could make something happen, and I didn't know when or how, or how it would work, but I knew something would happen if I kept going, so I just held onto that

[00:20:57] **Nicolas:** 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 the same ones.

[00:21:05] **Allen:** I feel like what I would tell my younger author self, is kind of what I talked about before that we are in control of our career. We're not ever waiting for someone else to give us permission. And I don't know if that's necessarily a mistake cuz I, I think, we learn from all the experiences we have and I don't know if I would have really understood that in the same way without having gone through that.

but just being prepared. I would've wanted to tell myself, to be prepared to own your career and own your decisions and the effort you put in from the get-go. And, which that wasn't necessarily surprising, but I, I would've wanted to amp that idea up in my younger writer's self

[00:21:51] **Nicolas:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons, which you kind of already did, but if you wanna talk about more, uh, that you learned on your journey to publication.

[00:22:00] **Allen:** Yeah, absolutely. so, like I've said, it really is about owning our career and, and kind of making decisions. that is kind of the big thing I've learned. But the, the positive side to that is is that there really is no, stop sign. There's no, well, I've gone as far as I can go. If we are in

charge of our career, whatever's going on around us in our career, whether you're just starting out or whether you're, you've had several books published, then things aren't going as well as you think they, as you hope they would be. If we're in charge of our career, none of that ever needs to stop us, that we can pivot and we can be adaptable and bold and, make decisions and ask for the things we want. that is, a small piece of, I think of owning our careers, asking for the things we want. one of the coolest things that's ever happened to me as a

writer was getting Gary Schmidt to blurb my book. I love Gary Schmidt so much, and that happened, that was one of the first, times where I was like, you know what?

I'm just gonna ask for the things that I want and I really wanna see if Gary Schmidt will blurb this book. And so I asked my publishing team and they were like, sure, we'll, we'll, , we'll send this over to him and see if he's interested. And he was, and he did. And it, he, it was fantastic. And that came about because I pursued it.

And so that really is the ultimate lesson I feel like I've learned as a writer is be bold and pursue the things you want. And that also comes with a lot of humility and kindness too. I should add, I get tremendous pleasure in being the most pleasant person that anyone has interacted with that day.

I love being that person. But I think so often we see boldness and. Pleasantness and kindness as mutually exclusive, and they're totally not. Like those things can totally go together. You can happily and kindly and boldly pursue all the things that you wanna do as an author, and that's kind of the culmination of, I think hopefully what I've learned so far as an author

[00:24:01] **Nicolas:** Yeah. I always say there's no harm in asking, but you're right that asking is different from demanding or assuming that people owe you things.

[00:24:09] **Allen:** Exactly. and even if they want to do the thing that you've asked them to do, they might not necessarily be able to, and that's, that's not their fault. that just means you can be creative and adaptable and, and. Figure out new ways to pursue those things. And also hoping for the future that if this time that thing you wanted doesn't work out, that doesn't mean that it's a no forever.

You know, you can just keep writing and keep, pursuing these other projects and, and all those things, you know, could eventually line up for you.

[00:24:36] **Nicolas:** All right. I call this the acknowledgements portion of the podcast. 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?

[00:24:49] **Allen:** I love this question. I, I seriously love this question because it is so true that I would not have ever made it without a lot of different people. There's two main, I guess, organizations or groups, uh, that I've been a part of.

Uh, the first is Pitch Wars. I was in Pitch Wars in 2016 and even though I didn't get an agent from that, I

met a lot of amazing writing friends and writing people from that. Uh, for example, one of them, uh, one of those people is, is the author who helped me, navigate switching agents. Uh, so all of the like industry professionals, that I met in, in pitch wars. And just, and I know pitch wars isn't around anymore, but there's still tons of ways and tons of

avenues and platforms like that where you can learn from established writers, and that is just invaluable. I also go to the Storymakers Writers Conference every year in, in Utah, and I have met a lot of authors that way. And I love that conference so much. If you're looking for an amazing conference to go to, especially, well, I was gonna say, especially if you're starting out, but honestly, there's stuff for Every level of author there. it's my favorite conference of the year. And whether or not you can make it to that one, I highly suggest going to conferences. Uh, you're learning from established writers like I talked about with pitch wars, but at conferences you're also networking with and communing with authors who are at your same stage.

And so you can support each other and, cheer each other on as you are all kind of navigating the same steps together. And then also I will say now that I have been published and I'm a little bit into it, I still am in many groups, or I'm still talking with the people who debuted

[00:26:37] **Nicolas:** Hmm.

[00:26:39] **Allen:** in my year in 2020. So again, that's another way of networking with and communing with, authors who are at your same stage. I think that's crucially important. Learning from the Authors who are uh, few steps ahead of you, but also I, all these, there's a lot of things going on now that I feel so much more stable about and secure in, having this community of 2020 debuts that I've stayed in touch with that help each other and support each other.

[00:27:11] **Nicolas:** Yeah. I feel like a lot of the debut groups, they end up, you know, hanging out with each other for a long time. But I feel like 2020 especially, y'all have like a special sort of trauma bond from the pandemic.

[00:27:25] **Allen:** It's so true. I know. We've been, I, I still meet with a small group of us about every month and, I, I have another book coming out this year and in, in some ways, so both of my other books were pandemic books, and this

is the first book I have coming out where I can actually go to the bookstore and like do author events and all those kind of things.

So I'm super excited. In some ways it feels like a, a second chance debut,

[00:27:52] **Nicolas:** Can you tell us about the book you have coming out in August?

[00:27:56] **Allen:** Absolutely. My August book is called The Nightmare House, and it is about Penny Hope. she's a very anxious girl and she has a lot of nightmares. She's had nightmares for years, and in her nightmares she sees a monster or a man called the fear maker who reaches into people and steals their souls and leaves them with white blank eyes.

And the book starts when she sees these white blank eyes in real life. And so she has to find the fear maker and find out what's going on. And stop her nightmares from invading the real world. And it's my first horror novel. So I'm I, which I have always loved to read, and so I'm super excited to, to do a spooky middle grade

[00:28:42] **Nicolas:** Nice. Thank you for coming on the show, Sarah, and sharing your story with everyone.

[00:28:46] **Allen:** Absolutely. It's so fun to talk about all this.

[00:28:49] **Nicolas:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries, Qualms and Quirks. You can find the text of Sarah's query in the show notes along with links to find out more 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.

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