

EPISODE 1: “Sarah Gailey – Meet Cute”

Note: This episode contains several swears. Listener discretion is advised.

HILARY: Hello, and welcome to Tales from the Trunk: Reading the stories that didn't make it. I'm Hilary B. Bisenieks.

HILARY: On today's episode, we have somebody who has won a Hugo award, and been nominated for several other Hugos, a Nebula and probably a bunch of other awards I can't think of at the moment. Sarah Gailey, welcome to the podcast!

SARAH: Hello, I'm so excited to be here!

HILARY: I'm excited to have you here, and I'm excited to have you here for our very first episode.

SARAH: Hell yeah! I love being on the first episode of a thing.

HILARY: Hell yeah. I have known Sarah online since their very first published story 'Look', which came out in 2015, I want to say?

SARAH: That sounds right. It's in 'Cease, Cows' magazine, it is a flash horror piece that is the first thing I ever had published and I'm still so proud of it. June of 2015.

HILARY: Yeah, it is a fantastic story. I read it and I was like, I want to know who this person is and immediately followed them on Twitter.

SARAH: Looking back on that story, I occasionally worry about representation, but that's a thing for another podcast. I will say that 'Cease, Cows' was just relentlessly supportive in getting this story out there and my name, and I could not have been more excited as a first-time published writer.

HILARY: That's awesome. That is much more than my first published piece got support. My first published piece was a flash fiction story that came out on a daily flash fiction Live Journal magazine.

SARAH: Ooooh!

HILARY: Because that's how long I've been doing this for.

SARAH: (Laughs)

HILARY: Kids, if your listening and you don't know what Live Journal is, look it up. It was something.

SARAH: It was a lot.

HILARY: It was a lot.

SARAH: Didn't Russia eat LiveJournal?

HILARY: Russia ate LiveJournal, and then maybe right before that Dreamwidth was like, hey, we're going to be LiveJournal but for not-Russians, and then two people stuck with Dreamwidth. Hi, both people on Dreamwidth!

SARAH: We gotta bring Zynga back.

HILARY: Yeah, for sure. Nothing problematic ever happened on Zynga. There was no drama.

SARAH: No. Never. It was a utopia.

HILARY: It was a utopia. Online utopias used to exist, listeners. Dear listeners.

SARAH: Back before all this conflict on the internet.

HILARY: Before this hoo-ha. So, I started following Sarah on Twitter immediately after reading this first story of theirs and had the good fortune of (at the time) living in the same city as Sarah and meeting them in person, and let me tell you they are even more of a quality person in real life.

SARAH: The same thing is true about Hilary. I was like, oh this person is going to be cool, and then we met IRL and I was like, yup, I was right. And then I was like, oh shit, I had no idea how cool Hilary would be.

HILARY: Oh, damn.

SARAH: And we've been friends ever since.

HILARY: There you have it. So Sarah, you're going to be reading a story called 'Meet Cute' and that's M-E-E-T. When I saw the title I thought I had misread for a second and thought it was M-E-A-T, which would also be a very Sarah Gailey story.

SARAH: That's going to be the cannibal story I write as soon as I get off this podcast.

HILARY: Excellent.

SARAH: Recently, I will say I was pitching a story that was going to be West Side Story, but plus cannibals and zombies and minus the racism,

HILARY: Oh my God, I want that.

SARAH: And I was going to call it 'Meat Cute', but my agent (who is very patient and long-suffering) was like 'please God, don't do this to me.'

Both: (Laugh)

HILARY: Dong Won, why?

SARAH: Yeah, he tries hard every day. So, I'm going to be reading 'Meet Cute'. Should I talk about it before I read it?

HILARY: Yeah, can you tell us when this was written and why you picked it?

SARAH: According to my Google version history, I wrote 'Meet Cute' in March of 2014. Which sounds right because that is when I first started writing. I had been beta-reading and critiquing for a friend of mine who is a very prolific short fiction writer for quite a while, and I started saying to myself 'you know, maybe I can try doing this thing too.'

And I wrote two stories in the same weekend, and one of them was 'Meet Cute', and the other one was a story called 'Letting Go', that is about a dead woman whose husband can't interact with her ghost.

HILARY: Oh, that fucked me up. That story fucked me up so much.

SARAH: Yeah. So I was trying to pick between those two because I've never published either of them anywhere, and the reason I've never published either of them anywhere is because I showed them to that friend who is a very prolific short fiction writer and they responded, telling me the one about the ghost wife 'wasn't a story and didn't have anything to say', and that the other one was a disaster, and that some people just aren't cut out to be writers, and I should stick to what I'm good at, namely critiques.

HILARY: The bastard.

SARAH: And I didn't write anything else for a few months. I'm not going to try and say exactly how many because I don't remember. You know, For ninety years I didn't write anything else!

HILARY: Fair.

SARAH: I've never even considered publishing either of these stories because even though when I go back and read them, I enjoy them and I'm like 'Oh, this is nice.' There's this thing like really deep down inside me that's like 'Oh, if you show people these they'll know you shouldn't be a writer.'

So, I was picking between those two for this podcast because I was like, you know, fuck that guy and everything he stands for.

HILARY: Absolutely.

SARAH: And I'm going to share this story. I haven't re-read it pretty much since he gave me that critique, so I don't actually know how good it is. I don't know if it's a mess. I don't know if I get representation right, but I do know that I was really excited to try out writing when I wrote it.

HILARY: All right, well I am excited to hear it, in your own voice.

SARAH: Yeah, hopefully I'll do an okay job. (Laughs)

HILARY: Oh, you'll do perfectly.

6:30 (Reads story)

26:00 (Resume discussion)

HILARY: Holy shit!

SARAH: (Laughs)

HILARY: Holy shit, that twist! Oh, that was incredible, Sarah! That truly was and I feel really honored that you brought that story here.

SARAH: I'm just excited to have a chance to share it with anybody.

HILARY: Yeah, but seriously. Like, chef kiss emoji here.

SARAH: (Laughs) Thank you.

HILARY: So, the normal questions I would ask about the story initially are ones we've already covered but, I'm really curious to hear what your submission process is now compared to what it used to be.

SARAH: Oh, gosh. It's really different. I actually don't usually talk about how these things have changed because I have had a really abnormal amount of good fortune and success in my career.

HILARY: Mh-hmm.

SARAH: Thanks. In large part due to people being incredibly supportive of my work. And thanks in part to the submissions hustles that I had early on with my short fiction.

So the way I used to do submissions is that I had this huge, elaborate spreadsheet that tracked every short story I had written, which in that first year of writing after I got past that thing of 'Oh, I should never write again', I wrote -- I want to say 27 short stories that first year.

HILARY: Jesus. Listeners, I've seen Sarah's spreadsheets and they are incredible, and truly the amount of hustle is incredible.

SARAH: Thank you!

HILARY: Like, that dedication is no joke.

SARAH: So, in the short story submissions spreadsheet I had two different pages, and one of them was where the short story is now on submission. So like, my short story 'Hilary is the best' is out for submission at 'Famous Hilary's Monthly' and has been there since this date, and this the date I expect them to get back to me, and here's the stage in the submissions process.

And then once I got a rejection, I would go into the next page, which was a record of every place I had ever submitted a short story. That way I wasn't submitting twice, you know? I wouldn't send 'Hilary is the best' to 'Famous Hilary's Monthly' twice in a row. Instead I would go to 'Famous Hilary's Quarterly', and then 'Famous Hilary's Review' after that.

I don't actually remember if I ever submitted 'Meet Cute' anywhere. I may have done, after I recovered from 'I shouldn't be a writer', I may have sent this one a couple of places.

But I now I have totally different process. I write a lot less short fiction, because I am spending so much time writing longer fiction, and when I do write short fiction it usually is for a specific project that I have been asked to write for. There's nothing right now that I can talk about that's been announced yet.

Oh, wait! Yes, there is.

So, an example of this is I recently wrote a piece for 'The Atlantic', and the way I had that submission process happen was that I had written and published a piece with 'Fireside Fiction.' Go Fireside, I am Team Fireside until I die.

HILARY: Yeah. This podcast, we've already recorded two episodes of this podcast before this, the inaugural episode and every episode has been very pro-Fireside fiction, and also very pro-Sarah Gailey.

SARAH: Oh, that's nice! Well, cool! I'm pro-the other people you've recorded episodes with, too. Even though I don't know who they are.

So, I had this piece go up with 'Fireside' called 'STET', it's Hugo eligible if you're nominating.

HILARY: It is Hugo eligible, it is Hugo worthy, it is – frankly, it is fantastic wherever you happen to read it and you can read it both in 'Fireside Fiction' online and 'Fireside Quarterly'. Go and do that because it is two totally different, totally wonderful experiences.

SARAH: God, the formatting that they did is stunning.

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: And so, this is a very experimental format, and the team at Fireside made it gorgeous and readable and functional.

So, what happened was the editor who I worked with at the Atlantic saw that, and contacted me via my website and said "would you like to write a short story for the Atlantic?" – and I fell off my chair and fear-vomited, and was like "Yeah, okay."

And he told me a basic prompt that he wanted me to work off, which was very broad. And I sent him a couple of pitches to narrow that down and we workshopped the pitches together to get the right direction for the story.

HILARY: Mm-hmm.

SARAH: And then I wrote the story that we settled on, like, a basic concept for. And then, I sent that directly to him. That's how I do most of my short fiction right now because I don't have time to do a lot of other short fiction, where I'm just writing it because I think of it and then sending it out to whoever wants it.

I do also have a few people where I write a piece and will be like, “Hey. If you want this for your magazine I will send it to you first.” And they can say, “Fuck off with that” or they can say, “All right, we’ll take it.” Which is a totally different submissions method.

Like if you had told 2015, or 2016, or even 2017 Sarah Gailey that that’s how this would go, I would have been like, “Oh, okay. You can eat a butt, you crazy person. That’s not how it’s gonna happen.” (Laughs)

HILARY: Yeah. (Laughs)

SARAH: That’s my submissions process now.

HILARY: That’s awesome. One of the big reasons that I wanted to have you on, specifically, is that I do not feel I am being hyperbolic in saying that your rise has been meteoric.

Since the time that I first met you, in terms of your being known as a fiction writer going from a flash fiction about a creepy baby – I won’t give any more spoilers about that, but it’s amazing – to like, winning a friggin’ Hugo last year? Oh my God.

SARAH: It’s been bananas, Hilary.

HILARY: It’s banana-pants.

SARAH: It’s completely. Like I keep looking over my shoulder like, “Are you guys seeing this shit?” And that’s also not a thing that I talk about super often, because you know I don’t want to be an asshole. Like yeah, things are going really great for me. Thanks, guys, this is amazing. I don’t wanna be standing up on top of the roof of a houseboat yelling about it.

HILARY: Yeah, for sure.

SARAH: But it’s been really wild. There’s so much happening all the time. There’s a really steep learning curve involved. And the process of writing?

HILARY: Mm-hmm?

SARAH: And the process of coming up with ideas, and the process of working with editors, has changed significant in just the time I’ve been writing.

I will say, to the immense credit of every editor I ever worked with, at every stage of my career, none of them treat me differently, with the possible exception of our emails being a little more informal because I’m not terrified of them anymore and I’m like, “Hey, my dude, here are your copy edits,” instead of, “Hello, sir. Thank you for these words that I am giving you.”

But all of the short fiction editors that I worked with early in my career, I’ve worked with almost all of them again. And the level of kindness, and clarity, and professionalism has been unwavering, from when I was someone no one had heard of and who had been told by a friend I ‘shouldn’t bother writing’ to now, when I have a rocketship in my living room.

HILARY: Yeah. That's, for me as a still very early career writer, who has been writing to submit things since, I think 2006 maybe? And to hear that there's that level of professionalism across the board is really heartening, and I think it would be especially heartening for me to hear if I had been listening back in 2006, to me at 2019 and not causing a time paradox.

SARAH: Yeah, don't. Please don't cause a time paradox.

HILARY: I don't want to do that.

SARAH: We've seen 'Into the Spiderverse' and we can't afford that kind of disaster right now.

But yeah. It's especially, huge fucking shout-out to Fireside who published Haunted, which was a very early short story of mine. That was the short story that got me noticed by the person who is now my agent, who has guided and mentored me and made me into the writer I am now.

I will just never forget the process of working on that story with them, feeling like I was being treated the way you dream of being treated by an editor, you know? I was being talked to as if I am smart, and know things about my writing.

It was collaborative and kind, just across the board kind and they've only gotten better since.

HILARY: That's fantastic, and I think that's something I really want to stress, and I think you bring out beautifully, is you wanna just be a person.

SARAH: Yeah.

HILARY: And if you're a person, the other people will be a person back to you, and it's not. You don't have to be a multi-award nominated author to be treated well, and you don't have to be that to expect to be treated well by the editors, and by writing peers. In general, you want to be treated like a human being, and if you're not being treated like a human being then you should, maybe reevaluate what's going on there and try to find people who are kind to you.

SARAH: Absolutely. First of all, this is something I love about the genre short fiction community is how excited everyone is for each other and how often people treat each other like human beings.

I'll also say being treated like a human being goes both directions in terms of where someone is on the very wide staircase of literary success. I say 'very wide staircase' instead of 'ladder', because there's room for all of us on every step.

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: But as something as someone said to me a long time ago, you should watch out for how people treat you when you're in power, because that's how they expect you to treat them when they're in power.

And there are people who will see the amount of success I've had and see that as a reason to stop treating me like a person. Instead they are treating me like an avatar of writing.

Which is: a – wild to me, because I am, listen guys, I’m not. No, no. But also, because those are the same people who I think , if I was just starting out, would probably be unkind. It’s just such a signpost if someone is treating someone else in this community, or any community, as if their worth as a human being is based solely on their level of success, they’re not someone who I ever want to work with.

HILARY: That’s a really important thing to stress, and I think also nobody gets into writing science fiction, fantasy, horror. Nobody gets into that to make a million dollars.

SARAH: Right, it’s not. If you are, if you are listening and you are thinking to yourself ‘I’m going to find fame and fortune in writing genre fiction’?

HILARY: Yeah, buddy we got another thing to tell ya.

SARAH: Yeah, and that thing is ‘Don’t do it.’ It’s just not going to work out that way. I mean even I am having so much more success than I could possibly have dreamed of, and it’s still, you know? It’s not golden house boats.

Wow, I’m really on houseboats today.

HILARY: I’m subtitling this episode ‘houseboats’.

SARAH: Good okay. I’ll try to bring them up a few more times. This episode of this podcast is brought to you by the Houseboat Lobbyists of Los Angeles, California.

HILARY: And the Houseboat Lobbyists of Oakland, California as well. Shout out to Jack London Square, where’s there’s probably at least one houseboat.

SARAH: Gotta be.

HILARY: Gotta be.

SARAH: Houseboats.

HILARY: Houseboats.

SARAH: They’re good to have and do.

HILARY: Absolutely.

SARAH: That’s the motto of the houseboat lobbyists.

HILARY: Before we got onto houseboats, where we both live, one of the – I can see the AT-Ats out my window right now!

SARAH: (Laughs) Shit.

HILARY: Before we go onto our houseboat kick, what I wanted to say was even editors are people too, and I think that is something, especially early on, that’s hard to kind of hold on to

when you're feeling really – like it can be really easy to feel downtrodden when you get your first rejection.

SARAH: Oh yeah.

HILARY: You know, when you sent your story out you were like 'I am amazing. I am a god of writing and this is going to make my career overnight. I'm going to be on the 'Today Show' tomorrow.'

SARAH: Mh-hmm. I guess that would make it the 'Tomorrow Show'.

HILARY: I'm going to be on the 'Tomorrow Show', today?

SARAH: (Laughs)

HILARY: But the editors aren't out to get you. Editors are just there to publish what they think is good, and that goodness isn't a reflection on you.

SARAH: Yeah. I mean, it's hard to get rejections. It hurts to get rejections, and also rejections kinda rule. I made a habit early on in my writing, and you know, submissions and stuff, to try my hardest to reach at least 100 rejections every year.

And having that as a goal was so helpful for me in framing this. I actually just looked back in my records and in 2015 I got 99 short story rejections.

HILARY: Jiminy Cricket!

SARAH: In 2016, I got 49 short story rejections. And all those rejections also added up to acceptances. The year that I got 99 rejections, it looks like I got 9 short story acceptances. That's a ton, that's a really high percentage because I just managed not to let the rejections wear me down to the point of giving up on stories.

The only stories that I've ever given up on are the one I that read on this podcast today, the one I mentioned early in the podcast about the ghost wife, and one that I like wrote, and then realized 'Oh, this isn't really my story to write', and that one is in the trunk and kind of belongs to stay there, and I'm just like 'that doesn't ever need to see the light of day'.

HILARY: Yeah. For sure.

SARAH: And by leaning into those rejections instead of letting them hurt, I also was able to think of editors more as people because I was like 'Oh, this editor is rejecting this story not to hurt me, or tell me that this story sucks, but because they're doing their job in putting together the magazine that they're trying to put together, right? I got so many rejections that said 'we already have a story like this for the issue of the magazine we're putting together now.'

And they can't just hold on to every story that they kinda like to see if they'll be able to use it later, right?

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: Those rejections went from being a thing that told me I was bad to being a thing that told me I was participating with the editors in the process of figuring out what fiction to publish and that made it so much easier to rack up that first 99.

HILARY: Yeah, absolutely. And, it should be noted that it isn't just the personal rejections where the editor is saying, you know, 'I really liked this but we have a story just like it that were publishing in the issue we're putting together right now', it's any rejection.

Like, any rejection is a win.

SARAH: Absolutely.

HILARY: Because it means that you're writing stories, it means that you're submitting, it means that like every time you put a new word on the page, you are winning.

SARAH: Mm-hmm.

HILARY: And, that's just vital.

SARAH: It takes so much courage to put yourself out there, and especially for short story writers who want to write longer fiction, and you know, query agents, and then send books out on submission to publishers and then work with editors of longer fiction.

Learning to be okay with long wait times and rejections in the short fiction market, it translates. It's a skill that translates into that other thing you want to do, and if you have no interest in doing that and you're like, 'I want to write short stories', awesome.

The more markets you talk to, and the more ambitious markets you reach for. That maybe you think that they won't like genre fiction, or they won't like your particular length of fiction you're writing, learning how to be okay with rejections and understanding that editors are talking about their needs and not the quality of your work, in markets that are kind of closer to home, helps you build those skills of being okay with hearing the things that editors have to tell you as you start reaching out farther.

In that piece that I wrote for the Atlantic, there was all this conversation we had to have about making genre fiction accessible to the readers of the Atlantic, who aren't even expecting fiction when they go to the Atlantic, and conversations I had with genre fiction editors about 'Hey, this, you know, leans a little too heavily on, like, the technology element of the science fiction, can you tweak it so it's a little more about the aliens?' That kind of conversation gave me the skills I needed to have that conversation with my editor at the Atlantic without freaking that I was terrible and everything was the worst.

HILARY: Yeah. It's really key to be able to, like, identify where, like every time you do something you're building a skill. It might not be a skill you think you're building, but every time you set

pen to paper, or put your hands on the keyboard, or however it is you write, like every time that you go out and participate in this process, you're building a skill.

SARAH: I feel like the Marie Kondo discourse fits in to this, because for me rejections spark joy. They don't always make me happy in the moment, but they're useful and they reflect good things I'm doing and hard work that I'm doing, and they're serving me in way that Marie Kondo would describe as, 'Yes, a toothbrush sparks joy', even though you don't look at it and feel excited.

Although, slight digression, I just got a Water Pic and that thing is the best, and every time I use it, I get so excited! I was just out of town for a few days and I actively missed it so, Water Pic sparks joy.

HILARY: Welcome to adulthood.

SARAH: Oh, man, it's the best! That thing rules, my gums feel so good! Anyway, big digression from short fiction. Just important.

HILARY: (Laughs) It's important.

HILARY: So, I wonder. Since you have experience at both ends of the length spectrum, if you can just say a little bit as we're getting towards the end of the show, say a little bit about how short fiction and longer fiction are in conversation with each other, even if they're – I feel they're skills that mesh with each other, but don't entirely overlap.

SARAH: Absolutely. Something that I actually loved about going back and reading this story is, you know, seeing some of the places where I think I've grown as a writer. Like, I wouldn't use the word 'round' three times in one sentence today.

My copy editor somewhere is going, 'Yes, you would!'

HILARY: (Laughs)

SARAH: (Laughs) But also in the way that I've learned how to kind of hone my voice more for the length that I'm using. The voice that I used in this short story is one that now, I think I would reserve for a novella. There's a lot more digression, there's a lot more explanation, there's a lot more kinda unnecessary worldbuilding.

Which isn't to say worldbuilding in short fiction is unnecessary, it's crucial. But in 'Meet Cute', I did a lot of showing the reader, like, all of the like, God, – the only way I can think of to explain this is – I don't know if you remember 'WisHilaryone'?

HILARY: Oh yeah.

SARAH: The television show?

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: And at the end of the show, they would always do this 'Here's how we did the CGI to make it look like WisHilaryone was Joan of Arc', and I did a lot of that in 'Meet Cute', right? A lot of 'hey reader, here's how this works,' that I think I wouldn't do now in a short piece of fiction, because I would be doing so much different work to try and communicate scenes and relationships.

Where in longer fiction, there's so much more room for things to breathe that if you don't talk a little bit about how things work, the reader has time to start asking questions that I, personally, often don't know how to answer.

HILARY: Yup.

SARAH: And I think that conversation happens in that space. I think that the more room you leave for the words and characters to breathe, the more the world of the story rushes in to fill it, and to fill that space.

And, I mean I love all lengths of fiction and I love working in all lengths of fiction, and it always fucks me up so bad when I transition from one length of fiction to another.

HILARY: Mm-hmm.

SARAH: I just went from, I had to write I novel in a really short time. I had 8 weeks when I wrote this novel, and then at the end of that I had two days to breathe, and then I had to dive into a novella I had a deadline on.

HILARY: Jesus.

SARAH: And so I had, like 4 weeks to write the novella and we wound up asking the publisher for a little more time so I didn't die. But, going back and re-reading the first few chapters of that novella, I'm doing all this letting the world breathe, and all this like, you know kinda expansive explanation of how stuff functions, and I'm like, oh, right, that doesn't have a home here in the same way it did in the novel I was just writing.

HILARY: Right. And I think that that is something that, if you want to write short fiction you can't just read novels, and if you want to write novels you can't just read short fiction.

SARAH: Yeah.

HILARY: Like you have to understand how the different forms work.

SARAH: Yeah, it's really crucial. And I think that if you want to just write short fiction, its also really important to be reading novels, so that you can see what you're not challenging your short fiction on.

HILARY: Right.

SARAH: Right, I have this tendency to make my short fiction very television-y. A lot of people who read 'River of Teeth', for instance, said that it read a lot like television. Which is great, that's

what I was going for. I wanted this to feel like you were watching a western, like a pulp western TV show.

HILARY: Networks, get at Sarah. We need, we desperately need 'River of Teeth' as television.

SARAH: (Laughs). Well, I'm in Los Angeles, I'll just stick my head out the window and let them know.

But, I mean, in writing that, that's how I tend to write a lot of my novella-length and novelette-length fiction, as if I'm writing for television. And then, every now and then, I'll go and read a novel and realize that there are ways I can write in that voice, while still doing things like describing how people look and including a theme, beyond the one I already knew I wanted.

And by reading longer works that engage with the stuff I'm trying to do with my shorter work I can see where I'm kind of resting on my laurels.

HILARY: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that makes sense. And yeah, to what you said, definitely don't limit yourself to only what you're writing when you're reading. And don't limit yourself to the genre that you're writing.

SARAH: Oh, god no.

HILARY: Cause that's, like if you only read space operas, you're not gonna be getting the ideas that are then going to help you write the amazing space opera you want to write.

SARAH: Honestly, sometimes the conversations that we have in the genre fiction community make me feel like talking to this ex-boyfriend who I had, who was really into IPA.

HILARY: Oh, my god.

SARAH: And so, he would be like, 'Oh, I want you to taste this beer,' and I would be like 'No, I don't like IPA,' and he'd be like, 'No, taste it, because with these hops you can really taste this like, berry flavor in the hops because they're different kind of hops, okay?'

HILARY: No, they all just taste bitter.

SARAH: They all just taste bitter and terrible! But I would taste it, and because he spent so much time drinking IPA, he thought he was telling me the truth. He thought that, you know, this was a different, exciting flavor of beer. And I was like 'well, maybe if you ever drank a porter, or a stout, or wine, or whiskey, or you know, a milkshake or something, you would be able to recognize that this extremely narrow place, where you're doing super tight slices of definition for your thing, doesn't translate elsewhere.'

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: You know, the thing that makes your space opera special and exciting can totally be that you have based your classes of royalty on Elizabethan politics instead of Victorian politics, and

that that's the thing that defines you as different from this one other space opera that people really like.

But that kind of discussion of your work, and like challenging of your work, and frankly, marketing of your work only functions inside a very narrow group of readers. If you want your work to be translatable to other people, you have to know what those other people are thinking about and talking about.

When I tell people that I wrote 'River of Teeth', and they are not part of the genre fiction community, they're like, 'what kind of book is that?', and if I said it is an alternate history weird western that draws on pulp traditions, they'd be like, 'what?'

HILARY: (Laughs)

SARAH: So instead I say, 'Oh it's like cowboys, but hippos,' and they go 'Oh, awesome!' and they get excited. Because I'm talking to them about flavor differences that their tongues know how to detect.

HILARY: You're talking in their experience, outside of this, like, its so easy to think of the genre fiction community as the only community and everybody knows what you're talking about, but its really not.

So, I work in technology. My day job is I do technology at an independent school, and living in the Bay Area, I talk to a lot of other people who do technology, not in independent schools. And I will just be having conversations with them and throw around these acronyms that I just think about constantly at my job, and even though they're in technology, they're like 'what the fuck is an SIS?' and then I have to back up and be like, 'Oh, so that's a student information system...'

SARAH: (Laughs) Yeah, I have that exact same thing, even in the genre fiction community, right? People will be like, 'Oh, this is, you know, it's like steampunk, but it's a little bit more like coldpunk, and I find that sustainable punk is more exciting to me.'

And I'm like, 'My dudes, we are getting so caught up in what makes us different within such a narrow space that it becomes impossible to even communicate about our work, and also a lot of times, those conversations are happening about what makes us different in genre fiction, instead of the conversations about representation in genre fiction, and its just like, hey. Read more broadly.'

HILARY: Yeah.

SARAH: I mean this whole conversation we're having about reading more broadly, we're having as two whites, and it is a craft issue just as much as reading people who don't share your cultural background, or skin color, or religious background, or gender identity or sexual identity.

All of these things are things you're really going to have to do to inform your craft. Like, that's my biggest piece of writing advice is to read more broadly than you are now.

HILARY: Yeah. So, this is the point in the show where we would have some words of wisdom, and I would give a prompt for some words of wisdom and then we'd hem and haw for a few minutes, and that would be edited out, and one of us would drop some huge knowledge – but I think you just did that.

SARAH: Oh shit. I ruined the podcast, I'm so sorry! (Laughs)

HILARY: Oh no, you're fine. Yeah, just read broadly.

SARAH: And if you think you already read broadly, read more broadly. Start reading non-fiction, start reading memoirs. Oh, read this memoir! Read Mallory O'Merra's 'Lady from the Black Lagoon!'

HILARY: Yes!

SARAH: There you go, perfect crossover choice for genre fiction readers who are like, 'Oh no, non-fiction. I don't know if I can do it.' 'Lady from the Black Lagoon' is about Millicent Patrick who is the woman who designed the creature from the Black Lagoon. Yes, the one from the movie. Whose entire legacy was erased by a shitty man who was insecure about the fact that she was getting a lot of attention.

And you should go read it immediately. Right now. Well, you can't right now because it's not out yet but it'll be out—

HILARY: It comes out on March 5th, I think?

SARAH: Yeah, March 5th. One week from the date that we're recording this. So, go read that. If you already think you read broadly, go read that and then report back to me about it.

HILARY: Yeah, so I studied creative writing in college, and I couldn't just, like a: there were no genre fiction classes and b: I couldn't just take fiction classes where I was reading things I was comfortable with for the whole four years.

You know, that really had me even within like, the lens of academia that is often very limited in terms of, we mostly read white men, but still even there we were reading, I took a non-fiction class, I took two non-fiction classes and like we read Allison Bechdel's 'Fun Home', which is a graphic memoir. And we read Michael Andanche, and we read all these voices that if I had just stayed at home and read, like, a lot of popcorn books, I wouldn't be exposed to those voices, and I would be a poorer writer for it.

SARAH: Yeah, absolutely. I think that even the shitty required reading that you have to do in a lot of high school and college literature courses, can make you into a more critical reader. There's some ways in which those classes try to stamp out critical thinking, because they're like, 'write an essay on why this book is good', and it's like, 'Oh, well, it's not.'

HILARY: (Laughs)

SARAH: But if you can even approach failure books, where you start trying read them and you're like 'Oh, I'm going to just die if I keep on reading this garbage!' they can make you a more critical reader, which makes you a more critical writer.

And it makes it where you can say 'Oh, what do I find boring about this book? I don't want to reproduce that in my work.'

HILARY: Yeah, for sure.

SARAH: So, there's your wisdom. Read Mallory O'Mearra.

HILARY: Yes!

HILARY: So, before we get going. Listeners, you can find Sarah Gailey on Twitter at @gaileyfrey, that is really the best place to experience threads about beetles, and other wild animals that you wouldn't have known you needed in your life. It's the best place to find out what they're doing at any given time, and its just a delightful follow. Even if you think you can't follow one more person on Twitter or you'll die, follow Sarah Gailey and at least you'll die happy.

SARAH: (Laughs)

HILARY: And also, Sarah you have a debut novel coming out, is that right?

SARAH: I sure do! June 4th, Magic for Liars – which is the story of a private investigator who is hired to solve the murder of a faculty member at a high school for magical teens. It is the high school where her estranged sister just so happens to work. The private investigator does not have magical powers, her sister does, and she feels fine about it, and there's no problems ever and everyone is happy, and everything is fine.

HILARY: It's true. I've read the book, and everyone is happy and everything is fine and its fantastic.

SARAH: The book is available for pre-order anywhere that you can order books. I highly recommend you order it through indiebound.com, where you will be ordering the book from and supporting independent booksellers, instead of the evil empire.

HILARY: Yes, yes. Listeners, if you have a local bookstore, go and order it straight from your local bookstore. And if you like online shopping instead, go to Indiebound, get it there, support your local bookseller, support for the authors you love with your money, before their book is out.

SARAH: You can also go and request it from your library. Libraries can pre-order books, and they're very excited to do it, and we like libraries. Go libraries, libraries are the best!

HILARY: Libraries are also an amazing way to support authors. Never feel bad about getting your favorite authors book out of the library, because libraries are America's greatest public institution, and there should be more of them.

SARAH: Go libraries, go houseboats!

HILARY: Go libraries, go houseboats!

HILARY: Sarah Gailey, thank you again, so much. You will be excited to know, and listeners I hope you will also be excited to know, that next month's episode we're having a Sarah fiction double-feature with the inimitable Sarah Hollowell.

SARAH: Other Sarah is the other half of my heart, and I support her unconditionally, and her being on this show is the best thing that's ever happened to anyone.

HILARY: There you have it. So, listeners, thank you so much for joining us. See you again next time.

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You can find the show on Twitter at @trunkcast, and I tweet at @Hilarybisenieks.

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