



Unfortunately...

You're a Member of a Losing Team

Podcast Title: *Unfortunately...*

Episode Number: S1E11

Length: 1 hour, 12 minutes

Hosts: Mona West and Courtney Floyd

Guest: Daryl Gregory

Theme Music: "Bad Scene" by Podington Bear. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 International License](#)

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

Courtney Floyd: I'm Courtney Floyd.

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

Mona: Today on the podcast, we're talking to Daryl Gregory. He is a Seattle writer whose novels and short stories have been translated into a dozen languages and have won multiple awards, including the World Fantasy, Shirley Jackson, and Crawford Awards. His work has also been nominated for the Hugo, Nebula, Edgar, Dragon, Locus, Lambda, and Sturgeon Awards. I don't think that list is long enough, though. His latest novel is [When We Were Real](#), coming out this month, April 2025.

His seven other novels include [Revelator](#), *Spoonbenders*, and [Pandemonium](#). Other books include the novellas [The Album of Dr. Moreau](#) and [We Are All Completely Fine](#), and the short fiction collection [Impossible and Other Stories](#), a [Publishers Weekly](#) book of the year. He also teaches writing and is a regular instructor at the [Viable Paradise Writing Workshop](#), which is where we met you.

Daryl Gregory: Great. How lovely.

Mona: Welcome to the podcast. Yes.

Daryl: Oh, thanks for having me. This is lovely. It's so nice that -- The thing about teaching at Viable Paradise, as opposed to a high school, is that there's no weird, awkward transition to, "Now you're an adult and we're allowed to have conversations outside of school." You guys come [laughs] as adults.

Mona: It's true. The power dynamic definitely is still there a little bit. The first time we got coffee and did some writing, I was like, "I have to be on my best behavior or he's going to grade me."

Daryl: Oh, really? I always figure that ends on Friday, but maybe that's a myth that we have. It's true. I went to Clarion 35 years ago, and I was talking to one of my teachers, **Kim Stanley Robinson**, and I was still having that teacher thing [chuckles] 35 years later. "Please, Mr. Robinson." He's like, "Daryl, we've been friends for a long time." I'm like, "Oh, okay."

Mona: Yes. [laughs] A little seed of that will always be there. I think that's a good thing. We're always going to have that little memory of you teaching us and helping us along the journey while also being someone now that we can just hang out with and shoot the shit [laughs].

Courtney: All right. The ice is already broken, but we'll do our icebreaker anyway. The question that you chose was, what is your favorite quote, saying, or philosophy about failure? I'll kick us off because it recently occurred to me that I haven't shared this one yet on the podcast, but it was one that got me through grad school so it's an important one, and it's Ms. Frizzle saying, "Take chances, make mistakes, get messy." [chuckles]

Daryl: Ms. Frizzle, *The Magic Bus* driver?

Courtney: Yes, on [The Magic School Bus](#).

Daryl: That's great. She's a wise soul. I actually have two. One speaks to the mission of this podcast, and that is, "Writers should get to know other writers. That way, you don't feel like such a lonely loser, but a member of a losing team."

Mona: [laughs] I never thought of it that way. I like that.

Daryl: It's like, "Look, oh yes, we're all losing. We're all on this team. We're the Cubs, basically." I grew up in Chicago, and I rooted my entire life for the Chicago Cubs. Then when they won the World Series, I was like, "This is breaking my family religion." The second one I think about all the time, and it's in tension with the first one -- The first one is, get to know other writers so you can commiserate.

The one I think about all the time, related to failure is, "Keep your eyes on your own page." Somebody is always getting something that you want. Somebody is selling more. Somebody is getting the award. Somebody is getting to do things. It's a ridiculous thing to feel jealous, because it's not like you can write their books. It's not like you can say, "I could have written that exact book, and the exact same thing would have happened."

In some ways, writers have it easier than professional sports athletes, where it's like, "No, they legitimately scored more points than you." There's objective [data]. For us, you're creating works of art so it's kind of crazy to compare. Especially when you're starting out, I was tremendously feeling like I was losing, there was a race going on. I came out of Clarion

with a cohort of other writers, the way you guys came out of Viable Paradise, and whenever something happened, I was like, "Oh, I'm behind. I'm not getting enough done. I'm not doing my job." That can just drive you insane. Get to know other writers, but also keep your eyes on your own page. If you can work out that tension, you'll be fine.

Mona: [laughs] I think the key is to just stay away from social media, because I'll be okay in those lulls where I'm just doing my own thing. I'm powering through, I'm writing this cool story, this is great. Then I'll pop on social media, and I'll see -- I just saw a post from someone who got an acceptance from a magazine that I just got rejected from. It's almost like I have no object permanence. When I don't see it, it's fine. As soon as I see it, it's like, "That's not fair. That sucks. I hate her. I want that." It is hard to find a balance, especially nowadays where all that stuff is so easily accessible. All the successes are easily accessible.

Daryl: It's so weighted toward success, right? This is why your podcast is doing a service, which is it's so weighted toward our Instagram selves, the selves where something great is going on. In some ways, that's totally understandable. If you're just constantly going online whining, you're going to drive people insane, maybe even your family. Also, if you sell a novel, and you start whining about, "Oh, the publicity was bad for my novel," everybody who hasn't sold a novel is like -- Can we swear on this podcast?

Mona: Oh, yes.

Daryl: Everybody else is like, "Fuck you. Where do you get off whining?" There's always somebody who's not gotten what you've gotten. There's always people who have gotten stuff you want. Yes, we're trapped on that ladder.

Mona: Yes, the Ladder of Success, the Mobius Strip of Success, in the words of our colleague, [laughs] our Viable Paradise colleague, [Zohar](#).

Daryl: Yes, because you will always be on the other side of it. One time I asked-- There's a great legendary editor, Gardner Dozois, who edited *Asimov's* for years. Gardner Dozois ran [The Year's Best Science Fiction](#) for years. All I wanted was to get into a year's best. That finally happened. One day, I'm sitting at a bar. Now I know Gardner Dozois. He died a few years ago. I was at this bar. I was like, "Gardner, do you have any advice about writing careers?" He said, "Daryl, it's all a ladder of sadness." I'm like, "Oh."

The Ladder of Sadness is, when you start out, you just want to sell one short story. You're thinking, "If I could sell one short story, I'd be happy. That would be enough." Then you get that wrong. Then you're like, "Oh, my God." You look up and you're like, "Well, that was a fluke. I need to sell at least two short stories, or I'm a complete fraud." Then you sell another short story. Then you're like, "Well, that was to the same venue. That doesn't really count." You're always looking above.

The trick with the Ladder of Sadness is there are always rungs above you, but if you can stop

for a second and look around where you actually are, and look how far you've come, that really helps. Mostly, it feels like you're failing at all times [laughs].

Mona: Yes. Like you said, we're a team of losers. At least we're all together on the same team.

Daryl: Some of us fall off the ladder, yes.

Mona: I'm always really bad at this particular icebreaker. I never actually come up with anything until the very last minute. The one that I have at this moment, the philosophy that I like about writing, is to "write downhill." I've really been trying to adhere to that lately because I'm really struggling. There's a lot of stuff going on personally and obviously the world at large, that's making it hard to sit down and focus.

I heard this once that you should "write downhill," which is where you essentially sit down and write literally anything. Then the next time you come back to it, there is something to work with. It's always easier when there's literally anything written down. I'm trying to force myself to just do that one tiny little piece, even if it's just a sentence or two. Because even if I leave that, and come back the next day, well, there's something. I'm starting to gain momentum, and I'm starting to roll downhill. That's where the writing starts to get easier.

Daryl: I know people who do morning pages. They do journaling in the morning to just put anything down. Also, I think the key part of that, Mona, is also you're telling your brain, "This is a job we're going to keep doing. This is not a thing that we do every two weeks. This is a thing you keep doing."

My wife is a professor and works for Penn State, and now she's a vice provost person, more of an administrator. When she helped people with their dissertations, when she was advising them, she would tell them, "Every day, you have to touch your dissertation, even if it's just to pick it up and move it to the other side of the table." Because you have to keep your brain saying, "Look, this is something we're always working on. This is in the back burner. Your brain, even when you're really busy, will keep working on problems if you're telling it, "This is important, this is important, we need to keep it in mind."

Mona: Yeah, even a couple words is writing. Honestly, even just when I'm walking my dog, thinking about nothing, and the stories are percolating, that's writing. Anything you're doing to move the needle is progress.

Daryl: Oh, and I do all kinds of writing to fool myself into getting more writing done. I've tried all kinds of tactics, and I keep messing with my process to see what'll happen. One thing I've been doing lately is, well, let me see if I can do this as a synopsis, as if it's an already completed novel. Could I fool myself into thinking there's a book here when I'm in the early parts of the process? I'm at the very earliest parts of this new book. I can't think clearly unless I'm writing the words. It forces me to just think in terms of the story and start filling in the gaps.

I know that, as I write, I will actually come up with better ideas as I get into it. This is fooling myself into thinking, "No, there's something worth writing about here. You could finish a story like this. You will come up with a better one as you go, as you think deeper about your characters and their problems." I need some sort of confidence that I'm not just going to just immediately hit a brick wall, that all I've come up with is a premise and not a story.

Mona: Yes, absolutely. Why don't we do the journey question, and then we can get back into all the cool stuff? This is the question we ask everybody because I think it's really helpful for folks to hear where you started, where you've come from, what you've been through to get here. We're in an industry where so many of our efforts and failures are invisible, where it's easy to think of people as overnight successes when it may have taken decades to "arrive." In the interest of making some of that invisible work more visible, can you briefly tell us where you are in your writing journey and what you went through to get there? Tell us your entire writing story briefly.

Daryl: Oh, briefly, in 30 seconds. I went to Clarion as a 22, 23-year-old. I think I was 23. I knew I wanted to write, didn't know how to do it, didn't know any other writers. Went to Clarion, that was a huge change for me. I met writers, I met my cohort, it was great. It was very hard to get writing done. I was a high school teacher. I would get some stories done. It was very difficult. Then I finally switched careers so I could have -- stopped teaching high school so I could have more energy for writing.

Then basically, I was very traditional in that I was writing short stories first. I wasn't ready to just go jump right into novels. Most of the new writers I meet now are all in on novels right away. I wasn't like that. I was a short story guy because I couldn't think of larger stories. This is a great career move for everybody listening -- go ahead and disappear for 10 years and not sell anything.

My wife was getting tenure, we were raising kids, and I was working on this one novel for two hours every single week. That's as much as I could do. Nothing was getting done. I get to the end of this process after years and years, and it's a totally unworkable novel that just -- it's like a ransom note of different ideas and different -- I kept changing as a writer as I was going too.

So chucked that, and finally got to the point in our lives where I could write half-time. I could work, program half-time, write half-time. That made a big difference. I began throwing hours into learning how to write novels and getting more time for short stories. I've been doing that mostly. For a while, I was a full-time writer. Then I realized that as soon as I went full-time, my productivity dropped [laughs] when I had the whole day to do it in.

Today, I still do some programming for my friend's startup. I do 15, 20 hours a week for them or build websites for other people like Viable Paradise. Just because I need to constrain my time in order to actually get writing done. Mostly, what I do now, if you call it a career, is I work, I write novels. Then in between novels, I write novellas and short stories that are usually completely different mood from the novels because I'm so exhausted.

If I write something really serious and grim, I have to write something goofy immediately afterward. I switch moods a lot. This is not a great marketing move, by the way, to your listeners. Every book is basically a different genre, or at least they're never the same genre twice in a row to the point where my editor now is like, "Daryl, can you at least write two science fiction books in a row? Could you do it?" I'm like, "I don't know, man."

Yeah, that's where I'm at now. I've been doing this for -- what I've just described is 35 years of being a writer. No, is that true? I'm about to turn 60 years old this year, so yeah, I started at 23, sure, it's even more than that. I can do math. If anybody looks at it from the outside and think, "Oh, you're an overnight success," no, it's decades of grinding away.

Mona: There's a lot to pull from there. I have a number of questions that came out of that, but Courtney, is there anything you want to jump into first?

Courtney: Yeah, I guess I'm just thinking about -- we had planned to ask you if you ever actually feel successful. I think our earlier conversation about the Ladder of Sadness maybe [chuckles] indicates how you would answer that. I'm wondering if, over this 30-something years, has your way of thinking about success changed or evolved? What does it look like to you?

Daryl: Well, for sure, the Imposter Syndrome has died down because, at a certain point, it becomes untenable to keep saying, "I don't belong here," if I keep writing. Then being able to teach at Viable [Paradise], and I've taught at other workshops, at Clarion and some other places. When you have evidence that you keep doing it, you can't keep claiming that you feel like an impostor, even if you do sometimes [laughs].

What's changed for me is, I used to be embarrassed to say, "No, I'm a writer," because I felt like there wasn't enough evidence, and it could all go away in a second. Now, at some point over the past decades, I was like, "No, I'm a writer. That's my central identity as far as the outward-facing world. I'm like, "Oh, okay." I got more comfortable with that. I guess the comfort is increased.

The confidence that I can actually write good sentences, *that* I feel comfortable with. I'm like, "Oh no, I can do this job. I have done this job in the past, so I can't think that I can't do it." Still, you never "arrive." You never get to the point -- maybe some other people have -- where I am guaranteed to sell every book I write now. No, you still don't have that. The business side of it still can make you feel terrible.

The confidence in actually doing the work and writing, that has increased over time just based on, "Oh, I keep doing it." I used to have this thing called the Spreadsheet of Shame. It was my Excel spreadsheet, where as I fell behind in my word counts, it would gradually get redder, like cells would fill in red and shame me into writing faster. I realized, a few years ago, I was like, "Oh, great, you don't do that anymore," because I love writing, and my life is finally at a point where I can make time for it that I don't need it anymore.

It's like, "Oh, this is the thing you do." Every day, you're going to go write somewhere, usually in a coffee shop. I usually try to get Mona or somebody else to show up, and then we can be like two hermit crabs, like, we could look at each other and go, "Are you writing?"

"Yeah, I'm writing."

"All right."

You go back to yourself. I don't know if that answers your question, but that confidence level, I will say, has gotten better over time.

Mona: We've had a couple of conversations with guests talking about things like awards, and the question has always been centered around whether getting awards builds up your reputation, builds up your **cachet** to the point where you're noticing more success in the industry. I'm actually wondering, do awards, do nominations, do those contribute to the shift in Impostor Syndrome?

As you get awards, are you like, "Okay, actually, I am good at this?" or does it make the Impostor Syndrome worse? How does the outward response to your work impact your perspective on your own abilities and success?

Daryl: Right. Yeah, I was thinking about this because you had mentioned that we may talk about this. I was like, "How do I feel about awards?" On one hand, yes, having a bunch of strangers give you a prize, basically like your Cracker Jack prize, does help with confidence. It does help career-wise, you have something to put on your resume. It may get you invited to some stuff or noticed by other editors, so it's easier to get work. It's like a drug that you get acclimated to.

Every time something good happens, it lasts a shorter and shorter period of time as far as actually making you feel good. None of the awards help you actually get the writing done. They might in that you have some confidence some of the time, but when you're actually facing the page, that stuff doesn't help at all. It may get in the way. It's the same with reviews. If you're into reading reviews, a positive review or a negative review can wreck your writing day. Either it will destroy you because it was a terrible review, or you'll be like, "I'm a god among mortals. Somebody recognized my genius at last." That doesn't help you write either. It's always a balancing act.

Mona: Yeah. [laughs] Also, we want to ask about the teaching aspect of it because now you're in a position, like you talked about earlier, where you are helping other writers and you're in a position of authority. Before we get to that, well, like I said, I'm still like, "Mr. Gregory, please like my story." Actually, I want to also ask more about being a full-time writer and you're not *full* full-time at this point because you are doing the programming on the side, but you mentioned, I think, before we started recording that all your days bleed together a bit. You don't really have a delineation between the work and not the work and weekends and

weekdays.

That's another piece of "success" that I don't know that we talk about a lot. Do you find that to be a sustainable lifestyle, and do you feel like it just becomes all-consuming because it is something you can do all the time, and it is something you also love? Where do you start to separate that piece of your life from everything else?

Daryl: Right. It is a weird thing that can border on dysfunctional and that I always feel a little guilty that I'm not working. Every day I'm not working, I feel guilty. Back in the old days when I was working full-time and having to write just at night, if I wasn't writing, getting a lot of writing done during the week, I would get grumpy and annoying. My wife would be like, "Could you just go away and write something for a while? I'll take the kids, go away for four hours," and then I would come back happier because then I felt like I was doing my job, this work ethic thing where you feel guilty if you're not getting your stuff done. It can be unhealthy, which is why you want to be partnered up or why you want to have a fuller life in that to have somebody with you who -- you need to pair up with someone who will wreck your productivity a little bit.

My wife and I are at the stage where we both, when we get together, because we're not raising kids right now -- our kids are grown and the first grandchild arrived about six months ago, which is lovely -- we're both at the stage where it's like, "So what do you want to do today? Do you want to work?"

"Yeah, I want to work too."

"Oh, thank God."

We're very comfortable in going off and working or going together someplace to work together. The one good thing about my schedule is that because I don't have a regular work week, at any time I'm available to do stuff, to be ultra flexible. I really like that. I like that I'm no longer in corporate America, where somebody else controls my time and stuff. It is very lovely to say, "Yes, every day feels like a work day," but on the other hand, I can go on any trip, I can do any particular thing during the day. It's great.

Mona: I think, personally, I worry a little bit because I did sort of work from home for a period of time, not as a writer, but I was doing academic stuff, and I know Courtney you're working from home, and it definitely can start to consume your entire life a little bit, but also your only pressure, really, is yourself. There's not as many external pressures to get stuff done. I think that, for me, at least that creates a monster because I have to be my own boss, and I am really driven by guilt.

[laughter]

Mona: If I'm my own boss and I'm saying I have to get X, Y, Z done, and then I can't get it

done in the time that I said I would, then I'm just sitting there stewing in my own misery for a period of time. Whereas, if someone else is like, "You need to get this done," for one, it seems easier to get it done when there's an external pressure, but it's just not as personal. It doesn't feel like as much of a personal failing if you don't meet someone else's deadline in a way, I guess [laughs].

Daryl: Right. I can see that. Courtney, how do you manage your time? How do you make time for writing and your job?

Courtney: Oh yes, that's a – when I am on my game, I get up at 5:00 and I write before work for a couple of hours because I don't have to commute. I can just get up and put words on the page before my critical brain comes online. I say that, I haven't been on my game in that way for over a year [chuckles]. It's really just pockets of time. I do try to write before work, because my work does demand a lot of energy and creativity.

I work in higher ed. I do consultations with people. I'm solving their problems often or helping them like brainstorm to solve their problems. It's a different creative muscle than writing is, but it can take all of that energy. Writing at night doesn't usually work well for me, but I do, all the hours that aren't day job hours, feel like they should be writing hours. It will fill whatever container I give it.

I have to be really strategic about pushing back against that. Thankfully, I have dogs that will scream at me if I don't take them on walks, or a partner who will disrupt my productivity. I live in the middle of the woods in Vermont. There's not a lot of outside world coming in to offer me distractions or break up the work, if that makes sense. It's very easy to switch from the day job computer to the writing computer, and then just be hunched over a screen all day long.

Daryl: One reason that I live in Seattle now, my wife still works for Penn State in Pennsylvania. I realized that I do better with an urban environment. If I have a coffee shop within 100 yards, like I do now, it soothes the soul. It's like, "Oh, okay." At a certain point, if I go three days without talking to anybody, I begin to feel a little alien and weird. I need to get out and I can come off as an extrovert, but actually, I test out to be pretty 50/50.

If I go too far into the introversion, yeah, I begin to feel alien, and I have to do things outside of my comfort zone like actually call somebody and say, "Can we go have a beer or something?" Which I always feel like, "They're busy, they don't want to hear from me. I don't want to bother anybody." Then I stay in my little hermit crab shell. It's a trick, yeah. How do you balance this stuff out? At least you have dogs who will force you out.

Courtney: Yes, it's a lifesaver. I'm jealous of that. I think it would be ideal to live walking distance from a coffee shop or a library or something, and to be able to do that body-doubling, have somebody else there who's just doing their work and pressuring me to do [chuckles] the same just by doing it.

Daryl: No, that's a really good point, which is even just being around people, even if you're not interacting with them much, just like you order your coffee, talk to the barista. I have a regular coffee shop that I brought Mona to where it's like my norm experience. They know my drink, and it's very comforting. Then when I sit down, it's basically like white noise around me. I'm not interacting with those folks, but I feel a little more human being around them and being outside a little bit, a little more sunlight than if I'm just at home.

Yeah, you have to do all these tricks as a writer to get yourself in fighting shape, like, "What is the conditions?" while at the same time, not being too precious about it. Because if you have all these rituals around writing, you will never do anything. If you can only write with your certain pen at a certain time, when the light is hitting the window at a certain angle, you're screwed. It's always a balancing act.

Mona: Yes. The dream is to be a full-time writer, for most of us, but that has its own Pandora's box that you may not anticipate if you're not thinking about it. How do you become a full-time writer without completely isolating yourself or completely spending 100% of your time either writing or feeling guilty about [chuckles] not writing?

Daryl: Right.

Mona: Yeah, it's probably something I'll never have to worry about, but it's nice to think about.

Daryl: Don't say it. You are saving lives, though. You do have a problem in that your job is meaningful. I'm not exactly sure what your job is, Courtney, but anytime I meet people who are like -- I know several lawyer-writers who -- writer-lawyers? lawyer-writers? [laughs] I'm like, "I think you're doing important stuff." It's like, "Yeah, but I really want to finish this novel." It's like, "Okay."

Mona: Right. I mean yeah, my patient, we got his heart going again, but it's not going to get me an award. It's not going to get me a Hugo [laughs]. It's a balancing act [laughs].

Daryl: I think, after you save someone's life, they should have to vote for you for an award.

Mona: You know what? Yes. I slip a little card into their pocket. "By the way, this is my website. Here are my pieces." Yeah, exactly. Good tip. Good tip. Yes [laughs]. Force your writing on everyone that you encounter, no matter what.

Daryl: I do admire those people who are entrepreneurial. I always hate the part of the year where everyone starts saying, "Please vote for me." They start posting everything they're nominated for or available for votes. As a Midwesterner, I grew up in Chicago. You're just not supposed to ask anybody to do anything, you're just supposed to shovel somebody else's driveway. That's the whole deal.

There's one award that I would always nominate myself for, which was the Daryl Awards. There was only one voter, it was my mom. She kept voting for another writer who spelled his

name differently, a different Daryl. I was like, so I've lost that award every year to Daryl Murphy.

Mona: [laughs] Oh man. If I asked my dad to vote for me, he'd probably be like, "Why?" [laughs] Can't count on that. Let's talk about teaching. That's another side of this industry that we haven't really explored. Courtney, you are also a teacher. I'm going to punt some of this to you.

Courtney: My Impostor Syndrome is starting up because I haven't been a teacher for a while now, but I used to teach composition for almost a decade. I learned a lot about process when I was doing that and that kind of thing. I'm wondering, has teaching writing shifted the way that you think about and approach your own writing, and in particular, your failures or struggles as a writer?

Daryl: Yes. For sure, when I first started teaching fiction writing, it made me have to decide some things about "what is my own process? What is important?" It's weird how it just clarified some thinking for me. I don't know if this is fooling yourself or not, sometimes I think, "Well, this works out really well as a lecture. Is this actually true?" Some things just seem to really work for me. When I stumble across them and I teach them, I'm like that, "I should actually be doing more of that," or, "I should start doing that."

Teaching always helps me, and it helps me figure out how does this process work. Always, my great fear, and Mona will understand this, is sort of a Hippocratic Oath where, like, first do no harm. With creative processes, if somebody is making a really rudimentary mistake, I'm pretty confident I can say, "You shouldn't do *this*, you should do *this*," and that'll help you out tremendously.

If there's some basic problems, you can tell somebody how to fix them and probably not do any harm. The better writers get and the more interesting they get, they may have a story that totally doesn't work for you, but your correction may throw them off the beam of what they're doing that's interesting and true. This is true at Viable [Paradise], where you meet some writers who are maybe writing stuff that's not commercial, but super interesting. You don't want to say, "Stop doing this."

When you make all these characters' motivations so opaque and no one knows what's going on, but there's other stuff that's going on, is that the thing that's making it really interesting? Because the reader's having to lean in so much? I'm always worried about doing harm. I always do it in-level. When I do line editing, I'll usually line-edit the first two pages of a short story or a chapter, and then say, "If you want more, there's more where that came from," because you just don't want to fill up the page with constant corrections with how Daryl would write this. **[36:41]**

I'm always trying to go in with a combination of, "Yes, I've learned a bunch of things and this is what worked for me," but it may not work for you. The common thing we say at Viable all the

time in most workshops is there aren't any rules, there's just tools. For me, the extension of that is there's only intentions. If you could ask a writer, "What are you trying to do?" Then we could have a conversation about how do you want to get that intention across?

If you're trying to create a static distance between you and the reader, if you're trying to bring in some coldness because that's the tone you're looking for, *that's* your intention. Okay, now we have something to talk about. If you're trying to bring them in, but it comes off really cold, then that's a problem. I'm constantly trying to come in with a bit of humbleness about what they're trying to do and help them do that, not write it the way I would write it.

Courtney: I was nodding a lot along to that, which listeners can't see. There's so much of that that's really resonating just in terms of, I don't know, thinking about, in composition, I had this rule for myself where I would comment on three patterns of things. Three big things I'm picking up in terms of sentence structure errors or something like that. I might do a page or two of comments, but just more than that, starts to overwhelm somebody.

It's almost like, as teachers, we're professional toddlers. I describe it that way a lot, where our job is to ask questions, ask why. "Why are you doing this? What are you trying to accomplish here?" That thing about intent, because once you're asking those really annoying questions that might seem super obvious or might seem like, "Why are you digging in so much to my work?" They can illuminate things just like straight up giving suggestions or advice might steamroll over, I guess.

Daryl: That's a key thing I learned by reading up on how other people have taught writing, is what questions to ask. For example, something David Mamet has, these three questions -- and we've taught this at Viable [Paradise], I've taught this at Viable [Paradise] -- how do you tell if a scene is dramatic? Well, it has to answer three questions: "Who wants what?" "What happens if they don't get it?" And, "Why now?" That "Why now?" was a revelation to me. I'm like, "Oh, this speaks to a lot of errors in my scenes. Why do they have to solve this problem *now* and not a week from now or a month from now? Where is the dramatic tension coming from?"

I'm constantly asking myself questions like that. Then one I stole from the *South Park* guys, I did a lecture last couple of years, I think you guys heard the lecture, their innovation was, for every beat in your story, it has to be connected by either "therefore" or "but." If it's only connected by "and then," you're fucked. I think about that all the time when I'm writing a -- right now, like I'm writing a synopsis, pretend synopsis for this next book. Every step is linked by, this happens, therefore this happens, but they meet this obstacle, therefore they have to try something else. I need to be able to link, I need to make that chain, that causal chain work. Where before, like I remember my third novel, I gave them a synopsis. I sold it on early chapters in the synopsis.

My editor was like, "So at some point, you just say in the synopsis, and then they go to Chicago. Like, *why?*" I'm like, I didn't know. I was just picturing it there. I'm like, but I had no

reason, story reason for this to happen. It was like, I look back at young Daryl, YesterDaryl as I call him, such a naive lad, and wish I could have told him that early on. It's like, there's some very simple questions you can ask yourself as you go along to straighten some things out.

Courtney: Yeah. It's like, it takes a while to realize maybe, unless somebody directly tells you, and even then you sort of have to experience it yourself that stories have an internal logic, like they *have* to if they're going to work. That those like, "therefore" and "because of that" chains, or like what [Mary Robinette Kowal](#) -- I think that's who said it -- the sort of "yes and, no but," improv logical chain through a story. Yeah. If that's not there, then what you have is like a series of vignettes or something, and not actually a story.

Daryl: I will, and just to throw a caveat on there, so [Kelly Link](#) talks about this, is that the "therefore/but" system works for day logic stories. [Night logic and dream logic](#) stories may work by a completely different process. They may work by a series of emotional resonances that lead you to a different feeling. A series of images are constructed in such a way to draw you through and arrive somewhere different emotionally. Now, that's a level of art and craft that is really hard to teach at a workshop like Viable [Paradise], but I want to make it clear that some people are writing in that mode.

The "therefore/but" system is great for daytime logic: *I do this for a reason, and I'm getting blocked, and so therefore I do something else*. But for some, if you're writing a very dreamy short story, and I say short story because a dreamy novel where nothing makes sense is a much harder thing to pull off. You just have to be a genius to pull it off. A short story, lots of short stories work by this kind of arrangement of images that lead you somewhere, and that's something that almost can't be taught. Somebody has to feel their way through it. This is why I don't teach poetry or can critique poetry very well, because I don't know how to say things that would be true and not harmful. I can give you my responses, but I don't know the craft well enough to say, "You know what, these are the two extra words that are throwing off your entire poem." I don't have that.

Courtney: Yes. I really love that "day logic, night logic" metaphor.

Daryl: Yes. Google Kelly Link, she talks about this, but she learned it from other people as well. She was in a killer writer group with [Karen Joy Fowler](#), and I think it was [Howard Waldrop](#). They talked about dream logic versus -- nighttime logic versus dream logic. Day logic, nighttime, dream. The fine-grained differences between those three modes.

Courtney: Yeah. I'm thinking about, there are sequences in lots of novels that are mostly day logic that are just sort of -- I'm thinking of [The Saint of Bright Doors](#) [by [Vajra Chandasekera](#)], for example, or something -- like parts of it that just feel like a fever dream, where, you fall outside of the story's sort of, spine of logic, but it is sort of still propelling you forward in a really specific and intentional way.

Daryl: Yeah. It's just hard to pull off. The people who do it, you're just sort of breathtaking,

because you can't, it's always great when you get in your writing life where you read something where you can't see the strings. Where you're like, "How do you do this?" Because the more you know the more you can see. "Oh, look, this is where they're setting up this. This is how they're going to pay this off. This is like, somebody's hitting the rule of three, bah, bah." When somebody does something that just seems seamless and beautiful, and you can't figure out how they thought of it or did it, it's magical.

Mona: I've actually, I've struggled with this a little bit lately, because I'm trying to write weirder stuff, and I'm just, my brain is so firmly rooted in reality. Everything has to have a rule. Everything has to have, a proceeding event and a logical outcome, and I'm really struggling to get out of that mindset. As we're talking about teaching and learning, we're gaining wisdom from everything around us, and it's feeding into how we are doing the craft, but I feel like there's, there comes a point -- for me at least -- where I know how to write what I write pretty well, but I can't figure out how to write what I'm not currently writing.

I don't know how to learn it, because it is something, it's like the night logic, sort of dreamier stuff. It ties back to, Daryl, the fact that you're writing, multiple different genres. How do you learn how to switch gears like that, especially when it's something that is very dramatically different from what you've been writing before, and even, how your brain just fundamentally works? Can you fix this for me?

Daryl: No, you sound like me, because I'm very logic-driven in a weird way. I'll get into it, but I feel the same way. When somebody is operating, writing by that dream logic, I'm like, "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to do this well." Even my weirdest stuff has a weird *premise*, but what follows is people responding psychologically, realistically to what the weirdness is. I've told people that my big thing is psychological realism in the face of surrealism. That's my jam. I love, because if something crazy and magical was happening to me, I'd want to be able to turn to a friend and said, "That shit's crazy, right?" It is crazy. Rather than just be straight-faced about it.

In a short story, I can be more straight-faced, where some things just don't occur to the character, and they're just deeply in it. In a novel, most of my characters are like, "Come on." The new novel is about people who -- the one that just came out -- it's called *When We Were Real* and it's about: We all found out seven years ago we're living inside a simulation, and then none of us, there was a freak-out period, but none of us got superpowers, none of us got super kung fu, or learned how to dodge bullets like Neo. Nothing, we didn't get anything, and we're still here in the simulation.

We know we're in a simulation, there's proofs all over the landscape that prove that we're, these glitches we can see. The group of people, though, are responding in all the ways that I would if we were told this ridiculous thing. They don't operate, there's movies I admire a lot, and I see this a lot in movies, where the people seem to be operating by different psychological rules than I would. Either it's ridiculous, and you're like, "No one would be like that." Or you're like, "Oh, in this world, of course people would act like this." I have trouble

coming up with the dreamy stuff and operating by those night logic rules. I'm with you, Mona. What I do is I treat it logically.

I have a zombie novel where a living dead boy begins to grow. He's found as a living dead baby alongside the road after the zombie apocalypse is over or whatever, and some humans find him, and he grows up as the most polite living dead boy you'd ever want to meet. My friend Jack was like, "Wait a minute, he *grows*?" I'm like, "Yes, he grows, but like, but he's dead. Yes, he's dead." I treat it as a premise. He doesn't understand it.

For the course of the novel, which covers his entire life, he's trying to find out what are the rules of this universe? How can I have thoughts if thoughts come from brains and I don't have any electrical activity? What are the rules? I'm in a magical universe, so how does this work? That I love completely because it does so much strange work for you as a science fiction writer to have a completely average person struggling to understand the unexplainable. That I love a lot.

Mona: Yeah. Maybe the key is just continue to lean into what you're doing. It's like the foundation of what we're writing is realistic, and you can surround it by anything, but the foundation's always going to be there. I feel like I'll never be able to break that foundation. That's just how my brain works. I've been sad about it because I've been reading some really, really incredible, weird, surreal stuff, and really admiring the work. I really want to do that myself, but maybe it's... because it's a skill that is an ineffable skill. It's really, it's not one of those things that's as easy to teach. Accepting where you've landed as a writer, maybe that's a big piece of just the whole thing.

Daryl: Yeah. Also writing -- your personal style is you writing the best you can that particular story. That's what style is. It's not, and then it is hard to get to know the difference between, "I *want* to do this, but I don't know how, therefore I need to work on it," versus, "I'm never going to do that, but I can do it this other way." That's like a lifelong struggle to -- for example, in short stories, I give myself more permission to break rules, break my usual ways of doing things, because the stakes are lower. If the story fails completely, okay, it's a short story. I've only spent a month on it. I haven't spent two years on it.

Usually, I had some rules for myself. Like, I just couldn't believe on the novel level about spaceships and aliens who looked, who talked. None of that stuff worked. My last story that came out was completely an **Iain Banks** homage where there's spaceships and talking aliens. I gave myself permission, like, "You know what? You can drop some of these rules you had for yourself." Maybe I'll do that at a longer length, but it's great. Short stories are great for me for experimenting and figuring out, is there a different way of doing this?

Mona: Yeah. I want to ask, to going back a little bit to the teaching piece, I remember at Viable Paradise -- just going to be totally honest --

Daryl: This is when you get to settle all your grievances, right?

Mona: It is. Settle my score. Look it. Yeah. Daryl, you were in my critique group, and your feedback made me want to cry. After I had gone home and sat on it a little bit, I realized how helpful it really was. It's played a big part in a lot of the edits I've made to the beginning of the book. How do you make sure that when you're giving feedback that is more constructive or critical, that it's being -- because it wasn't mean at all. It was just me being like, "But I thought I did it right." How do you make sure you're towing the line where it's not feeling hopefully too personal to the person receiving the feedback? Also like, how can people become more comfortable and amenable to receiving feedback that is not always going to be glowing and super, super positive? I know that's a big, that's a big thing, even in critique groups that I'm a part of now, the knee jerk is often like, "You just didn't get it." How do we --

Daryl: You didn't get it. You do not understand how brilliant this is.

Mona: -- move past that?

Daryl: Yeah. I have the same thing. I have good friends who have been my readers for years and if they completely call me on some bullshit, I'm like, "You don't understand, this is --" I'm like, my knee-jerk is to reject it. Now it's happened enough times over and over again, that if I just don't say anything, sit with it for a while, I'm like, "Okay, yep, I could see it now." A lot of times it's separating the diagnosis from the treatment. Sometimes it's like, I was bored here. Then the critiquer will say, "You should do this." You're like, "That's not going to work at all." You throw off the entire story or the entire book. *But*, they were still bored. That's still data.

It could be, it's like a reflexology. It could be that you have to change my spleen by squeezing my big toe or something. It could be that the change needed for the story is way over here and *that*, you have to figure that out. It's like, "Oh, the problem is not this scene. The problem is I didn't set up the stakes in the previous scene. Or, it didn't start right. A lot of times you're doing this gestalt view of your novel. All the pieces are in plane. It's really hard to do, especially at a larger length. But you're trying. To your point, your question was, how do you manage that as a teacher or a critiquer? You have to sort of -- this is why I like teaching adults who come to Viable Paradise.

With a high school student, when I taught high school, you have to meet sort of people where they are. You can't just blast them with negativity because you will not get the results you want. You do not get them thinking more, doing better work. You may just shut them down completely. Some adults who come to Viable may be like that, too, where I did have a student saying, "How could you be so negative? This is the most personal thing I've ever written." I'm like, "Well, it didn't work as a short story, though."

I was like... so but the deal, the transaction you're making when you come to Viable is, "I'm going to pay you money for honest feedback. You're not my mom. You're not my spouse who loves everything I write or my partner. I'm purchasing your time for feedback to make me better." Then it's about the work. It's just hard to make it about the work if you feel personally attacked or something. And I do, I'm constantly watching people's faces.

I had this thing happen a few years ago at Viable. I read this story. It was super interesting, super images, great writing, but I don't think it worked as a short story. As I'm talking to the person, their face is stone cold. They are hating this. I'm getting a little shook, like I'm like, "I don't know what's going on here." I sort of cut back a little bit. I meet this person at a con[vention] nine months later. She's beaming. She's like, "That was the best workshop. When you said this and like -- " I'm like, and I realized that what I was reacting to was she was nervous. She wasn't angry. I was reading anger. I was reading like, rejection of everything I was saying. She was just nervous. And I was like, "Oh, I got it."

Figuring that out because we are all people. So I really enjoy the one-on-ones when rather than going in a circle and somebody may get all piled on, if they were writing a story that's just not working, and they're just feeling jumped on, that's a bad experience. Everybody who's gone through the experience knows how hard that is. The one-on-ones where it's like, "Look, we are two people, we're just trying to figure this out. This is a hard job we're doing." I like that. That's better. It's also time to repair, saying, "Remember, these are the good things people say, this is stuff you want to protect and hold on to. This is the stuff to change." Because if you're anything like me, you hardly hear the positives. The negatives go right into your soul. They've just stabbed your little baby. Yeah. I don't know, it's a tough job.

Mona: It is. Yeah. Time, though, is a good balm for that, because it does seem like with that person you talked about, they were probably absorbing the feedback in a, it sounds like in a relatively positive way, even in the moment, they just weren't necessarily able to show it. When you sit on feed -- I've noticed that when I sit on feedback, it almost always ends up making sense. It starts off being the worst critique of all time from someone who has no idea what they're talking about. And then it becomes, "Actually, this is a good point, and this is something that my story is missing that I didn't see." That's the whole reason we get critiques.

It's interesting that we seek out critiques, but it's almost like we expect them to always be positive. Why are we seeking them out if we just think we're going to get positive feedback? Why even bother? It's hard to take, it's hard to be critiqued. It's hard to get criticism. It's just like human nature that we don't want that. It's interesting.

Daryl: It's such a lonely job that you do want the positive, you do want the positive feedback. You want someone to say, "You're on the right track, you're doing great." You just crave it because you're off by yourself writing. So I understand it. I want it all the time too. I want people to go, "No notes, pure genius, go make a million dollars." That's usually not what happens.

Mona: Yeah. Well, if I show it to my mom, it does. Then it's the best thing ever written. If anyone needs positive feedback --

Daryl: Yeah, go to your mom. Or go to Mona's mom. Go to my mom.

Mona: She'll love everything that everybody writes. It's such a -- we've picked a craft where

the actual, the work is hard because you're alone doing it, huddled over a computer, stressing out. When it's done, you give it to people to rip apart. When it's finally fully done, you send it out to get rejected. Every step of this process sucks. I don't know why we do this to ourselves, but, and like, you need different skills to handle each hardship. Handling negative feedback is a different skill than handling a rejection, than dealing with the guilt of not writing. It's --

Daryl: It's all ego management. I think about ego management all the time, which is, you have to be egotistical enough to think, "I think they want to hear my thoughts. I think strangers would be better off by hearing me tell a story," versus, then you have to be humble enough to take the feedback in. Also, I think the biggest factor on whether people can make it in this job or not is coachability and self-criticism. The coachability means, you may not start with the most talent, the most beautiful sentence right off the block, but if you can take in feedback and constantly improve and coach, receive coaching and coach yourself, that is the biggest indicator of whether you're going to keep going, by far.

Being able to somehow balance out the creative part, like what Courtney was talking about, like writing your first drafts before the critical brain kicks in, and then turning the critical brain on later. Seeing, you're seeing those two, basically two selves that are working together to craft this thing, that is super key. Also, you're managing a third person, by the way. You're managing your mental model of the reader. You're constantly trying to figure out, how is this landing with somebody who's outside my head? How much information do they need at this moment? Is this too much melodrama where I'm actually getting the reverse effect of what I want? I want to evoke emotion.

I don't want to perform the emotion for them, so it takes it away from them. I was an English and theater double major. I'm always telling people, it made you twice as unemployable as the usual liberal arts major. One of the lessons of acting is, you need to cut back on your emotion. If you're bottling it a little bit, and you're in tension, the audience will provide the emotion for you. If you walk out and you're just bursting into tears right away, and you're just -- they're like, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. That doesn't seem quite -- you seem, that character seems like an annoying person who's overly dramatic."

If you see them get choked up and hold on to it, then you're like, "Oh my God, they are really dying inside." Then you begin to feel it. The empathy kicks in. All those parts of the process where you're trying to gauge your effects on the reader, is like the third person is always hovering over your right shoulder when you're writing. It may not -- you may not want them there in the first, it depends on what writer you are -- you may not want them there in the first draft, but for sure you want them in the second draft. If you're writing for others. If you're just journaling, none of this applies. But we're writing for other people to have an effect on them. That's the whole game. That's the trick.

Courtney: Do you find that, so I'm sort of struggling with this right now, since I have actually -- I *am* writing for real readers for, at the novel length for the first time. I'm wondering if you find that managing that imagined reader gets easier with time or harder, or like, how do you

manage that?

Daryl: I tend to write in order, scenes in order. I may plan out a lot. When I'm actually writing, I write in order of the way the reader would read it because it helps me imagine this is what they're expecting at this point. This is what they don't know. I call it Rate of Revelation. How fast are you feeding them information and chunks that they can manage? That's a huge task. How fast do you give people information and how the emotion is landing?

One time I really screwed myself with this was this book called *Revelator*, where it takes place in two timelines. There's a young Stella who from age 10 through 15, and then there's her adult version who comes back home, and these are alternating chapters. The adult Stella knows everything that happened to young Stella, but it hasn't happened in the book yet. I'm like, "Oh, Geez."

I tried alternating chapters and I finally broke down. I'm like, I just have to know exactly what happened to young Stella. I wrote all of those chapters, mostly. I held off the ending because as a reward to myself, I'm going to write the climax later. I wrote all the early Stella chapters. My adult Stella would know what had happened and I would know. I would know how adult Stella would react when these other things start happening. But, it was so hard to keep in mind what the reader knows or doesn't know at that moment because I'd written it in the wrong order. My mental model was all confused.

At that point, you either put it away for a long enough time that you can read it fresh, or you have good friends who are good readers for you. I had also a really good editor who was like, "This is the piece we're missing. We're missing this here." I think, or, "You're tipping your hand. You're making it too clear that this big surprise that's happening in the next chapter, you've just told it, you've just given it away here and you're blowing your emotional moment." I'm like, got it. So it's very difficult. It just depends on what writer you are, too, about how do you keep that mental model in mind. Especially for long works, it's really hard.

Mona: Yeah, I've learned one thing that has been exciting in this whole journey is I've learned to trust my gut a lot. So sometimes I'll write something and it just, I don't know if I'm thinking about it as the reader or what. I'm not totally sure which perspective it's coming from, because usually I don't realize why it's happening at first, but I'll write something and it just doesn't feel correct. And it, and it, like it usually takes me a while to figure out why, but if something doesn't feel correct in the writing, I know I have to sit on it for a second.

I know I have to think about it more because it's going to continue to not feel correct. In every single case I've realized I'm either telling the story from the wrong perspective or the reaction doesn't make sense or something, but I don't know that at first, but I know something's wrong. Getting to a point where you can at least trust your writing that much, that's been really helpful. The next piece of investigating it and figuring out *why* is a challenge because it could be any number of things, but it is worthwhile to like, there's some piece of you somewhere that knows the story well enough that it can send you those little signals, like, "This doesn't

make sense."

Daryl: Yeah. That's the huge part. That being in touch with that part of yourself, that's telling you those signals. I'm constantly also being in touch with my inner boredom. I was like, "No, I think I've seen this scene before in too many TV shows. I've seen this," and saying, "I need to come up with something better." That feeling that, especially for me, it's -- I will move too fast sometimes and skip an emotional beat. The next day I wake up and go, "Wait a minute, this big thing happened and she didn't even react to it." We moved right on to the next plot point. Like, her dad just died or something. You can't just not think about that in the next scene or not, have a color of the scene. That's the problem with sometimes being an outliner is that like, you're moving on to the next part and you're like, "Wait a minute, you've missed this emotional beat."

Courtney: I have a collection of snail art to remind myself to slow down for that reason. I have a necklace that I wear. I just got a postcard when I was traveling that says, "Slow and steady." It's just this cute little snail, but yeah, because it's almost like you have a checklist when you outline. It's easy just to go *check, check, check*, and to miss the story when you're hitting the beats.

Daryl: Yeah. By the way, total tangent, but if you haven't seen, I think it's called [Autobiography \[Memoir\] of a Snail](#), it's an Emmy nominated stop-motion animated movie. Fantastic. Totally right. It's about a woman who collects snails and snail art.

Courtney: Oh, that's really cool. I'll check it out.

Mona: I always have more to talk about, but --

Daryl: I know we've gone through an hour here, but I can talk to you guys all day.

Mona: That's awesome though. This is fun. Thank you for joining us. Before we wrap up for now, do you want to let the listeners know where to find you and pitch something to them? I know your book just came out, let them know where to find it. Anything else they can check out?

Daryl: Yeah. You can find me at [DarylGregory.com](#). I'm at Bluesky as [darylwrighterguy](#). I'm barely on [Instagram](#), much to my daughter's chagrin. She keeps coaching me to be more on Instagram. Yeah. The next book is that's out now is *When We Were Real*, out from Saga press. I'm on a mini tour heading to Portland in a couple of days and then San Francisco and New York.

If you're at any of those places, I don't know, this tour will probably be over by the time this podcast comes out. Nevermind. You've missed it! Feel bad for yourself, people.

It's just like, it's just the job. I keep writing the next thing. There's a novella that's done. There's short stories coming out. They'll be out eventually. The hard part is just -- I told

somebody yesterday that I'm working on the next book, even though this current book has just been out in the world like a week. I feel like we're just leaving the baby in the living room while mom and dad are going and getting busy making a sibling. It's like, "Can you give some attention to the newborn? No? You're just leaving them alone out there?" Like, "No, I got to go move on to the next thing." That's where I'm at.

Mona: Many more awesome books to read in the future that we can look forward to is what you're saying, right?

Daryl: Yeah, totally. I'm trying to make a gigantic family. Actually, that would make more sense if I was a faster writer. I'm always like, "Man, I wish I was a faster writer." I realized I'm never going to be faster. This is just my process.

Mona: Well, the snails have it, right?

Daryl: The snails win. Snails for the win.

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

[END OF AUDIO 1:11:56]