

# QQQ Esme Symes-Smith

[00:00:00] **Esme:** it was such a relief because like I had gone so long not getting anywhere and like not really knowing if it was me or the book or the moment or the agents.

[00:00:15] **Sarah:** Welcome to Queries, Qualms and Quirks, the weekly podcast that asks published authors to share their successful query letter and discuss their journey from First Spark to day of publication.

I am your host, author Sarah Nicolas and literary agent Sarah N Fisk. Esme Symes-Smith grew up in the southwest of England, got their degree in literature and creative writing in Wales, and now lives in Missouri with their wife and fur babies. Sir Callie is their first novel, so please welcome Esme to the show. Hello!

[00:00:44] **Esme:** Hello. Thank you for having me.

[00:00:46] **Sarah:** Yeah. Thanks for coming on. So we're gonna talk about your journey to publication today, and we're gonna start by going all the way back to the beginning. When did you first start getting interested in writing and how long did it take before you started getting serious about pursuing publication?

[00:01:01] **Esme:** I love that question cuz I feel like, getting serious about writing and getting serious about publication are two like super different things. So fun fact about me. I was the only person in my friendship group who did not want to be an author when they were very young. I wanted to be an emu farmer , but that didn't quite work out.

but I realized that I wanted to write, probably when I was 12 or 13, and I started reading a lot of fan fiction. it was amazing for me 'cause you know, you, you read these stories about the characters that you love so much and you realize that, oh, I can do that too. I have the power. and I love fan fiction because, You know, you can get so deeply into just the characterization or like just the, the plots.

You can really pick and choose what you like. and I remember reading something that made me feel real emotions. Um, like I got these like real physical feeling, like deep in my chest. I was like, Ooh, . That's amazing. I love that you can like, You know, real things can be created out of fiction. I was like, ah, man, I'm gonna do that too.

I like to manipulate people's emotions. Um, so that was when I decided , that I wanted to write. but I didn't get serious, serious, serious about publication until. , I was 21. so that was in 2013. And I just graduated university out of a degree of literature and creative writing. Ugh. Um, . And I just moved to America and I was feeling really depressed cuz I didn't know anyone and I was in Texas and I didn't drive.

And you have to be able to drive, especially in Texas. Sucked. Um, God, it was awful. And like I had this degree that I spent a lot of money on and no ideas and it sucked. Um, and then my wife told me about NaNoWriMo. I wrote the book and then I was like, Ooh, that's powerful. I finished a book, I'm gonna get it published and we'll get into that later.

But it was, it was 21 when I first decided that I wanted to be published.

[00:02:49] **Sarah:** Hmm. So how did you learn more about the publishing industry? Like how it works, how to query, how to go about everything?

[00:02:56] **Esme:** Yeah. Um, well, I've always lived my life online. so before I found Twitter, I was on the NaNoWriMo forums. it's not really about publishing, but it's, it's writers writing. It's writers doing the thing. inevitably there were gonna be some authors like seeking out publication, like working out what they're doing.

Um, and I made a lot of friends who were. Working out who they wanted to be and what they wanted to do with their writing. so that was kinda the first time I'd heard about like, the process of querying. but it wasn't until I really discovered Twitter that it felt possible because I feel like for publishing the rules are so intangible and vague.

Uh, you can't just Google like how to be published because you'll get a lot of junk . Um, so spending a lot of time online, especially on social media. With other authors doing the thing, authors who have like just done the thing or like approaching doing the thing was like the best education I could possibly have.

[00:03:54] **Sarah:** It's funny cuz I was talking to someone a while ago who had started the same time as me, 2007 I think. And we were saying that back then the trouble was finding the information cuz there just wasn't a lot out there. And now it's like trying to

[00:04:07] **Esme:** Too much information.

[00:04:09] **Sarah:** and what's a scam, you know?

[00:04:11] **Esme:** It's so true. And I, I feel like especially, post pandemic, all the rules have changed. So like , I don't know how people queering right now manage because you know, everyone a couple of steps ahead, their information is pretty much obsolete. Yikes.

[00:04:27] **Sarah:** So then what happened? Can you break down for us your journey from then to signing your first book contract?

[00:04:34] **Esme:** Yeah, absolutely. So, I wrote my first book in 2013, and a few months later I realized that you need to revise the damn thing. Haha uh, . So it was a lot of like working out how to do that because previously I was not an editor. I was not a reviser. I was the kind of student who would bang out their homework in a night and not look at it again and hope for the best and yeah, bad times.

but I realized that, you know, I actually need to make this chunk of words that I have just like thrown on a wall legible. so I. I re, I rewrote it and then I rewrote it again, and then I started to work out like, oh, you know, what is it? Because apparently agents need to know like what your genre is and like who your audience is, which honestly I think is super rude because I don't know, if I don't know, then nobody else needs to know.

sounds great. I remember, um, walking around the Target book section in like an Eyore funk, um, because that was where I spent most of my time. Um, this was before I could work, So I spent all my time in the target cafe with my wife who was a barista. and I remember just wandering around just feeling really miserable and like staring at the shelves

I was going like, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what I'm writing. I've written this thing, I've revised this thing. I spent like three years at this point on this thing and I dunno what it is. That's great. Love that for myself, because I've always grown up with like Philip Pullman books. You know, his dark materials.

What is his dark materials? Who knows? Is it sci-fi? Is it fantasy? I dunno. Is it for grownups? Is it for kids? I dunno. He doesn't need to know. Why do I need to know? But apparently if you're not Philip Pullman, you can't be Philip Pullman, which I think is really rude.

anyway, so at that point I had a pretty decent book, you know, all of the beta readers I had read it and loved it. Like really loved it. I was like, Ooh, this is good. This is exciting. and then I connected with an agent, and this was through my aunt, who is like a media lawyer, and she put me in touch with this agent and I was like, oh man, it's gonna be my brain. It's a good thing. This one's gonna come out, it's gonna be fabulous.

Um, and she read like my first few chapters and she was just like, oh yeah, let's have, like, you know, at that point it was like, Skype, let's, let's hop on Skype. I. Haha. Okay, I'm gonna have agents, it's gonna be amazing. And I get on and she's like, yeah, this is, this is really good, but what is it? I'm just like, what do you mean what it is?

It's right in front of you, . I dunno what it's, she's like, okay, go away and work out what it is, and then send it to me again. I was like, ah, dang that wasn't my big break, but okay, I'm feeling good. I'm feeling good. I can work it out. And at that point I was just like, You know what it's gonna be ya. Yeah.

Because that's what all the cool kids are doing and I'm definitely writing ya. Even though it was like a seven POV with like characters ranging from like in their forties to like eight . I was like, yeah, it's ya, it's totally ya, you know, whatever. It's fine. so I revised it again and I sent it over. And I got an email back and I was just like, oh man, this be my chance. This will be my break. It's gonna be great. She was just like, Esme this is a great book. This is really great. But like, I still dunno, like, what is it? I'm just like, listen, it's YA how is this not YA? How do you not understand? She's like, I don't think so. Dang. That's, that's not great. and we went through this cycle once more. And she asked for a call and I was like, okay. I put my whole heart and soul into this book. I've rewritten it like 10 million times. I've cut it down from like seven points of view to like three points of view and like, I think it's fantasy.

Pretty sure it's YA. It wasn't. It wasn't. And she was just like, still dunno what it is. And I'm just like, I cannot do this again. I cannot do this again. I'm so exhausted at this point. Just like the ups and the downs and the hope and the defeat and like I sent out a couple of queries, but like literally nothing is biting.

And I said, Ugh, this is exhausting. So I went to the process of like breaking up with my book, which is horrible. Like no one ever tells you how shitty that. Um, it's just, it's just, it's so hard because like you spend so much time with these characters in this world. all of your music reminds you of them, you know,

So I had to like, delete all my Spotify playlists, take everything off my walls from memory. It's like it was a total complete breakup. It's like, okay. so then that NaNoWriMo I was just like, . I just wanted to write something completely different, completely different. So I wrote a YA book. It was really YA at this time.

It was like two POVs, Ya. I wrote it and it was really nice just to like practice and play in the genre and writing to a market that wasn't just me.

[00:08:57] **Sarah:** Hmm.

[00:08:58] **Esme:** that was, that was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that. and then I did a similar thing the next year and then Pitch Wars. Pitch Wars happened. Um, and the first time I heard about Pitch Wars was my writing buddy who'd been with me for like, you know, five years at that point.

She was just like, yeah, let's do pitch wars. I was like, okay. I dunno what that is. Well, let's do it. That's great. and it was really cool because, you know, That was like when Twitter got really big and I was, you know, finding all this community who was like trying to enter pitch wars and we were swapping queries and we were swapping synopsis, and it was just like really cool to be around people just like honing their craft.

And you know, that's what I really liked about NaNoWriMo was people just like, Doing the thing, but this was like, it was less about writing, more about pitching, um, which was something that like I had not found my way through yet. so yeah, we found this like whole little community. It was really cool.

And the only book that I had to submit was. My NaNoWriMo 2013 book, which I had rewritten like 10 million times and I was pretty sure it was ya, but no one seemed to believe that. I was like, okay. Um, so I sent that in and I waited for the requests and nothing came. I was just like, okay, that's great. Love that for me.

Oh my goodness. But the really cool thing about that year, and I believe that was 2018, was a lot of feedback I had was telling me that my story was middle grade. And at first I was like, mm, no, I don't like that. I don't write for children. I am a, a sophisticated author. Ha ha ha. so I, I resisted it a little bit and then I was like, I got to the end and no one had requested anything.

I was feeling pretty, pretty down. I was like, okay, what if it is middle grade? Is that okay? Is that okay? Am I okay with that? I was like, okay, I have one more

year on this stupid book. I'm gonna make it middle grade and it's gonna be one point of view and I'm just gonna give it one more shot, and then it's dead to me forever.

Okay? So I spent the year of like end of 2018 through 2019 revising this book. It turned out pretty good. And I was like, okay, this feels good. This feels good. You know, it's a, it's a decent length. I've improved my craft. I know for a fact it's middle grade. I know for a fact it's fantasy. I can query this thing.

but the plan was to submit Pitch Wars again. so I, I honed my query home, my synopsis, and it felt better this time, I felt like I knew what I was doing. I was like, okay. This, this is gonna be the break. It's gonna be great. and I submitted and nothing happened. And at the time, I went to a workshop in Austin called The Writing Barn, and it was with Lauren Spieler and Laura Weymouth, who were two of the best humans ever.

and I submitted Moon Path I needed to invest in myself. So that was what I was doing. I was investing in myself. It was like a good chunk of time. It was a very good chunk of money. and just to go and spend time on my creativity. this was during the Pitch Wars phase, and I was waiting and I was so upset that I hadn't, I felt like I hadn't got any further than the year before.

and that bugged me cuz I, I had put so much work in, I really felt like my craft was better. I knew what I was doing. My book knew that I was doing and it's still nothing, nothing, nothing. Um, so I went into that feeling pretty miserable. But, um, the feedback I got at the workshop was enormous. It was so useful and so good.

and, but the best thing was I hung out with Ash Van Otterloo and they were repped by Lauren Spieler and like their first book hadn't come out yet. I went up to Ash, like at the end of the evening. I was just like, Hey, look, please, can you just like have a glance at my query? And just tell me what I'm doing wrong because I don't know.

Everyone tells me it's fine, but like I'm not getting any bites on it. Like nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. And they were like, okay, okay. So we ended up staying up to like three o'clock in the morning, which was amazing. And we just went through, we didn't even go through the query line by then. It was just like I was just telling them about my story and like, What it was and what I wanted it to be.

I remember I was just like writing down everything that we said, like pages and pages and pages. And I remember thinking, oh God, this is gonna be the longest query ever. It's gonna be thousands and thousands of words. And then I got up the next day and I was like, okay, I'm just gonna like, , put it on paper and see what it is.

And it ended up being like the shortest query I'd ever written. I was like, ah dang, this is good. And like I know that it wasn't the kind of thing that I would've written on my own, but it felt good. so I went home from Austin and I met up with my friend Cat Bakewell, and I had a glass of wine and I was just telling her about everything, about this query.

And originally my plan had been to query in January like everybody else does. This was in like, um, October at the time, and she was just like, Hey, Ez, send a query, I'm just like, shut up, Cat, no . so I had another glass of wine and then she's like, Hey, Ez, send a query. I'm like, okay, I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna send a query.

so I yeeted off a query that I felt was like, you know, low stakes, pretty safe. It wasn't an agent I was like, especially excited about, but like... You know, I don't never query agents that you don't want to work with. Um, so I was like, yeeted it off, not expecting anything. And then by the end of the day, I had my first partial request.

I was just like, huh, whew. Okay, okay. That's something. And then I panicked because that mean I had to start actually querying because if this turned into something, I wouldn't have any options, which is not good. . So I sent more queries, , I got more requests and it was insane. It was like agents who I'd previously, you know, sent to and they'd just projected me outright.

They were now like interested. I sent to an agent who had been a Pitch Wars mentor. I had subbed to before they were an agent and they requested like everyone was requesting. I was just, Whoa. Because like I feel like in publishing everything is so slow until it's not, and then it's real fast. Like, holy moly.

And I remember I was driving to work. I used to work at Starbucks. Um, I was driving to work on an evening and I stopped at a stoplight and I just, you know, glanced at my notifications and it said I had a, an email from agent. I'm just like, oh, boy. Because at that point, like I had no more, no one else could like request stuff because like everyone had requested, I was like, okay, this is either like the, my first rejection on my phone or it's something else.

I'm just like, oh God. And of course my, my phone would not open my email cuz of course it

[00:15:17] **Sarah:** Oh no,

[00:15:17] **Esme:** um, I know. So I had to like drive the rest of the way, trying not to crash, trying not to just like freak out, just like completely aware that my life was about to change. Whether it was for the better or for the worse.

I'm just like, oh boy, this is terrifying. Oh no. So I stopped in the parking lot and I took a few deep breaths and then I opened my email and it was a request for the call and I was. Ah, okay. We, we did it, we did it. I mean, it could, it might not be that, but you know, it probably is. And it ended up being that. it was such a relief because like I had gone so long not getting anywhere and like not really knowing if it was me or the book or the moment or the agents.

And like you just, no matter what kind of feedback you get, you never really know what it is. and it was finally something good. Um, and that ended up being the agent who I had subbed to at pitch was , who's MSWL was just like the perfect thing for this book. And they hadn't wanted it then, but they wanted it now, so it's great.

so yeah, I had the call with Megan Manzano and you know, their editorial. I was just like, so. Absolutely on point with like my vision. because at that point, you know, I'd taken this book as far as I could take it on my own. And I needed someone outside of myself, basically to tell me what it needed to make it better.

so I did that and it was really fun. That was like from November to February. Um, we went through a couple of rounds, like nothing huge. And then in March, 2020. Wasn't that a month? we went on submission

[00:16:45] **Sarah:** Oh no,

[00:16:46] **Esme:** yeah. Yeah. You know, you know where this is going. That was the time, um, we went on submission.

I was just like, I'm gonna be a unicorn. I'm gonna get a book deal in like 10 days. It's gonna be amazing. It's gonna be fantastic. I know what this book is. Everyone else is ha ha, ha. and then we went to quarantine . And I was just like, this is, this is not so fun. because not only did I not have a book to like, you know, procrastinate on, uh, I didn't have work to distract myself on.



We were like in a global pandemic. I was just like, oh my goodness, this sucks. and I was not a unicorn because I wasn't hearing anything back except for rejection. I was like, oh, that's great. So I realized that I needed something to make me happy, um, because I have a spicy brain and it suffers sometimes.

and I looked at my bookshelves and I was just like, what brings me joy? And I remember the books that I used to read when I was like 10 and they were like the Tamora Pierce books. Which were, you know, the Alana books, the Girl Night books that are all about, you know, being brave and like conquering your foes and beating the bad guys.

I'm just like, I'm gonna finally write the Kid Night book of my dreams. It's gonna be fabulous and it's gonna be queer and it's gonna be just for me. It's gonna be great. Um, so I sat down and I NaNoWriMo'd that thing and it was, it was just such a joy to just like sink into, you know, and like I never know what I'm writing until I've written it.

So like, it looked a little bit different and that was okay. Um, and I still wasn't hearing anything about Moon Path and that was okay. Cause I had a different project. It was fine. so I spent, you know, 2020 just like having fun in Callie's world. Just like learning about these new characters, learning about this world.

No worries. It's fine. It's cool. and like as I was doing it, I, I spent a lot of time on Twitter because I don't touch grass. I was sharing a lot of the stuff that I was working on and people were really excited about it. I was like, Oh, this, this feels like fan fiction. This feels good. You know, I love that validation.

Um, that's why I write, like I love being read. and it really felt like I had something special. I really enjoyed my first book. You know, it, it was a good book. I'm proud of that book, but like, it didn't have the. The, what's the word? What's the word? Like catchiness that Callie had it, it didn't have the hook.

I was like, Ooh, I'm writing something with a hook. That's exciting. cause I feel like that's a really hard thing to do intentionally. so I was like writing it, feeling good about it. And then I sent it to my agent, and she was excited about it. We still hadn't heard anything but rejections about Moon Path, and that was okay.

And then we were just like, okay, we're gonna, this was like January, 2021. We're gonna pull moon path, like we've pretty much gone through everyone that we've wanted to. and that's okay. I was like, I'm ready to sell Callie and . I remember when we were getting to that point where we were about to send it off, , into submission hell, and I was just like, what am I gonna do next?

Because, you know, we've, we've gone a whole yearly cycle and I'm exactly back where I was last year and I'm about to throw this book into the void. It's not gonna go anywhere. It's not gonna do anything. It's just gonna languish and die just like the other one. So I'm gonna need something else to work on.

That's great. Um, so I was like with my critique group and like, I have a few ideas, blah, blah, blah, blah. You know, nothing that was really sticking, but things I could play with. I had breakfast on Zoom with my agent as we like shoved Callie out the door to like, do their thing. I'm so, all right. That book's dead to me now.

Fabulous. Love that for me. and I moved on with my life and then a few days later, it was Friday and it was like nine o'clock in the morning and I was sitting on my couch downstairs watching Schitt's Creek because that's all I wanted to do. I worked and I watched Schitt's Creek and like that was as much as I could manage.

and I get a, a DM from my agent going like, hey, get on Zoom. I'm just like, oh God, something's happening. What's happening? Oh God. And I'm just like, you know, fear and excitement are very similar feelings. And I was feeling all of the feelings. and she was just like, someone from Penguin read your book. And I'm just like, oh, that's a lot.

and she was like, yeah. And they, they really liked it. I was just like, okay, that's the thing. And she was just like, yeah. And they're wondering if you wanna , if you're thinking about, like, you could make it bigger, like a big sprawling series, because at that point it was a, a standalone, like quite a small, like character driven standalone.

And I'm just like, well, I cut 40 K for you, Megan. Um, I have a lot of stuff that we didn't put in the book that I can, I can dig out again. Yeah, that, that sounds pretty good. She's like, ok. so we ended up having a call with Liesa Abrams a few days later and like I was, I was sweat. Because, you know, she's really cool.

She knows what she's doing and like she's very experienced and I'm just like, oh boy, oh god. And like at this point I just had a car crash. I was about to change my job. Like everything was happening all in the same week, cuz of course it was because that's what happens. I was like, okay, just be cool Esme.

Be cool. And she was just like the nicest, nerdiest person. Tiny, tiny, tiny lady just like me. and I was just like, dang, this is really great. Just like talk to

someone with like, so much knowledge, but who's so like down to earth and just like she understands my work better than I do, like it's amazing. It's wild.

And she was like, yeah, I wanna make it bigger. I was like, hell yeah, we wanna make it bigger. so we got the deal like the next day

[00:21:51] **Sarah:** Oh wow.

[00:21:52] **Esme:** So I think we were on sub for 10 days. So I got my little unicorn experience and it was wild. It was so bizarre cuz like, like I said, you go from, you know, slow, slow, slow, nothing, nothing, nothing to like phoom all the way, all the way.

yeah, we went through a few rounds of revisions and just like, I love big revisions, like they're so fun to me. So I added, like 30 K to the manuscript cuz it was like originally like a very respectable 60 K cause that's what my agent wanted. Uh, and it turned into a very not respectable like 88 k um, , which is great cuz like, you know, Liesa's kind of well known for her, like huge books.

They're enormous. That's ridiculous. You can tell a Liesa book from a mile away cuz they're like that. And we, we went through the process, and it was spectacular. And like I kept waiting for the shoe to drop because like, I know publishing, you know, at this point, I know publishing and I know people's experiences with publishing and like even if you, step over the threshold, , you know, it can fall apart at any time.

So I'm just like waiting for it to fall apart, waiting it for it to fall. It doesn't, it doesn't fall apart. And I go through book two and it doesn't fall apart and I'm just like, what's going on? I don't understand. anyway, so all that's say, I signed my book contract and here we are.

[00:23:04] **Sarah:** Nice. It is time for the first Q of the podcast. Can you read your successful query letter for us?

[00:23:10] **Esme:** Absolutely can, Dear Megan, I was very excited when you liked my hashtag pit dark pitch. Peter Pan meets the giver. On his 13th birthday, the Empire will steal Laurie's imagination and destroy his only friend, the imaginary Joanna. To escape, Lori must abandon his brother and learn to put himself first.

But the past tempts him back against Joanna's Jealous will. Hashtag hashtag hashtag. and I was planning to query you today anyway cause I'm very excited

about querying them. In half magical Laurie's world, the empire begins stripping away children's imaginations at 13 in preparation for a focused life.

But after witnessing the damage to his older brother Dakin, Laurie wants no part in it. Besides no imagination means being severed permanently from his only and imaginary friend Joanna. Terrified of a lonely, magic-less life. Laurie and Joanna grasped at his mother's old fairytale the Moon path and try to make it real.

The moon path is the only way to escape across the sea without help or permission. But going means leaving Dakin behind once and for all, and Laurie's loyalties are split. To make matters worse, Joanna's becoming possessive and corporeal the closer they come to leaving. And the memories of his lost relationship with Dakin Pull Laurie away from her.

Laurie must accept that he no longer needs Joanna as a crutch and face the full force of her wrath to save his brother, even if that means sacrificing the last hope of the Moon path and his own freedom. Told in a dual timeline similar to Laura E. Weymouth's *The Light Between Worlds* the Moon Path is an upper middle grade fantasy complete at 57,000 words and will appeal to fans of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, and *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness.

Thank you for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you. Esme Symes-Smith

[00:24:45] **Sarah:** Nice. Thanks for sharing. How has your experience been since signing that contract? Especially let us know if there's anything that really surprised you along the way.

[00:24:54] **Esme:** I would say I'm surprised with just how healthy it's been. I've developed like a really good working relationship with my editor and I feel like, you know, adding so much onto the manuscript really helped because, you know, I remember the first time I sent her a full draft, so like half of it was like nice shiny polish.

That's what I subbed. And then the other half was like terrible first draft . So like just having like the difference between like the polish and the first draft, you know, I was really nervous about sending that, but then she knew that I could turn that into that. Um, which really, really helped when it came to book two because, you know, we were working from scratch at that point, which was absolutely terrifying.

but we were already at a point where she could trust me to make it shiny, in a short amount of time. I never expected anything from this journey. Like I never expected any kind of like support from my publisher. I didn't expect any like, accolades or anything, so I always went into my publishing journey

just willing to do everything myself. I made the decision that if this book was going to fail, it wasn't gonna be my fault. Um, which is why I went so hard on like my pre-order campaign and like connecting with readers and like having a street team. Like I really wanted to make sure I was doing everything I could to be visible and to make sure that the people

to whom I was, selling this book, could see it. I, I believe that really helped the publishing team like, See that I was all in, so they were more willing to do stuff for me. Um, so whenever I would get in anything from them, it was a lovely surprise. I think the coolest surprise was being asked to read the author's note myself for the audiobook.

that was really cool, like being in a professional, um, recording studio. terrifying, but really cool. I, I think one of the hardest things is just you don't really get a break. I was working on, you know, revision to book, book one and dreaming about book two, and then it came to just like, You know, you have to do it so damn fast.

I dunno how people do it, who don't do NaNoWriMo. Like people, people who spend like, you know, multiple years on a single book and then suddenly they're under contract and they have to do it on one. Like, that's, that's wild to me cuz like, it was hard for me because, You know, I, I write pretty fast.

I draft pretty fast, but like revisions I like to sit with, you know, I like to take my time to get it right. and you can't, you can't do that. There's no time for that. Um, so just like, just the pace of it was really kind of terrifying and realizing that like as soon as I'm done with this draft, there's gonna be another one, like straight away.

Like it's not gonna end. And just like the weirdness of the stress of that and also understanding that, you know, this is the dream that I've been chasing for 10 years. Ah, . That's horrible. I hate that. No, it's terrible. Um, especially like working full-time because I feel like most people have to work full-time, um, in this economy.

I'd be trying to do my work, my writing work, like before work, which meant I had to get up pretty early and then I'd be at my day job and I'd try and do a little

bit during that time. And then I would come home and I'd be exhausted, but I try and do a little bit more. And then I ended up going to bed too late, and then I had to get early and I was just like tired.

All the time. And like it's not just a matter of being tired, it's a matter of like, my head is not working . and like trying to like make things right doesn't work when your head's not working. Like I can, I can throw down a draft without even thinking, but like when it comes to revisions, you need your brain to work.

Um, so I think that was the absolute hardest thing. And I remember getting to one of my deadlines for revisions for book two. and like I hadn't finished them. I hadn't even nearly finished them and I was just feeling so bad and guilty cuz I, I'd asked for like an extension and like I'd asked for accommodation at work.

I'd just taken like a few days off to like try and get this done and like I was still failing and it just felt so bad. Like I was just like letting myself down. I was letting everyone around me down and like, Oh God, it was so bad. And I remember emailing my editor just going like, I know you are not my therapist.

Will you please hop on, call with me and just like, talk me down. Because like, you know, she's, she's been through like so many authors. Like she's, I'm sure she's seen this before and she was just like, Esme. Chill, it's gonna be okay. And I'm just like, I don't think it's, it doesn't feel good. And she's just like, listen, shut that door.

Don't think about anything else. Don't think anything about publication. Just like, enjoy the story. I'm just like, that's good advice. That's good. Enjoy the story. so I did that and it made things so much better. And, you know, I took a couple more months to do my revisions, but like, at least it ended up something that I can be proud of.

[00:29:37] **Sarah:** Hmm.

[00:29:37] **Esme:** and I think that's the hardest and most important thing is I don't want to send something out into the world that I'm not proud of. Like, it doesn't have to be a hundred percent, you know, I don't have, nothing is a hundred percent perfect, but like, I need to be pleased with it. If I'm not pleased with it, it's not going out there.

I know that was strenuous on like scheduling, like copy editors and all that stuff, but like, it was worth it. I'm glad that I took that time. I think the most surprising

thing is just. How stressful it is objectively, you know, it's gonna be stressful because it's work, but also it's like the big sparkly dream.

Yay.

[00:30:12] **Sarah:** All right, so this is our quick ground. I call it author dna. Are you a pantsier or a plotter?

**Esme:** Plotter

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

[00:30:22] **Esme:** Underwrite first over write second. And then happy medium in the middle.

[00:30:26] **Sarah:** Do you prefer to write in the morning or at night?

[00:30:28] **Esme:** Definitely in the morning.

[00:30:29] **Sarah:** When you start a new project, do you typically start with a character or plot or concept or something else? First?

[00:30:36] **Esme:** I'd say character and concept. And if I didn't have to do plot, I wouldn't.

[00:30:40] **Sarah:** you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:30:41] **Esme:** Tea every single time.

[00:30:43] **Sarah:** When you're writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound?

[00:30:46] **Esme:** Mm. I like sound. Preferably movie soundtracks.

[00:30:50] **Sarah:** When it comes to the first draft, are you more of a get it down kind of person or a get it right kind of person?

[00:30:56] **Esme:** Get it down. Everything is flexible and you can't edit a blank page.

[00:30:59] **Sarah:** What tools or software do you use to draft?

[00:31:01] **Esme:** I use something called dabble. Um, it's kind of like s  
Scrivener, but Fu Dummies.

[00:31:05] **Sarah:** do you prefer drafting or revising more?

[00:31:07] **Esme:** Revising. I hate drafting with my whole soul.

[00:31:10] **Sarah:** Do you write in sequential order or do you hop around?

[00:31:13] **Esme:** Very sequential

[00:31:14] **Sarah:** And final quick round question, are you an extrovert or an  
introvert?

[00:31:18] **Esme:** introvert with most people. Extrovert for writing folks.

[00:31:21] **Sarah:** 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 were they realized, or did you overcome them, or how did they  
shake out?

[00:31:31] **Esme:** Yeah, I think the thing I've been worried about the most is  
being asked to change a story in like, the essence of it. like most things, you  
know, I'm happy to negotiate on. I'm happy to change, but like there's always  
the core of a story that. , you know, I'm not willing to change. and I remember  
for Moon Path, it's a very heavy story.

It was all about like, you know, trauma and like child abuse and all that. And I  
remember getting feedback from an agent that said, you can't do this in middle  
grade. And I'm just like, oh, Jesus. Okay, well you're not the agent for me then  
so I'm glad that you passed. Um, you know, and for Callie, I was always like  
really worried that I'd be asked to

you know, tone down the queerness or like cut out like the modernisms. And  
like I, I find the language that I use in Callie really important because it's, it kind  
of broaches the gap between book and reader. I find that if fantasy uses too  
many, like archaic tone or like language, then. You know, it doesn't feel as like  
reachable or touchable and like I always call Callie like a very modern story set  
in like a fantasy setting.

Um, so that was really important to me. you know, I've had to, to stet a few copy  
editor things, but like nothing big. Um, and I've always been very supported



about like, you know, the big choices that I wanted to make as far as like queerness goes and like heavy themes. so like, I basically, I was just like really nervous about asking, being asked to change and that hasn't had to happen.

[00:32:59] **Sarah:** All right. Now it's time for the third Q of the podcast, do you have any writing quirks? Is there anything about your writing process that you think is kind of different or interesting or unique?

[00:33:09] **Esme:** I think my biggest quirk is that I can't do the same thing two days in a row, , which is really obnoxious cause um, I'd love to have a good routine down that I just do automatically. but if I sit at my desk and work one day, there's no way in hell I'm gonna do that the next day. I have to go out and find something to do.

so it's, it's a lot of like chasing what feels good. but conversely, I can also like write anywhere. I can write on my couch, I can write in the car, I can, I can write anywhere. Um, so I think my quirk is just adhd.

[00:33:41] **Sarah:** when you were in the lowest parts of your journey, whatever that was for you, what kept you going and why did you stick to it?

[00:33:47] **Esme:** Yeah. I feel like there are a few points where. You know, I felt like the lowest, and they were all pretty similar. Like, one of them was in Austin before I realized what NaNoWriMo was. Another one was like breaking up with Moon Path. And you know, for all those moments it was, I love writing , you know, that.

And that's what it comes down to. Like, if, I fail every time, I would still do it. If I never got read, I would still do it. You know, I, I love writing more than anything else. I love telling stories, even if no one's gonna read them. it's just, it's my greatest joy and. It's what I want to do.

[00:34:21] **Sarah:** Yeah.

[00:34:22] **Esme:** Everything else, just extra.

[00:34:23] **Sarah:** Do you feel like you made any mistakes along the way that you might wanna let listeners know about so they can avoid the same ones?

[00:34:30] **Esme:** I feel like I queried too early. I feel, but I feel like you need to query too early to kind of learn that you queried too early. I was really good about making excuses for myself and like excusing behavior. I knew that wasn't

good. in that, like I knew that because I was struggling to write my query or my synopsis.

That probably meant that my book needed fixing, but like, I just ignore that. So, yeah, I, I think that was really hard because that was a real big dent on just like my confidence on the publishing side. and it was very distracting. Like I don't think I wrote much during that time. Trying to put all of my eggs in one basket was rough.

Um, I think it's really important to just, keep writing no matter what. Even if it's just fic. You know, have something that you're working on that you enjoy doing. Cuz otherwise it stops feeling good. Cause I'm, I'm very much like a one book at a time person, so when that one book failed, I was like, oh goodness.

[00:35:20] **Sarah:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons that you learned on your journey to publication?

[00:35:25] **Esme:** do it because you love it. nothing is certain in this industry at all. Like there are no rules. You don't necessarily get out what you put in. everything can fall, fall to pieces, uh, in a split second. So make sure that you are loving what you produce. So even if the world falls down, you will still have a story that you enjoy reading.

Um, I think that's the most important thing, like screw the market. , the market's not gonna be your friend, so you might as well write something that you enjoy.

[00:35:53] **Sarah:** 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 or even organizations who helped you along the way and how?

[00:36:08] **Esme:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I, I feel like the best thing about writing is it's so individual, but like everyone's doing their own thing together, which I think is so cool. honestly, like NaNoWriMo, just as a whole concept is just amazing. My bestie there is Sarah Schultz, who has been on my side all the way from the beginning.

shout out to The Forge, who is the best writing group of all time. Shout out to Megan Manzano and Liesa Abrams who keep me floating and Cat Bakewell who got me drunk and made me send that query. we all need a friend that will get us drunk to make us send the query. All my friends on Twitter love y'all and my wife are putting up with me

[00:36:42] **Sarah:** All right. Since your query letter was not for Callie, do you wanna tell us a little bit about Callie before you go?

[00:36:48] **Esme:** Sir Callie and the Champions of Helston is the first book in a queer fantasy middle grade series. Um, second one will be coming out next November. the book one is all about a non-binary kid who wants to be a knight, and they're defeating dragons and the patriarchy and, meeting their friends who they're empowering, who help each other.

And all that good stuff. Lots of witches, lots of magic, lots of sword fights.

[00:37:11] **Sarah:** Nice. All right, Esme thank you for coming on the show and sharing your story with everyone.

[00:37:16] **Esme:** Thank you for having me.

[00:37:17] **Sarah:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries Qualms and Quirks. You can find the text of Esme's Query and the show notes along with links to find out more about them and their books. If you enjoyed the show, I'd really appreciate if you helped 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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Thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you next time.