



Unfortunately...

There's a Room Full of People Talking About You

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Hosts: Mona West and Courtney Floyd

Guest: C.J. Dotson

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

Courtney Floyd: I'm Courtney Floyd.

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

Courtney Floyd: In this episode, I am delighted to introduce C.J. Dotson, who possesses the statistically average number of body parts for a human being to have. Not unsettling at all. She and her husband, stepson, and children, all of whom also appear human, share a cabin in the woods with more bugs than she would ever like to see. In her limited spare time, she enjoys reading, video games, painting, baking, and decorating cakes with questionable success, and petting her puppy and three cats. I think that number is out of date, but we'll get there in a second.

Her debut horror novel, *The Cut*, is available for pre-order now. At the time of recording, we're about a month out. When this comes out, I think we'll be four days from release. You can say hi to C.J. at [C.J.-dotson](#) on Bluesky, or subscribe to her newsletter at [C.J.dotsonsdreadfuldispatch.substack.com](#). Welcome to the podcast.

C.J. Dotson: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Courtney Floyd: How many cats are you up to now?

C.J. Dotson: Five currently inside, and I still have the two strays outside that I'm looking for a home for. My husband and I are *this close* to breaking and taking another one of them in.

Courtney Floyd: They're all so adorable. I can't believe--

C.J. Dotson: He's my baby. One of them, he went missing for about two and a half weeks. I spent the whole two weeks trying to convince myself that he is such a sweetheart, he must have found another home. My husband spent the whole two weeks convinced that something terrible had happened and blaming himself, even though it was mutual decision that we cannot have any more cats. But when Scratch - we called him Scratch - when Scratch came back, both of us are like, "Oh, no, we might have to just have six cats now instead of five."

[laughter]

Mona West: The cat distribution system is working overtime in your home.

C.J. Dotson: It's broken.

Mona West: If you want to send some my way, I would love that.

C.J. Dotson: Are you near upstate New York?

Mona West: I'm not, but I've seen what is [the movie called], *Homeward Bound*. It'll get there eventually.

[crosstalk]

Mona West: As long as it's a hypoallergenic cat, then I can convince my partner.

C.J. Dotson: Can't promise that.

[laughter]

C.J. Dotson: We adopted one of his brothers and that cat is the most allergenic cat I've ever had.

Mona West: Worth it though, right? [chuckles]

C.J. Dotson: Totally. He's so soft.

Mona West: We love them. We love our critters. Well, delighted to have you. Thank you for joining us. I'm going to go ahead and start with our icebreaker. Then I will give my response, and then pass it off to you, C.J., and then Courtney will give her response. Your selected icebreaker is what is your favorite quote, saying, or philosophy about failure? I am really, really bad at prepping for this icebreaker question in general so I looked up my quote literally about three minutes ago, *and* it's a quote I've already said on podcast during R. Haven's episode, but I do really love it, it's courtesy of Jake the Dog from Adventure Time, which is one of my absolute favorite shows.

The quote is, "Dude, sucking at something is the first step toward being sort of good at

something." I like to hold on to that quote anytime, especially I'm exploring a different genre, because I've said in a couple episodes, I'm trying to write more horror and more weird stuff, and I'm not very good at it. Sometimes it's really discouraging, but you know what? You start by sucking, and then you keep getting better. I'm going to keep working on it. Eventually, maybe I'll write something that's kind of good horror.

C.J. Dotson: I love that. I love more horror, always.

Mona West: Nice. What is your answer?

C.J. Dotson: I have two answers. The first one is one that everybody has heard. It's the Picard quote, "It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not a weakness; that is life." The other one is the one that got me through querying my novels. It was my husband, who just whenever I was starting to get down, would remind me, he would say, "Just keep bashing your face into the wall and you will get through it eventually." It really helped a lot.

Courtney Floyd: Both of those are amazing.

Mona West: Yeah. Gosh, and a very interesting visual for that second one.

C.J. Dotson: Oh, yes, my husband has a way with that.

Courtney Floyd: That's appropriate for a horror writer, though.

Mona West: Absolutely.

Courtney Floyd: My favorite quote I shared in a previous episode, which is just a quote from *Dracula*. I'm going to share a different one today. This one is from another Victorian novel because I'm nothing if not a nerd for Victorians. It's George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It is, "Failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure."

C.J. Dotson: I like that.

Courtney Floyd: I almost expect it to take a turn into positivity, but it doesn't. It's just you stay in the failure, but that shows that you've done something.

C.J. Dotson: Yes. There was a really long period of time when I was pregnant with my daughter, and when she had just been born. When I got pregnant with her, I quit smoking. I had been a smoke break writer before that. When I quit smoking, and I was pregnant with my second child, and then she was a baby, there was a really long time when I couldn't write at all. For like two years, I couldn't write *at all*. The quote that you just said, I've never read that, but the gist of it, the idea that it's better to have tried and for my kids to have seen me trying, even if I never made it, feeling like it was better to have let them see me try and try and try even if it never worked out, was part of what got me back into taking my writing seriously

again.

Courtney Floyd: That's amazing.

C.J. Dotson: Thanks.

Mona West: Congratulations on quitting.

C.J. Dotson: Thanks.

Mona West: I hear people say that's one of the hardest things you can do. Huge kudos.

C.J. Dotson: It'll be seven years in May, and I still sometimes want a cigarette so bad I could scream.

Courtney Floyd: Oh.

Mona West: Well, you did the hardest part of stopping the thing. Kudos to you.

C.J. Dotson: Thanks.

Mona West: Well done. I know it's a challenge every day, but it sounds like you're doing an amazing job.

Courtney Floyd: I think I'm going to want to circle back to a question about that. What do you do when your process relies on a ritual that you can no longer enact, right?

First, I want to ask a little bit about your journey. We have this boilerplate question we're asking everyone, just to contextualize: We're in an industry where so many of our efforts and failures are invisible and where it's easy to think of people as overnight successes when it may have taken decades to "arrive." In the interest of making some of that invisible work more visible, can you tell us where you are in your writing journey and what you went through to get there?

C.J. Dotson: Yes. I am about to have my debut novel come out in 38 days [as of recording]. It's coming out with St. Martin's Press, which is an imprint of Macmillan. It was a two-book deal, so I'm going to have a second book out next year, also a second horror novel. To get here, this is actually the - not counting books that I wrote when I was in high school - *The Cut* is the fifth novel-length work that I've written.

The first one that's going to be coming out. And it's my third horror novel. The first two novels that I wrote are the first two novels in a dark fantasy trilogy that I would love to revisit someday. I talk about it all the time because I'm still obsessed with it. I started taking the writing seriously with the horror novels. I got into [Pitch Wars](#) in 2020 with my first horror manuscript, which is going to be my second book that comes out. Pitch Wars was a

competitive mentorship program that had a group of mentors who were all involved in some way in the publishing industry, either authors, sometimes agents, or editors. Mostly it was authors. They would make a manuscript wish list. Anybody who had a completed manuscript, but they did not have representation from a literary agent, could apply to, during my year, up to four mentors.

The mentors would pick usually one; a couple mentors picked two mentees. Then there would be a three-month long intensive overhaul process of just revising the absolute heck out of these manuscripts. At the end of which was a showcase where all of the mentees had, I believe it was 300 words altogether, for a log-line and a snippet from the first chapter of their manuscript.

Then agents and editors could register to peruse this showcase and for a certain amount of days, they could send messages through the Pitch Wars website, as comments to the authors saying, "Please send me this full manuscript," or, "I would love it if you would query me with this." I got 10 requests through my Pitch Wars showcase and not one of them panned out. With that manuscript, I queried 111 agents and a few editors from presses that took un-agented manuscripts. None of them panned out. I had a pretty good request rate for full manuscripts and partials, but at the end of the day, that book, I had to shelve it.

Second book, I didn't have Pitch Wars for that one, obviously, because I had already done it. I had the community, which was great and has led to me finding other amazing writing communities. I queried my next book and I sent out, I think, 108 queries for that one. Again, I had a pretty decent request rate and none of them panned out. It was about 110 queries that I sent for my next book, *The Cut*, which is my one that's coming out. I had one agent schedule a phone call with me. He's incredible. His name is [Chris Bucci](#). He's my agent now and I love working with him.

Over the course of three novels that I queried seriously, I racked up about 333 rejections and one yes. My book comes out next month. When this episode comes out, my book comes out really, really soon, and I'm somewhere panicking.

Courtney Floyd: Wow. That's quite a journey. I have been lucky enough to get to read *The Cut*, and it's fantastic. Listeners, you are not ready, but you need to pre-order it immediately or go to a store in four days and buy it in person. That is a lot. We have so many questions about all of that.

Mona West: Yes. That leads well into our first question. You mentioned in your setup interest form that you haven't always been able to keep going in the face of rejection. We would love to hear more about that, but especially in the context of 300 rejections, how do you keep going? How do you find the motivation?

C.J. Dotson: I was one of those gifted kids. Everything came pretty naturally to me when I was young and everything was pretty easy when I was young. I went to a really small town

school, kindergarten through graduation, same kids growing up. In elementary school, I was one of those "didn't really have to try very hard," and got the good grades, and had the grownups impressed anyway, people.

Then around third or fourth grade, I lost it. I don't know what happened. I was very, very socially awkward. I was struggling to stay organized and I just completely fell apart academically. It was a great disappointment. I didn't handle rejection well at all. I didn't handle failure well at all. I got to a point where if I would meet people, I believed from the start, "Oh, everybody here hates me." Just totally normal, perfectly nice people. "They hate me. I know it." I was pre-rejecting myself.

The first time that I tried submitting a short story to a magazine, the rejection came back and stunned me because all of my friends were like, "You're such a good writer," and my family was like, "You're such a good writer." I got this rejection from *Clarkesworld*. Of course, from one of the most well-known and sought-after publications. I think I even committed the very grave mistake of trying to email him back and be like, "Why though?"

Mona West: Oh no.

C.J. Dotson: I have never made that mistake again. He didn't answer, which, thank goodness, because that would have been even more mortifying in hindsight. What really helps me get through it now is community. I mentioned a minute ago that Pitch Wars did not get me my agent, but Pitch Wars got me the people that I spend the most online time with, the people that I talk to the most, the people who understand the most, the struggle in publishing, and the people who can help me and who I feel like I can help, and all of those things together, really - I wouldn't necessarily say I've got a thick skin. I can still get my feelings hurt. It's easier to shake stuff off, especially when you've got a really good crew of people who are just incredible, who I'm so lucky to have, who can be there for you, and who get it. Even on the days when you don't really want a cheerleader or you don't really want someone to go, "It's going to be okay," just even having someone go, "Oh, my God, that sucks. I'm sorry," makes it easier to move past it. I don't think that I would have gotten this far without my people.

Mona West: I want to ask a few follow-ups. That is the thread that comes up again and again and again, is community. You have these people who have a shared experience. They know the trials and tribulations. They know how much it hurts to get these rejections. They know how exciting it is to get these acceptances. Having people who share that same experience makes such a huge difference. You mentioned your family and presumably non-writer friends, their feedback, and how that maybe puffed you up and gave you unrealistic expectations. I have been there 100%.

I was in the Gifted and Talented program in elementary school and it did nothing to advance my life in a meaningful way except to give me unrealistic expectations for what my life would be and how easily things would come to me. I think it's actually probably more damaging than anything. It also sets expectations for the people in your life. I would find that my family and

my friends would see the stuff I put out and really give me all this praise. I was like drunk on the praise and drunk on the fact that, "I am so good at this." Then you actually put it out there and you actually attempt to join the ranks of the people who do this for a living and have been doing this their whole life, and you're just smacked down unceremoniously. You don't even get an answer even when you reach out to ask why. It sets you up for a little bit more of a challenge.

It's during those formative years when you're starting to learn who you are. Those ideas that things should come easy, things should be good. "I should be good at this." They're really, really deeply ingrained and really hard to break. I don't know that there's necessarily a question, but I can relate. I relate really, really hard to that. I guess one question that could come out of it is how is the relationship of your writing and your career to those non-writers in your life now? Do they really see and appreciate the amount of work you put into it and the toll it can take or are they still blissfully like, "Well, of course. Of course you have a deal. Fantastic work"?

C.J. Dotson: I have been so lucky in my friendships. I have the best friends. I also have the unfortunate situation where in 2021, my family and I (my husband, my kids, and I), moved 13 hours away from everyone I've ever known. Then in 2022, we moved again. We're now only seven hours away. I don't get to see my real-life friends very often. I have this very vivid memory of the going-away party that my friends threw me. It wasn't a big bash. When I say a party, I mean me and my six closest friends. It was right after I had gotten a short story accepted for and produced by a podcast called [ThirteenPod](#).

I don't know if you can find the story publicly now. It was one of their paywall stories at the time. I obviously was given the file to listen to. My friends wanted to listen to it. I was falling asleep on my buddy Marty's couch in his old apartment. The last thing I could hear as I was falling asleep, the night of my going away party, one of the last times that we were all going to be together for a while, was my friends listening to this story and talking about how sure they were that I was going to make it someday. If I never got a book published, I would not be cherishing that memory as much as I think I do.

I think that my friends and my family are really good at listening when I tell them about how hard parts of it have been. Some of them, I think, get it more than others. I have friends who are in creative endeavors in other arenas. There really is no replacing the understanding that you get from writing friends. It's a totally different kind of thing.

Mona West: I'm really glad, though, to hear that you can cherish that memory instead of potentially feeling like salt in the wound.

C.J. Dotson: Like it's heavy, yes.

Mona West: Right. It's something that's very positive and very lovely.

C.J. Dotson: Yes.

Mona West: Has getting the two-book deal now changed your perspective on rejection? Do you think it's going to change how you handle rejection moving forward?

C.J. Dotson: I'm not sure. I'm not entirely sure about how that's going to feel going forward. I still get short story rejections. I have had a few short story acceptances. There's part of me that almost wonders sometimes, if I get an acceptance, is it going to be because of my story or is it going to be because I have a book coming out, and maybe that makes me look a little bit more attractive as a potential draw?

I get this burst of Imposter Syndrome, like why would I feel like my story might be a draw just because I have a book coming out? I don't think that it's made rejection any harder or easier. I think that it's made rejection and acceptances just feel a little more complicated.

Courtney Floyd: I can totally see that. I think I've already started thinking that way too, even though I'm much further from my book's release. It makes me so thankful for blind submissions-

C.J. Dotson: Yes.

Courtney Floyd: -because then I can just be like, "Yes, if they accepted my story, it's because this story rocked," obviously. It's not just because maybe I have name recognition that can sort of boost sales or something. I don't know. I think that's maybe a good segue into the debut experience more generally. It's a wild time.

C.J. Dotson: It is.

Courtney Floyd: Very celebratory, but at least in my experience, there have been a bunch of struggles, some that I could have anticipated and some that I couldn't. I'm wondering, what's it been like for you? What's been surprising or challenging?

C.J. Dotson: The thing that I feel like I should have anticipated and didn't is that writing, for me, has always been something that's completely inside my control. Especially when I started writing horror during the pandemic, when everything was so out of control. My son was five, and my daughter was two. We were doing remote kindergarten. We had just moved my husband's, at the time, 91-year-old grandmother in with us because we wanted to be able to better take care of her during the pandemic. That came with a lot of challenges that I didn't anticipate. Everything just felt completely, completely out of control. Writing was this haven where I was God. Everything was in my control.

Now, I'm at this point where, at the time of recording this episode, we're a month and a week out from my book coming out, and there is nothing I can do. There's nothing I can do with it. Anything I might be able to say or do on social media - I'm so awkward on social media. I don't feel like I've got the time for it, I don't always remember it. There's a debut Discord

group, and I see people talking about all the stuff they're doing, and they're putting together their own pre-order campaigns, and they're ordering goodies, and they've got all these really clever, cool Instagram ideas and stuff. I can't do any of that stuff. There's nothing really that I *can* do.

The challenge that I didn't anticipate was how having the book be out of my control right now is deeply impacting my ability to write right now. I'll sit down, and I'll open the document. I've got a finished manuscript that I've just got to do some heavy revising on, and then I'm planning to send it to my agent. I've got a short story for an open call that, Courtney, I think that you were talking about too, the [Plott Hound](#) one.

Courtney Floyd: Yes.

C.J. Dotson: I've got a short story I'm trying to write for that. I managed sentences yesterday, but mostly, I'll open the documents, and then my brain will go, "But what about *The Cut*? Let's Google yourself again." It's not to get a thrill out of seeing my name or my book. I'm like, "Are there more bad reviews? Are there more good reviews? Is there a trade review? What if they hated it?" It's checking behavior. It gives me this brief illusion of control again that actually, is super detrimental to my writing time. That's the one that I didn't anticipate, and I feel like I should have.

A lot of the other struggles, like the nerves, the terrible, incredible nerves, I totally anticipated that. In our writing group, we've got friends who have a couple books published or have had their first book come out last year. Talking to them about that all has really helped a lot. This goes back to a question you asked me earlier, Mona. I think it was your question. One of the ways I didn't think of it before. (*Oh, cat bad.*) One of the ways that my family hasn't really understood is I remember the first time I told my mom. It was earlier this year. I said, "Oh, my God, my book is coming out this year. I am so terrified." She genuinely was baffled.

She was like, "Why are you afraid?" I was like, "Because I'm putting my heart out there and my soul and my words for strangers to read and pass judgment on. Of course, I'm afraid."

My son this morning, I said to him, "Officially, today I can say my book comes out next month." He's nine. He gives me this huge smile and this thumbs up. He was like, "We're going to be rich soon."

Courtney Floyd: Oh.

Mona West: [laughs]

C.J. Dobson: I was like, "No. We are very much not."

Courtney Floyd: I was nodding vigorously for most of that because, yes, it so impacts the writing. I'm doing the same thing. I'm googling myself just to try to feel some sort of control. Just thoughts of my book keep taking over when I'm trying to write new things or revise old

things. It is such a struggle. I don't know if I could have anticipated it, honestly, but somebody should have warned me about this.

C.J. Dotson: What they warned me about a lot and what they continue to warn me about a lot, especially, I think you guys interviewed [Dave Goodman](#) already -

Courtney Floyd: Yes.

C.J. Dotson: - Dave has been very helpful in the Stop Looking at Reviews camp. He's been the "stop looking at reviews" voice that's helped a lot. That's one of the warnings that I have needed multiple times and will need again.

Courtney Floyd: I'm dreading the day that I start getting reviews because when I taught, student evaluations would just tear me up. They would be mostly positive, but the one mean one would just ruin my life for weeks at a time. I don't need that kind of negativity. I already supply all the negativity I could ever need for myself.

C.J. Dotson: Right. I've got that on lockdown.

Courtney Floyd: On the subject of reviews, why is it so hard not to read them? What's drawing you to them?

C.J. Dotson: It's this terrible combination of wanting to validate my positive feelings about my writing and wanting or being unable to not validate my bad feelings about my writing. I don't think I know any single writer who has written something and been like, "This is perfect, and there's nothing wrong with it." You read the reviews, and you're like, "My pacing is a place that I struggle." It's just you want the feedback, you want to see if people got it or not, and you want to tell yourself, "This person gets it."

There's also a really personal aspect – I mean, everybody's books are personal, but my book deals with a protagonist who has escaped from an abusive situation. I've had a couple of people reach out in DMs, like early readers, who have said that seeing my portrayal of Sadie in that light was really helpful for them. It's weird to say that I'm looking for that, because I want stories where people have been in this bad situation, but I would love to think that my writing might help anybody in some way.

Then, also, sometimes it's this purely self-serving, I just want to look at the four-star reviews or the five-star reviews and have a little bit of an ego boost. It's hard to know that there's this room full of people talking about you, and you shouldn't put your ear to the door and listen to it. That's what Goodreads especially feels like, that there's this little room, and everybody's in there saying stuff about you, but you're not allowed to know what they're saying if you're doing it right. How do you handle that?

How do you handle that? I don't know. I'll figure it out eventually. I'm still occasionally even looking at the bad ones, and I shouldn't. I look at the average star rating. Then if it's gone up,

then I know I can go and look at what the review is. If it's gone down, I have to force myself not to look. Sometimes it still is so tempting.

Courtney Floyd: Yes.

C.J. Dotson: What's really helped with that, with keeping my perspective when I do slip up and look at the bad reviews, is finding bad reviews for books that I have loved. It's a book that I know, I think, is incredible, and here's somebody who gave it a one-star review. They either weren't the right reader for that book, or they just didn't get it. A lot of people just don't get stuff. Then, for maybe three days, I can tell myself, "Oh, the people who don't like my book just aren't the right reader for it," or, "The people who don't like my book just didn't get it." Then that wears off, and eventually, I'm back to, "The people who don't like my book are right," and I have to work my way back to the other mindset again.

Courtney Floyd: I can totally get that because publishing feels like throwing your work out into the void in a big way. So much of my work, like my audio drama and my short stories, I never know if it's finding its readers, if it's making those connections that I hope it goes out and makes in the world. I feel like that temptation is going to be huge when there is this room full of people who could tell me if that's working. I love your strategy.

For a brief period of time, I had a different podcast, because I have a problem, and I start too many podcasts. It was called *Lit Slashing*, which is a reference to the practice of panning books in the 19th century, they called it "slashing," so it's not a fanfic reference. I just found and shared horrible reviews of beloved classic fiction.

C.J. Dotson: That's fun.

Courtney Floyd: That was really great to be like, "Oh, somebody called the Brontë sisters' novels too gothic. They really didn't get it." Knowing those people are out there, it is helpful. It feels like there's a lingering toll of reading those bad reviews, maybe.

Mona West: I have mentioned this before on the podcast, I work in healthcare, and Courtney and I have backgrounds in academia. Feedback comes at you so fast in those industries. You always know how you're doing, and you have to know how you're doing. When you put out a research article, you can see how many people are citing it. You can see how many people are referencing it. When you take a test, you can get your grade back. It's very weird, I would imagine, to switch gears and suddenly enter this world where it's completely opaque. You go from knowing exactly how you did on something and exactly how people are responding to a world where you really don't have a good finger on the pulse. If you try to put your finger on the pulse, you might drive yourself completely insane.

I don't know that there's a way to model the writing world after those other industries and those other professions where you can get that feedback in a way that feels a little less toxic. If I get to a point where I'm publishing a book – and I've published just a tiny, tiny amount of

short stories, and even those, I dig up the reviews. There's two reviews for one of my short stories, and I absolutely had to, because I'm so accustomed to knowing what people think of the work I've done, but it's also different. A grade on a test isn't something that I feel deep in my soul versus a review on a story that I've poured so much of my time, and my life, and my heart into. So it's very different, but I do just think it's interesting that we're conditioned in so many other ways to expect the feedback and to want the feedback. Then you have to turn that off, and it seems like it's a real, real struggle. I, for sure, am going to struggle with that if it ever gets to that point in my career.

Courtney Floyd: From my position in academia, though, when you assign grades, that's all people get out of the feedback, is whether they got an A or not. Yes, I want an A in publishing, but also that's not super meaningful, right? I guess I'm glad that we don't work on that model. Also, can you imagine if books got graded as a matter of course? That's horrifying. What happens when your book comes out and you get a D?

Mona West: Who's grading it, right? Who's the person who has the power to grade it?

Courtney Floyd: You would imagine that's a top-down situation. We have [lead titles and midlist](#) right now, but imagine if they made that explicit. How mortifying.

Mona West: I need to get an A+. I need a 4.0 in being a creative writer, or I quit.

C.J. Dotson: I need to be on Macmillan's Dean's List.

Mona West: Yes. [laughs]

Courtney Floyd: The honor roll.

Mona West: That leads into the second part of our question. Whether you have actually found anything useful in the negative feedback that you've received and the negative reviews that you've read.

C.J. Dotson: Kind of. I hesitate to say “yes, I have,” because I feel like that might encourage other writers who might be doing a better job than I am at not checking bad reviews, it might encourage them to look at bad reviews. Don't do it, guys. You're doing a great job if you're not looking at the bad reviews, good for you, but I look at them. I say kind of because what really brought it home for me was not just seeing the two-star reviews. *The Cut* has a very slow first one or two-thirds. It's an atmospheric, character-driven story for the first one or two-thirds of the book. It's a slow burn with the horror. I really tried to build it up gradually. That seems to have been the most commonly cited reason for poor reviews. People don't really seem to have the patience for that.

Then I read [When the Wolf Comes Home by Nat Cassidy](#). That book just *starts*, and it's incredible, by the way. I got to read it on [NetGalley](#). It comes out, I believe, in late April. I went in knowing only the title, and the cover, and the author. I had read his debut, [Mary: An](#)

[Awakening of Terror](#), which is also phenomenal. I knew I was going to like this book because I liked *Mary* so much. Nat Cassidy seems like a really positive person when I see him on socials. I love to support people who seem like they are a positive influence on the community. I was really excited to get to read *When the Wolf Comes Home*, and I did not learn anything else about it intentionally, because when I'm going to watch a movie or a show or read a book that I know I'm going to like, I go in as blind as I can because I spoil for myself really badly. I guess things too quickly a lot of the time, and so I would rather go in blind.

I went in thinking that *When the Wolf Comes Home* was probably going to be like a werewolf book, and it is so much cooler than that. It starts so fast, and it just keeps going. I have to try to capture some of that feeling. Really, it inspired me to want to try to write, for one thing, grosser, and for another thing, faster books. It was such a fun read. It was that, it was reading Nat Cassidy's new book and the phenomenal pacing and how much I loved it, paired with the common factor in a lot of my negative reviews being about the pacing together that made me want to work more on that.

Mona West: Interesting. There's a little bit of kismet there because that book just happened to enter your life around the time that you were looking at these reviews and getting that kind of feedback.

C.J. Dotson: Yes.

Mona West: Do you think the feedback would have been as constructive if you did not have that example so soon after of what you might want to aspire to in your future work?

C.J. Dotson: I'm not sure. I would say possibly not just because so much of the conventional wisdom is to ignore the negative reviews and because, as of right now, there's still more positive reviews than negative reviews overall for my book. I can only guess, but I would guess no.

I would guess that without having a corresponding positive experience with the other side of what the reviews were mentioning, I think the negative reviews on their own, I don't find them helpful. I wouldn't recommend them as a source of helpfulness for other writers. Having them in conjunction with seeing this other example that I loved that was so positive, I think that's what made the difference.

Courtney Floyd: It sounds less like feedback and more like you were thinking about pacing and want to try this challenging thing. Not like *The Cut* did anything wrong. People are going to complain. That pacing was pristine, as far as I'm concerned. I loved the slow build. I was there for it. Maybe it was just a perfect storm of - I don't know if this is true for you, but for me as a writer, after the end of every project, I'm trying to challenge myself in some new way. Often, it comes out of something I struggled with in my last project.

With *Higher Magic*, it took me a while to get the urgency and motivation where it needed to be

to really propel the reader through the story. With a project that I just pitched my editor, I was like, "This is going to be literally life-or-death stakes. How do I design a story with life-or-death stakes that's really compelling?" The challenge comes out of the past thing in a way without the past thing actually being broken or wrong, if that makes sense.

C.J. Dotson: That's interesting. That's probably part of what's going on with - I am an overwriter, so I'm always trying to be more aware of pacing. That's my perpetual problem. The novel that I'm going to be revising as soon as I can get my stupid brain to work is one that started out when I finished the first draft. My target was 90,000 words. I finished the first draft at 138,000 words. In my first round of revisions, I got it cut down to 97,000 words and it still needs more cutting.

For me, I do think that mostly when I find what I want to work on next or how I want to challenge myself next, I do think that mostly I find that from the work of writers that I admire. For *The Cut*, as an example, one of the things that I feel I did really well in *The Cut* was the atmosphere and the descriptive writing. I wrote *The Cut*, I was working on *The Cut* - I think I started it... my memory for time is really bad, so I don't really fully remember if I beta-read [The Faceless Thing That We Adore by Hester Steel](#) before I drafted *The Cut* at all or if I beta-read that while I was working on my revisions.

Hester Steel has this gorgeous horror novel coming out later this year called *The Faceless Thing We Adore*. It is lush. Her descriptive prose is gorgeous and vivid and really takes you there. That's the part I'm focusing on right now because it's the part that I feel impacted my writing in *The Cut*, but the whole book is phenomenal. I super recommend it. Her descriptive writing was just - you were *on* that island. You were tasting the lemons. It was very, very powerful, and it made me more aware of my descriptive writing.

I do recognize from my own work the things that I need to work on, particularly the pacing and the overwriting, but when there's something that really lights a fire in me, it's almost always because I found something that I really admire in someone else's art and would love to find a way to apply some aspect of that to my own work.

Mona West: I feel like I'm really good at finding this nebulous thing I like in other books, very bad at pinpointing why I love it so much. I also think I'm kind of okay at recognizing my own limitations and weaknesses as a writer, but obviously having another set of eyes on it - ideally not reviews, ideally critiques, trusted writing partners and stuff - that's going to help me better identify the areas where I need to improve.

But it is true that reading widely makes you a better writer, but I've never been particularly good at figuring out what about the things I'm reading make the books so good, so that I can then try to do the same thing in my own work. In part, because I read in very small chunks, especially the past few years. I'm a very, very slow reader. I'll read a chapter every couple of days. I'm never reading such a big chunk that I can really synthesize what's happening in any coherent way, other than just straight up, "This is what's happening in the plot," not, "This is

what's happening behind the scenes in the writing.”

I think it's true. If you want to be a better writer, you need critique people, folks who you trust, who can look at it and tell you what they think needs to change. You also need to read widely because, eventually, those books are going to teach you a lesson, and looking at reviews, looking at what outsiders may think is probably not going to get you there. Eventually, maybe. Like in your case, they kind of led you that way.

You read that book [*When the Wolf Comes Home*], and you love that book, and you figured out why that book's pacing was so fantastic. You probably would have done that - to some degree, you would have noticed there was something about it, and maybe it have gotten the wheels turning and maybe you would have landed on that answer later on, but it still resonated with you in a way that it would have probably - You would have cogitated on why people love it so much.

We have some other questions, but there's one I really want to follow up on, Courtney, if you're okay with me going rogue for a second -

Courtney Floyd: Sure. Yes.

Mona West: - which I do a lot in these interviews anyway. Going way back to the beginning of this interview, you mentioned that you were awkward when you were younger and really had a hard time with just interacting with people and potentially making friends and joining groups. What are your recommendations for people who struggle with that kind of social awkwardness, introvertedness in joining the writing community? How do you get into it and become a real part of it when you feel like maybe your social graces are -

C.J. Dotson: You need to make friends specifically with [MK Hardy](#).

Courtney Floyd: Who will be on the podcast in a few episodes.

Mona West: Yes.

C.J. Dotson: Serious answer. I mentioned Pitch Wars as the place where I really got my jumping-off point into the writing community. I didn't get that aspect of it right away. There's an interview floating around somewhere on the old Pitch Wars website where my mentor and I were interviewed, but everybody and their mentor were interviewed for the website at different times. When I read my answers back now - which I haven't done in a while, but I did I think a year ago or so - I can see how much I was at first trying to focus on the get-an-agent's-attention aspect of Pitch Wars and not really focusing on the making friends aspect of it. That was because I was still in that mindset of when I enter a new group, my first impulse is to think that nobody likes me. I was in that mindset really bad at first in Pitch Wars.

I did Pitch Wars in 2020, so there was all that social isolation. A really good friend of my husband's and mine passed away. I think he entered hospice care the day that I found out I

got into Pitch Wars. It was a very socially weird time in everybody's lives and a socially challenging time for - not socially challenging but challenging in terms of friendships at that time for me. At first, I just completely ignored the social aspect of Pitch Wars entirely. I don't fully remember what prompted me to ask to join the Discord, but I did and made the friends.

I guess my advice for other people who feel awkward and weird is twofold, and it's: just try. It sounds so easy and trite, but you'll never find your groups if you don't put yourself out there a little bit. The other one is authors are all pretty much awkward and weird also. We're all people who are choosing to spend a lot of our time sitting by ourselves making up stories that we are telling mostly to ourselves for a long time. We're all probably somewhere on the same awkwardness continent as you.

It doesn't need to feel as intimidating to make writing friends as it did at first. That was a trick I was playing on myself. The communities I've lucked into, just really positive, incredibly cool communities full of wonderful and wildly talented and incredibly kind people. Authors are also awkward. It's okay. [laughs]

Courtney Floyd: It's our superpower, really, I think. I think we have time for one more question before we wrap up, and I'm going to just cheat a little bit and bundle two of them together because I want to revisit this thing at the beginning where you talked about stopping smoking and how that ground your process to a halt. Part 1 of the question is how do you rebuild your process from the ground up? Part 2 is has publishing, and its deadlines and pressures forced you to update your process or change it again?

C.J. Dotson: That's a good question. When I quit smoking, and was pregnant, and had my baby, and I did not write for two years, and I wanted to start writing again, like I said, mostly for me, but also so that my kids could see their mom pursuing her dream no matter what happened, even if I failed. It was super hard at first. I basically had to redo the entire way that I approached writing. You've probably heard the advice, if you're struggling with writer's block, try switching your font to Comic Sans or something similar.

I think that probably does work for a lot of people because it's about shaking up what you're doing in some way. Previously, before I quit smoking, I would take a notebook and a pen outside with me on smoke breaks, either at work or when my kid was taking a nap or asleep or having a snack in his high chair safely. I would take a notebook and a pen and go outside and smoke and write by hand. I would do all of my first drafts completely by hand. My first round of edits, I would do by hand.

Then my second round of edits would be as I transcribed them into the computer. I had to cut out the handwritten first drafts entirely. I started out by forcing myself to do 10 minutes a day of writing. I did it on my phone at first. I couldn't even imagine drafting on my phone anymore because I'm such a typo monster. At the time, I would be doing midnight feedings or some other aspect of parenting where it's best to not be super engaged with your kid because you want them to go back to sleep or you want them to learn to self-soothe or you want them to

learn to independent-play.

It would be some aspect of parenting that you're supposed to give them a little bit more space, so I would just try to write on my phone. I would try to do 10 minutes a day. No matter what, I could do that. I could do 10 minutes a day. At first, I had to force it. At first, it was a hard 10 minutes every day. Sometimes, I would get to the end of my day and realize I hadn't done it and force it out real quick at the end of the day. After a while, I realized I wasn't craving a cigarette while I was writing anymore because I had changed.

I was no longer handwriting. I was no longer going outside to write. After a while, the 10 minutes, I didn't have to force it. Then it would be more than 10 minutes, and it gradually just grew out from there. I have been thinking about this a lot lately because I mentioned lately I've been struggling to write again as my debut day gets closer and closer. I've been finding myself - I'll sit down in my writing recliner with my laptop, and I won't let myself do anything fun because it's not time for fun.

It's time for writing, but I also won't let myself write because it's time to panic and check on my book. I just wind up paralyzed. I think what I'm going to do is try to go back to some like, "You only have to do focus-on-writing for X amount of minutes a day at first." The other thing that helps is that I have this horrible attention span. I can't. I'll be writing for a couple of minutes and my brain will start going, "Doot, doot, doot. Nope, nope, nope. Something else."

I've got this one, very stupid phone game. It's just a Bejeweled ripoff. It's just a match-three game. When my brain starts wandering away, I will give myself one level of the game. Win or lose, one level, and then I put it down and I write again. If it's a particularly bad brain day, I tell myself, "I cannot pick the phone back up and do another level until I've done 100 words, just 100 words." I've gotten through thousand word, 2,000-word days that way, just 100 words at a time with tiny phone breaks in between.

What really does it is shaking it up and giving yourself a little bit of grace with the stupid phone game. Give yourself little rewards, and if you're in a place where you're completely blocked and you can't do it, start small. You don't need to overwhelm yourself. You're already overwhelmed. That's what worked for me.

Courtney Floyd: That's fantastic. I have to trick my brain as well and one big way that I do it is instead of writing at my desk with my lovely keyboard, which is a delight, I just write at the kitchen table on my terrible built-in keyboard because it doesn't count as writing when I'm doing it somewhere that's not the Writing Spot. It's just like wrangling the gremlin brain. It's not always successful.

C.J. Dotson: It's gotten us this far.

Courtney Floyd: Yes.

Mona West: Exactly.

Courtney Floyd: Can you tell listeners, again, we said it at the top of the episode, but where to find you and what you would like them to do, what you would like them to read?

C.J. Dotson: Yes. Mostly, I'm active these days on Bluesky and that's [C.J.-dotson.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/CJ-dotson) is where you can find me there. I'm also on Instagram sporadically because I don't really have much to take pictures of except for snow and my cats, which I guess could be a lot, but they don't stand still very well. There, I'm [C.J. dots](#), both of which I had to check as I was saying them because my memory is not great. Of course, I think you should read [The Cut](#), which is my book that's coming out on April 8th.

I've also mentioned a couple of really great books during this interview. I mentioned [The Faceless Thing We Adore by Hester Steel](#), which is lush and gorgeous and horrifying and haunting, and it has stayed with me since I read it. [When the Wolf Comes Home by Nat Cassidy](#), bonkers good time. Fantastic horror novel. A+ fun. Super gross. Loved it. Devastating ending. [At Dark, I Become Loathsome by Eric LaRocca](#) was one of the most horrifying books I've read and also has some of the most beautiful prose to juxtapose the horror against.

[The Needfire by MK Hardy](#), who aside from being some of the best people I know are also some of the best writers I know, and it's a moody and atmospheric Scottish historical gothic horror, full of yearning and secrets and it's wonderful. [Dissolution by Nick Binge](#), that's coming out soon. It's a decades-spanning memory thriller with the most tender heart at its core, and it's so intricately plotted and perfect. I think I said perfect of all of the books I just mentioned.

Courtney Floyd: They're all perfect books.

C.J. Dotson: Yes. [They're good dogs. Brent.](#)

Courtney Floyd: Yes.

Mona West: [laughs]

Courtney Floyd: Listeners, you have plenty of companion reads to choose from when you obviously go out immediately after listening to this to buy [The Cut](#).

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

[END OF AUDIO 1:02:07]