QQQ Donna Gordon

[00:00:00] **Donna:** I feel like I've gone from being a writer to being an author and there is a difference and I feel that I've consolidated my effort in a way that's been meaningful.

[00:00:16] **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 date of publication. I am your host author, Sarah Nicolas and literary agent Sarah N Fisk.

Donna Gordon is a Cambridge Massachusetts based writer. She graduated from Brown and was then a Stegner fellow at Stanford, a PEN discovery, and a Ploughshares discovery. She was a 2017 Tennessee William scholar at the Suwanee writer's conference and a fellow at the Vermont studio center in 2017 and 2018, she received the 2018 new letters publication award for what *Ben Franklin Would have Told Me*, which has been named by the independent book review as well in the top 45 they're excited about for 2022.

So please welcome Donna to the show. Hello.

[00:01:07] **Donna:** Hi, thanks so much for having me, Sarah. Good to meet you.

[00:01:10] **Sarah:** Hi, we're gonna see if I can edit out the thunder that just rolled over in my intro there.

[00:01:17] **Donna:** Oh, bummer.

[00:01:19] **Sarah:** So we're gonna talk about your journey to publication. We're gonna start by going kind of all the way back to the beginning. When did you first start getting interested in writing and then how long did it take from there before you started getting serious about pursuing publication?

[00:01:32] **Donna:** When I really think about it, I was writing poetry in junior high and high school and in a pretty focused way, I'd have to say. And then when I got to college, I did a poetry writing workshop with Michael Harper who sort of became a mentor to me. And he was very demanding and tough on us about, looking harder at our own truths.

And working harder to edit. So I think that that was my first really serious experience as a writer writing poetry. And then I did publish some poems and

literary magazines, and I had some early success there, which spurred me on. And then I was a Stagner fellow at Stanford, which I was very lucky to be there.

And I was still writing poetry, but the friends I made there were mostly prose writers. So I was influenced by them and my sentences got longer. My poems became prose poems, and then eventually short stories and then the novel. So it was sort of an evolution. But it makes sense looking back that that's how it went.

[00:02:39] **Sarah:** Nice. Can you tell me a little bit more about the moment that you realized that you wanted to be a published author? You know, that you wanted to see your book on bookshelves. You wanted to take that path.

[00:02:49] **Donna:** I think I was always ambitious. I think I felt that I needed to take things as far as I could. So when I was 17 and writing poems, I was named a Ploughshares discovery by the poet, George Starbuck, who I had taken a workshop with. He had published books, the people in the workshop, they were actually graduate students when I was an undergraduate and I felt the desire to have my own book. I felt the desire to publish. I believe that everybody writes something that's valuable. I really do, but I think that for myself I just sort of needed some sort of further documentation and I really wanted to publish and I really wanted to have my own book.

I just felt that desire and hunger.

[00:03:40] **Sarah:** Nice. I like that.

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

[00:03:43] **Sarah:** So once you decided to take it seriously, how did you learn more about the publishing industry? Like how to query, how it works, how to go about it?

[00:03:52] **Donna:** When I was very young, I had gone to the Breadloaf writers conference as a poet, and I met some pretty serious people there. I did a poetry workshop with the poet Donald Justice, and it was a very focused group, both the writers who were there, conducting the workshops, as well as the poets and fiction writers who were in attendance.

I would say it was sort of hierarchical and sort of competitive, but at the same time, it made things a little more concrete. It made things a little more

believable that one could get there. And so I think that was the first sort of reality check that I had in terms of what it would take.

And it was pretty competitive just to be accepted into that workshop. And then once there in the workshop, people were very focused about their work and a lot of people had already published. So I think that experience was very influential.

[00:04:48] **Sarah:** All right. So then what happened? Can you break down for us, your journey from then to signing your first book contract.

[00:04:56] **Donna:** I, , I say I've had a long journey getting my first book published. I. I've published several poems just by being really dogged and really focused. I worked after I graduated from college and after I'd come back from Stanford, I made a lot of sacrifices. I worked part-time as an editor and I worked Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

I set my schedule up that way so that on Tuesday and Thursday, I could go to the library and I could work on my writing and I was very disciplined about it. I really took it seriously. I revised my work as much as I felt it needed. I was in a small writing group and I, I really felt that that was the most important thing in my life at the time.

It meant the most to me and I lived in a rooming house where I had mice and I had kinds of I, my stove wasn't connected to a chimney. I burned a hole in the wall. I shared. I shared a bathroom with people. I slept on a mattress on the floor. I made tons and tons of sacrifices. I was financially independent.

I didn't receive any other kind of funding from family. And it was just me and my desire to write. And I spent a number of years doing that and I was publishing poetry. And then I did have sort of a big interruption in my writing life. I got married, I had children, my husband had his own business and I was really sort of on my own taking care of the family and it was harder and harder to write.

So I stopped writing fiction for a while. I freelanced for the Boston globe magazine. I wrote features and some short fiction and personal essays. And then I also wrote a novel during that time and that novel almost got published. I was reading the magazine poets and writers, and there was an agent on the cover of poets and writers, a woman named Ellen Levine.

And I wrote to her and bingo. She wanted to represent my first novel. Cave paintings, which did not wind up getting published. But I was asked to rewrite it

three times once by Gordon Lisch of Knopf, who called me and told me how excited he was about it. And then of course disappeared. And then once by editor at Soho press and a third editor at Chronicle books, and all three of them came close, asked for revisions.

And then didn't wind up taking the novel. At that time I had also sent a short story to Roger angel at the new Yorker. And it was a two page story that I sent over the transom that he actually responded to told me I was like, Samuel Beckett, ask me to rewrite it. And then didn't wind up taking it.

So there were a lot of, sort of painful near misses that were part of the journey along the way. Cut to I'm 65. So cut several years later, I had started writing poetry in my publishing in my twenties. And now after my kids were older,

I started another novel, the current novel called W*hat Ben Franklin Would Have Told Me*.

And this is the novel that was just published by Regal house. I started writing it in 2012. It was bought by Regal house in 2019, but it was just released on June 8th, 2022 because of the publication cycle, the production cycle COVID and just how things went. I was grateful to my editor at Regal house.

My editor is actually the publisher. Her name is Janie Royal, but she and I worked together pretty closely. And I definitely feel that our collaboration made the book better and stronger. And we probably cut about 50 pages during the course of the editing process. But I, I feel that the result is something I'm more proud of.

So that was time well spent.

[00:08:54] **Sarah:** Nice. It is time for the first Q of the podcast. Can you read your successful query letter?

[00:09:02] **Donna:** Yeah. And this letter that I'm gonna read is one that I had been I had received the publication prize at new letters, magazine for a story called primates. And so I did mention that story in this query letter, there were a few different versions of this letter, which I, I customized for different readers.

So if I was gonna send to one agent, I would check that agent's Career and see who he or she had represented. And I would try to mention some of those writers in the first paragraph of my letters say, you know, I admire these writers

and, my writing is something like that. Maybe you'll like my book for that reason.

So this letter is one I wrote to an agent who responded to me after she read my prize- winning story in new letters.

And she wrote to me asking if I had a novel, just about the same time I had already been made an offer by Regal house. But I published with Regal house without an agent, and I was still sort of hungry for an agent. So I responded to this person after she read my story. And the letter is almost identical to the letter I wrote to the woman at Regal house who eventually published the book.

Thank you for your response to my story primates in new letters. It's kind of you to let me know you liked it and also kind to encourage me to send you more writing. I do have a recently completed novel. What Ben Franklin would've told me. Following loosely in the tradition of mark Haddon's the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime and Jonathan, Edison's the revised fundamentals of caregiving.

My novel follows the adventures of Lee, a 13 year old boy afflicted with a premature aging disease and his caretaker Tomás, a former political prisoner of Argentina's dirty war. Tomás, recently released from prison has come to the states in search of his missing wife and daughter. His wife Violeta was also among the disappeared and pregnant when abducted.

Lee's mother CAS hires Tomás as a last minute replacement caretaker and companion for Lee, whose best friend Kira afflicted with the same disease has just died at 13 of a heart attack. Lee, an American history buff, and Ben Franklin fan has a final wish to visit Washington DC and Philadelphia. When Cass has a last minute work schedule change, and can't take Lee, Tomás agrees to take him instead. Once there Tomás must tell Lee the truth and together, they set out to search for Tomás's missing family.

I have done a project with amnesty international, putting faces on the unimaginable for which I both interviewed and photographed 15 people who were former prisoners of conscience and on amnesty speakers list, the essay was published in the brown alumni, monthly, and the captions and photos were exhibited at Harvard's fog museum,

boston's French library and Tufts university's Wessel library. I had also volunteered at camp sunshine in Maine, a camp for kids with cancer and also progeria a premature aging disease. These two experiences came together in

writing the novel. The novel was a 2019 finalist for black Lawrence press's big moose prize.

And the first chapter received honorable mention from art street press in 2018, it was also a finalist for the 2019 key west Marion Russo award for fiction a semi-finalist for the 2019 hidden river arts El award. And is a semi-finalist for the yes. Yes. Books, novel competition. I'm also completing a collection of short stories, lesser saints, which was long listed for Z presses, 2019

open competition. Six of the stories have been published. I was a 2019 writing fellow at brush Creek arts Wyoming, a 2017, Tennessee William scholar at Swanee and a fellow at the Vermont studio center in 2017 and 2018. I graduated from brown, where I received the Kim, an a star award in creative writing, was afterwards a Stagner fellow at Stanford, a PEN discovery in new England and a Ploughshares discovery.

Some of my fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in tin house, Ploughshares, the Boston globe magazine story quarterly, the quarterly poetry Northwest and post road. I was a finalist for the 2016 new letters, Alexander Capon prize in fiction, and received honorable mention from glimmer train 2016 and 2017.

My essay temporary shelter appeared in sister to sister, an anthology of sister relationships edited by Patricia Foster. Serving up equal justice, my adventure with Serena Williams was recently posted on medium. I'm happy to have you take a look at What Ben Franklin Would've Told Me. Please let me know if you'd like me to send it

[00:14:26] **Sarah:** All right. Thank you for sharing.

[00:14:28] **Donna:** sure.

That's a mouthful.

[00:14:30] **Sarah:** So, how has your experience been since signing that first book contract? Especially let us know if there was anything that particularly surprised you.

[00:14:40] **Donna:** Well, one of the things that surprised me is that I gave away most of my rights to the book. I think that I didn't really think my book was gonna be as successful as it appears to. Be becoming right now. I've gotten some

really good reviews from the Boston globe newspaper and the Martha's vineyard times and the Vermont standard.

And I've been on a, a reading tour. My launch was at Harvard bookstore in Cambridge, and people are responding very positively to my book. So some of the concerns I'm having now is that I didn't think I was gonna have as many opportunities to do more with it as I might. So that was something I would've reconsidered.

I'm not sure I would've had much choice in the matter. I think I just really needed to have my book published in order to move on. I think it, there were so many sort of near misses. And almost and maybes with different agents. There wasn't a lot of consensus. I, I sent my book to a lot of agents and people wanted different things.

Some people felt that the story belonged to my main character Lee and some people felt it belonged to another character Tomas, and it was confusing to them whose story it was. So. I think I just really, really needed to publish it and move on and I did give up some things, but I also gained some freedom. Now. I feel like I've gone from being a writer to being an author and there is a difference and I feel that I've consolidated my effort in a way that's been meaningful. . And so I, I do feel it's, it's advanced my, my writing life and my personal life to have published it.

[00:16:26] **Sarah:** Hmm. Nice.

All right. It is time for the quick round. I call it author DNA, just classifications that we like to put writers in.

Are you a pantser or a plotter?

[00:16:38] **Donna:** What was the first word?

[00:16:40] **Sarah:** Do you know pantser?

[00:16:42] **Donna:** No, I'm not sure what you mean.

[00:16:44] **Sarah:** okay. So basically the question is, do you outline ahead of time or do you just kind of write and see where it goes?

[00:16:51] **Donna:** Um, I'd say on both. I think I need to do both. Because my novel is a journey story. There was a structure built in, and so I had that sort of as an outline, but then in terms of each chapter, I was a plotter.

[00:17:07] **Sarah:** Mm. Do you tend to be an overwriter or an underwriter?

[00:17:11] **Donna:** Over

[00:17:12] **Sarah:** Do you typically write in the morning or at night?

[00:17:15] **Donna:** morning.

[00:17:16] **Sarah:** when starting a new project, do you typically start with a character or a plot or a concept or something else?

[00:17:23] **Donna:** I often start with a phrase and then that becomes part of my first paragraph. And then I sort of start to understand what I'm doing.

[00:17:33] **Sarah:** Do you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:17:35] **Donna:** Coffee

[00:17:36] **Sarah:** When you're writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound?

[00:17:40] **Donna:** silence or my cat.

[00:17:42] **Sarah:** When it comes to 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?

[00:17:49] **Donna:** I do both actually. So I'll write for a couple of hours and then I'll sort of refine that before, moving on to the next stage.

[00:17:59] **Sarah:** What tools or software do you use to draft?

[00:18:03] **Donna:** I just use Microsoft word.

[00:18:05] **Sarah:** Do you prefer drafting or revising more?

[00:18:08] **Donna:** I think revising is where things come together. So I would say revising

[00:18:14] **Sarah:** do you write in sequential order or do you hop around?

[00:18:17] **Donna:** generally sequential order.

[00:18:19] **Sarah:** and final, quick round question? Are you an extrovert or an introvert?

[00:18:24] **Donna:** Introvert, Definitely introvert.

[00:18:27] **Sarah:** So 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?

[00:18:39] **Donna:** I think going from poetry to prose was a huge challenge for me, but it was necessary. And so I think that I, I didn't study the formal elements of fiction. I studied the formal elements of poetry. So when I did deviate from poetry and become a prose writer, I really needed to learn a lot of things about.

Plot and structure and character and story and dialogue. And that was, I'd say dialogue in particular was a challenge for me making it sound natural. But I would say also, you know, like believing that I could get to the end, that I could finish a story that I could finish the novel. And also I think letting people help letting the people in my writing workshop.

Contribute ideas in a, you know, constructive way. I think that was important to be willing to hear them.

[00:19:32] **Sarah:** Yeah. Now it's time for the third Q. Do you have any writing quirks? Is there anything about your writing process that you think is kind of different or interesting or unique?

[00:19:42] **Donna:** I'm also a visual artist. A lot of times I'll write in my quote unquote art studio, which is my converted garage. And I do like. To sort of think back and forth between if I might be working on a painting or a print and how that encourages me to complete the arc of something I'm writing.

So both writing and visual art have challenges to sort of get to a finished moment. And so when I'm looking at my art and I realized you don't have to have kind of a resounding end to something you write, you can have a quiet end, or you can have something that is a shape as opposed to a highly structured plot.

So I think that my mind sort of works back and forth between those ideas. So that might be considered a quirk.

[00:20:32] **Sarah:** Yeah, I like it.

[00:20:34] **Donna:** Thanks.

[00:20:36] **Sarah:** When you were in the lowest parts of your journey, whatever that it may have been for you, what kept you going and why did you stick to it?

[00:20:44] **Donna:** I've thought about that and I can tell you that it's really the music of language that I could not shut off. I could not shut off the desire to put words together. And so, and I felt almost physically in pain not writing something. It was really, really hard for me to know that I had the desire, to know that I had practiced it and that it became something that I knew I was sort of good at working at and then to have shut it off was pretty hard.

And so. I needed to write. I really did. And I didn't know that I was gonna come up with this particular story in my novel, but I would say that it was a really, powerful experience for me to create characters that can stand alone. And that, I didn't know I was gonna be capable of that before I did it.

And that was, that's pretty powerful even now.

[00:21:41] **Sarah:** Yeah. Do you feel like you made any mistakes along the way that you might wanna share with listeners? Maybe they avoid making the same ones.

[00:21:51] **Donna:** Yeah, I think so. I recently wrote a what's called the breaking in column for writers digest. And I was asked to think about some of those things and definitely for me, I did not believe in myself as much as I should have. I let other things sort of become more important than my own desire to write.

And if I were to start over again, I would've fought harder for those opportunities. Although, you know, not everybody has those opportunities. Life is complicated. And when you have a family it's different and it's, it's not easy at least to put yourself first. But that for me in my life is the main thing.

There were a lot of, lot of delays and I'm just grateful that I caught up and was able to, was able to complete this book. Like I said, it's a big shift going from

being a writer to being an author. And it's much more empowering to think of myself as an author now.

[00:22:49] **Sarah:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons you learned on your journey to publication?

[00:22:55] **Donna:** I had a lot of challenges with this book. There were a lot of things I had to do on my own because Regal house is a smaller literary press. So for instance, I have characters who are Spanish speaking in my book and I was responsible for getting the Spanish right. So I had to call upon her friend who was bilingual and to ask for her help.

I would also just say that it takes a lot of stamina at every phase of writing, whether it's writing the initial draft or revising or working with a copywriter or editor or publisher, and you just have to be ready to keep going. You have to be ready to do what's called upon to do what you know will be the best possible outcome for your words.

And your characters and your overall book, you can't give anything up and let things go to chance. You have to stay with it, no matter how much, how difficult it is, you just have to ride it out the whole way.

[00:23:54] **Sarah:** Mm-hmm . Yeah. 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 organizations or groups who helped you along the way?

[00:24:09] **Donna:** It was the people who believed in me at various stages in my life. So I would go back to elementary school and junior high school and high school, my English teachers were very nurturing and encouraging along the way. And they made me sort of believe in myself as an adult.

For this particular book I worked with amnesty international. I learned a lot through them. They helped me a lot. And I, you know, my family, my husband, my kids and some close friends who could see me struggling and the women in my writers group who helped me through the struggles.

And like I said being able to collaborate with people who can see things that I couldn't see, I think, in particular, the people in my writing group who stood by me all the way from the beginning to the end, I like to like to thank them.

[00:25:03] **Sarah:** Yeah.

[00:25:04] **Donna:** Yeah.

[00:25:04] **Sarah:** All right, Donna, before you go, is there anything you wanna share with listeners about your work, who may be interested in reading either your short stories or your novels? Um,

[00:25:15] **Donna:** Yeah. I mean, I think that my novel, *What Ben Franklin Would Have Told Me* is a powerful book, an emotional book. It's an unlikely coming together of characters and I think people might be inspired by reading it. It's a situation that brings together two characters who have very sort of dark histories and challenges.

And yet the book never felt dark to me at all. It always felt like my characters were gonna rebound and become something more. So I'd love it. If people wanted to take a look at my book and read it. Let me know what they think either on good reads or amazon.com whatever might, they can look at my website and see what I'm doing with the visual art.

If people are curious, just let me know.

[00:26:03] **Sarah:** All right, Donna. Thank you so much for coming on the show and sharing your story with my listeners.

[00:26:08] **Donna:** Yeah. Thanks so much for having me good luck to everybody. Just stay with it.

[00:26:12] **Sarah:** Yeah.

This concludes season two of Queries, qualms and quirks, we will be back in early 2023 for season three. Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries, qualms and quirks. You can find the text of Donna'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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