



## *Unfortunately...*

You Lose the Calluses

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**Hosts:** Mona West and Courtney Floyd

**Guest:** Danai Christopoulou

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

**Courtney Floyd:** I'm Courtney Floyd.

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

**Courtney:** [Danai Christopoulou](#) was raised on a diet of myths and tragedies instead of fairy tales. A journalist and copywriter by trade, Danai's writing has appeared in Glamour, Marie Claire, [khôréō](#), [Fusion Fragment](#), [Flametree Press](#), and more. They have also been nominated for a [Pushcart Prize](#) and for a Best of Small Fictions, and appeared on the Nebula and Stoker Recommended lists.

[Vile Lady Villains](#) is Danai's debut novel, out with [Penguin Michael Joseph](#) in the UK in March 2026. Growing up amid the ancient ruins of Athens, Greece, Danai currently haunts a forest in Sweden along with an army of cats, chickens, and a kind, Swedish man. You can find Danai on most social media [@DanaiWrites](#). Welcome to the podcast.

**Danai Chrysopoulou:** Thank you so much for having me, both.

**Courtney:** Yeah, and [Vile Lady Villains](#) is, I've been telling everyone, the best title I've heard. It's just fantastic, so I'm so looking forward to it.

**Danai:** Oh, thank you so much.

**Mona:** Before we get to our next question, I have a very important follow up: Do your cats and your chickens get along?

**Danai:** Oh, that's very interesting. I think they're scared of the rooster. They tried first, the cats, when we first introduced them, tried their luck with them to see if they could hunt them. Then they realized that the rooster is bigger than them and he can hunt them back. Now they're like friends from a distance, like a respectful distance.

**Mona:** I like it. That's awesome. I've heard roosters are pretty brutal, so I don't think I would want to get on the bad side either. We're going to go ahead and do an icebreaker to start. Your icebreaker is: What are the most rejections you have received for a single piece? I'll go first.

I have 11 rejections for one of my stories. This is something I've been subbing for about a year, so I expect more rejections to come. I have quite a few things that are at 10 right now. What about you?

**Danai:** Are we talking about novels or short stories? Because short stories, I think the most rejections I've had on one was 21. The interesting thing with that is that this short story not only was accepted, it was accepted twice. It was also published as a reprint in the [Medusa Anthology](#) by Flametree Press. It was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize. It's like, it's interesting to see that sometimes rejections don't really reflect what will turn out to be a successful, or a loved or a liked story or not.

**Mona:** There's an excellent lesson there to not give up and not take rejections as a sign that the work is bad. Just not a good fit, just doesn't jibe with that market for whatever reason. That's fantastic, and that gives me a lot of hope for my stories that are climbing up there in the rejection numbers.

**Danai:** Definitely. And if we're talking about novels, I think I have something 120 rejections to offer to the table.

**Courtney:** Wow.

**Danai:** That was for my first novel that I was querying for. I got around 80 agent rejections before I got my agent offer. Then when we sent it out on submission, I think throughout the years it accumulated something like 40 more rejections from publishers. Interesting note about that, too, is that it went to acquisitions four times.

**Mona and Courtney:** Oh, wow.

**Danai:** This novel has gone through a lot. I'm hoping that just like my short story was rejected a lot and then ended up being published twice, who knows? Maybe this novel will also make a comeback at some point.

**Courtney:** That's amazing. It's just reminding me that when we had Dave Goodman on, he said something about the same in terms of novel, amount of novel rejections. They just build up over time a lot.

I think my most rejected short story is currently at 14 rejections, and I've been submitting that for a couple of years now, or three years now, wow. It's gotten holds many times, so there's something there that's grabbing people, but it just hasn't found the perfect fit yet. Then with novels, I think, oh, I did not keep track, but not nearly that many because I got super lucky with my timing, but I think something like 20 or 30 rejections on that.

I think we can move on to our journey question. This has already come out a little bit, but we're in an industry where so many of our efforts and failures are invisible, and where it's easy to think of people as overnight successes when it may have taken decades to 'arrive'. In the interest of making some of that invisible work more visible, can you briefly tell us where you are in your writing journey and what you went through to get there?

**Danai:** Right now, I'm in this weird limbo year before my debut comes out next year, where it's like this Schrödinger's Book where it simultaneously exists, but doesn't exist, because we're currently in the process of developmental edits with my editor at Penguin. So there's a lot of waiting and there's a lot of anticipation and there's a lot of trying to prepare for what's going to happen next year. There's also a tendency to forget to sometimes celebrate where we are, right?

When we are closer to achieving our goals, but we haven't quite conquered that milestone yet, it's like an interesting trap to fall into to feel like things are not moving as fast, or things are not happening as much as you wish would happen. It's also important to take a step back and look at the journey, like you said, look at what we've been through to reach where we are at this point.

I think in terms of my journey, I've been writing all my life, but I did not dare to write fiction until 2020 or so. I've always been a writer. I've always worked as a writer, as a journalist. My nonfiction has been published since I was 19 years old. That is a positive and a negative because like the nonfiction world is very different to the fiction world.

In one sense, it gave me the confidence to put myself and my work out there. In another sense, it created false expectations because with nonfiction, it's very often that you will send a piece to magazines and then you will be accepted and then your piece is going to be published and then you will create a relationship with that magazine. Then, it might be that you become a monthly columnist for them, as it has happened for me. That's not how fiction publishing works at all. It's like it's so common that you will just send so many stories, queries and manuscripts out to agents and publishers and you will hear nothing back. Or you will get a **form rejection** years later and that, I was not prepared for that part. It has been very illuminating to experience.

I've been writing all my life. I started writing fiction in 2020, after I wrote a few books for other people first as a ghostwriter, which gave me the confidence to be like, "Okay, I can do this as a job. I can do this and hit a deadline with it, so why don't I try to do this for myself as well?" So I wrote my first novel in 2021. It's interesting to write in a language that's not your first

language. It has a lot of challenges come with that.

A lot of my nonfiction work is in Greek. There's a different part of my brain that works for that. I've only written fiction in English. If you ask me to write a book in Greek now, which is my native language, I don't know if I would be able to, which is also very interesting to see. But I got very lucky. I wrote my first novel, I queried it for only six months in 2021, and I got an offer from a small press during one of those pitch parties back when Twitter was still Twitter. It was also very good to create a community with other authors in different stages of the journey and learn so much about how this whole process works.

Then that small offer led to me nudging all the agents that my manuscript was out with and then eventually led me to getting an offer from my agent. We ended up not working with that small press. We ended up reworking the novel and sending it out to publishers, which has led to the long journey I spoke of before, of four times getting it to acquisitions and almost yeses, but not yet.

As lucky as I was during querying, I think we can say with confidence that I was unlucky during submissions. I was out on submission with four manuscripts for three years. It has been a lot, but it has also been so interesting. It has taught me so much about the industry, about myself as an author, about what motivates me when external success doesn't come yet, external validation doesn't come. How do you keep going?

I wrote a very different book as a second book. I co-wrote it with two author friends. I co-wrote my third book with another author friend. Then at some point, I just decided to write the book I always wanted to write and I was too afraid to write, which ended up being *Vile Lady Villains*. When we sent it out on submission, I had a weird mix of jaded and incredulous because my former experience on being on submission has taught me that things take forever and then nothing happens, or you get to acquisitions and then there's a no. With *Vile Lady Villains*, the experience was so different. It took me a while, I think, to realize that it had happened because we went out with it in the middle of the summer, which for everyone who doesn't know, is like a dead period during publishing. Most editors are out. Then we got interest in two weeks. It was like an avalanche started right away. We got the offer in, I don't know, less than a month of the manuscript being out. It happened so fast. It was like, whoa.

**Courtney:** That's amazing. I think your phrase, Schrodinger's Book, just resonated so deeply with me because since I got my offer last May, there was just a huge chunk of time where theoretically there's a book, but it's difficult to believe for a long time. It's like you're secretly making the book while pretending that the book is a thing. I don't know, it's just this whole strange limbo.

**Mona:** That answer was fantastic. It answers a lot of the questions we actually wanted to ask you over the course of the podcast. You have been on such a, frankly, pretty wild journey going between different genres and all these different experiences with writing for yourself, writing for others, writing for yourself again. It's fascinating and I hope we get to follow up on a

lot of those questions. One thing that I do definitely want to ask you, and you alluded to this, was finding that validation and motivation to keep going when the external validation was lacking.

What are the things that kept you going when you were on that treadmill just waiting for things to happen and having things not go the way you hoped?

**Danai:** Short fiction. That's the short answer. I was always drawn to short stories, but I hadn't experimented so much with them before. I wrote one or two, I think, before I started querying and then went out on submission. There's something about the short fiction process that is like, because I'm also ADHD, my brain craves this dopamine that comes from getting responses fast and managing a spreadsheet with different answers. Then with short fiction, we have tools like the **Submissions Grinder**, where you can see where the magazines are in terms of responding to submissions. It helped me also a lot in terms of my craft to experiment with different genres and different writing styles.

It's a bit scarier to do with a novel if you feel like you don't know what you're doing yet. It just created the continuity in my writing that, okay, my novel is parked there for a few months or years, but in the meantime, I can do something with my writing, with these words, with this world, with ideas. Another thing that really helped, I think, that is like tangential to this is being involved in the community and in short fiction magazines and markets as a volunteer, and just being introduced to so much talent that exists out there and consuming words of other writers and being in community with other writers. That really helps you understand that you're not alone.

**Mona:** That's one of the main reasons we wanted to do a podcast like this, was to expand that feeling of community to really capture the frustrating parts of this that aren't always as easy to see. I fully relate to what you're saying about the ADHD tendency to just want to keep working and wanting to keep almost just checking boxes. It's almost very utilitarian. I write because I love it, but when I get to check the box saying I did it or saying I submitted it, there's a lot of satisfaction just in that act. It's a good motivator.

**Danai:** Having written is sometimes better than writing, like [Dorothy Parker](#) famously said, "I hate writing. I love having written." I totally understand that. The problem, I guess, with traditional publishing is that it doesn't really offer to the average author this kind of transparency and this kind of ability to know what's happening, and, okay, I can check this box now, as you do with short fiction, with the short fiction market.

Interestingly enough, this was one of the things that led me to realize that I have a passion for the agenting side of things, because I was so invested in my own journey during submissions with my agents, I really wanted to be so informed of everything that was happening informed of everything that was happening in real time. As this process went on, after the first shock, because it's always shocking when industry professionals reject your writing, but after I got over that, I started to realize, okay, this is a very interesting industry. I want to understand how

these people think, I want to understand how they approach storytelling. That also, gave me a sense of gratitude for how my agents stuck with me throughout all these years and all these different projects and all these different rejections.

It began to grow on me this need to become that champion for other writers, which led me to eventually start as an intern and then become an assistant agent myself.

**Mona:** I think I missed that, that you're an assistant agent now. That's amazing. That's such a valuable way to give back to the community. What does that work look like?

**Danai:** So far, it's like this in between stage, because I'm helping my boss manage his own client list while slowly building my own list. I don't have a lot of clients yet, but that is also a positive, because I get to spend a lot of time with them to work on edits, work on a submission strategy. That has been a very interesting part of the process. I really like to see a future where I can combine agenting with writing fiction. That would be ideal. Hopefully, it will pay the bills at some point, but until then, we have the love of the craft.

**Mona:** That, I think, leads nicely into one of the questions that we had prepared ahead of time.

What is your approach to being on sub and emotionally handling all that? What would you suggest writers on sub for the first time think about to manage that emotional experience? Now you're in a position to help people manage that, so what are the tools that you're sharing? What are the tools that you use and the techniques to not get overwhelmed, or so frustrated that you weren't sure if you wanted to keep going?

**Danai:** I think what I always tell people is know your limits. Your limits might change throughout the process. You might think that you want to get every rejection as it comes. You might think you want to read that. You might think it helps you, but it might not. It might become too much after a while and that's okay. You need to protect yourself in this long, arduous process. You need to be in a mindset where you can keep creating.

While some people need the real-time updates, for some people, that can be harmful, so know your limits, and then work with your agent to establish a process that respects these limits. For instance, some of my clients want just monthly updates of what's happening on submission. Some of my clients want a weekly update of what's happening on submission. Some only want news when there's good news. I needed to know what was happening in real time, but that was mostly because I needed to understand the industry.

If I was in a different place in my life where I just wanted to be an author, I don't know if I would have made the same choice because it can be excruciating. It can be excruciating to read the rejections as they come. Yes, know your limits, and don't be afraid to protect yourself.

**Courtney:** I love that. I think it was especially excruciating when they were very positive passes for me. That was a real surprise. I was one of the people who wanted weekly updates, or real-time updates for good news, but weekly updates for rejections. You just need to think about that when you're going on sub, and just communicate what you think will work for you.

**Danai:** I think another thing that might help is the more stories you send out there to magazines, the more the volume increases, the easier it gets to have a sense of, this is not personal, this is not a rejection on myself. It's not even a rejection on the quality of my work, it's just a rejection on this specific fit for this specific story for this specific market in this specific time. That becomes easier after a couple of novels that you may have queried or went on submission with, and it becomes easier after a couple of stories that you have submitted. It's not easy to do when it's the first time you send your work out there.

**Mona:** I have not been subbing very regularly recently for various reasons. I find that the longer I go between subbing, the more the rejections start to hurt again, because you've de-acclimated to that. It's hard, because then when, for whatever reasons, whether it's self-preservation or motivation or competing interests, you have to step away for a second, it's almost like you're starting over again. You have to go through that mental trauma, like, "Oh God, another rejection, this sucks," and you have to retrain yourself almost.

It's frustrating that you can never really get into that mindset, it feels like, and just stay there, because our minds are not really equipped for rejection. You can lose that skill and that callous pretty fast, in my experience.

**Danai:** It's like a muscle, you need to train your rejection muscle.

**Mona:** Luckily, there's a lot of opportunities to train in this industry.

**Courtney:** This is giving me flashbacks to being in the querying trenches and getting those waves of rejection. I write myself little letters or poems, or things to help manage it. One of them was this poem that starts, "This is the blister stage. Before you form a callous, you blister often." You lose your calluses if you don't keep building them up. That's the tragedy of our work.

**Mona:** I am always so impressed by people who enter the fiction world later on in their life, later on in their career. I've been primarily writing fiction my entire life. Even so, I really struggle now to switch up genres within fiction. I've always written fantasy, sci-fi type stuff. Lately, I've been trying to do more horror, and despite reading more horror and trying to familiarize myself with the tropes and everything, I really am having a hard time getting into that mindset.

I'm curious, because you came from nonfiction, how did you end up switching gears? What was it like learning how to think in that way and write in that way? You had the added challenge, which is incredible of writing in your second language, too. I'm just curious what



that looked like for you, and were there challenges along the way in trying to get into that genre? Were there periods when you were like, "You know what? I don't want to do this anymore. I'm just going to go back to nonfiction." What did that look like?

**Danai:** This is interesting, because the fiction I tend to write is so closely interconnected with my identity. It's so much rooted in Greek mythology and all the stories I grew up with, and my country's culture, folktales, and all that. I think the main challenge sometimes can be to take a step back from that and try to think of what other things I can play with, what other influences and inspirations I can draw from. That mostly comes from reading broadly, reading indie authors, reading [traditionally] published authors, reading poetry, reading short stories, reading in different genres. Just find different books to fall in love with.

It was also interesting, because when I grew up, I consumed a lot of books through their Greek translation. Now it's an interesting point where, oh, I need to actually read Clive Barker in English to see how I feel about him, because I love him in the Greek translation. You come to literature already from a different corner of the world with different influences.

But can you just try to find your way? My first love was fantasy, and fantasy steeped in Greek mythology. Then, I knew I wanted to try something different. I had an idea for a science fiction book that I was not smart enough to write by myself. I maintain that I'm not a very smart person when it comes to science fiction. I have no idea how things work. This is where I partnered with two author friends, and through this process, both observing their own process towards writing and observing their own process towards solving problems in this science fiction world we co-created, that was a very inspirational and educational moment for me. I really wanted to do that again.

It's not very easy in traditional publishing to co-write books, unless you've had some kind of success first that can be tracked through sales. I'm hoping that our co-written books will be published at some point. Even for the lessons I've learned through them throughout the years, it was a very good thing to do. I think people should co-write more things. Especially, Mona, to answer your question, like in a genre that you don't feel so comfortable with, start writing with someone else there and then see what happens.

**Mona:** That's great advice, and it's not something I've even thought about. Why don't I find someone who's more familiar with writing horror and just co-write something and start picking their brain and learning their process?

We don't talk about co-writing very often. I've co-written, actually, a few things with a friend of mine. It's been a genre that I'm comfortable with, so I wasn't necessarily using that as much of a learning opportunity, but it was fun. It's a great community exercise. It's a great skill-building exercise. It sometimes feels like a novelty, when maybe it's actually a really good tool for learning more about the craft.

**Courtney:** Just to contextualize this question a little bit, I've been having lots of conversations



lately about the various ways that success can sort of change your relationship with the work. I'm really interested to hear about how your nominations for the Pushcart Prize and being on recommended reading lists for the Nebula and Stoker Awards has impacted how you think about success and failure, and how you do the work.

**Danai:** If you grow up with a mother who minimizes every achievement you ever make, I think you grow up having a very interesting relationship with success, because whatever I do, I never deem it important enough or good enough for me. Sometimes I have to be told by other people that, "This is a good thing that happened now, that you need to feel some kind of sense of pride or joy." Does it affect me? I'm not sure. I think it affects me up to a point, but if anything, it like shows me that, perhaps there is something here, how can you be even better at it? Which I'm definitely not saying is a healthy way of going about it. Please, people at home, do not approach good things that happened to you in the same way. Unless you have a lot of money to pay for therapy.

**Courtney:** That's really valid. I'm wondering, even if you're not necessarily marking it as a success, does that become a baseline for you? That one story got nominated, so all of your stories should, or else you're somehow slipping? Does the reverse happen?

**Danai:** I wish I could say no. It does create expectations. Mostly for myself, not as much externally, but like, "Okay, so this story was good. What made it good? Can you create more stories like that?" It's a kind of futile path, mental path to go on, because so much of this success and these nominations, not mine, in general, is also about luck and timing and the right people reading the right story in the right mindset or in the right mood. You can't really predict that there is no way to always reverse engineer what was "good" or "successful" about a story and try to duplicate it.

I guess, what I'm trying to do in the end is try to replicate the feeling that I had when I was writing it. Did it make me feel like something meaningful was happening on the page? Did it make me feel like I was expressing a part of myself through these words or through this world or these characters? If so, maybe I can focus on doing that again. External success and nominations, they're always good, I think, but they can also be a trap if you tend to be a perfectionist with a difficult childhood who success is never good enough or is the baseline.

I would like to add here as an anecdote, that when I called my mother to tell her I got an agent, her response was, "Oh, that's nice. Did you do any actual work today?"

**Mona:** Oh jeez.

**Danai:** I think I'm only mentioning that because it colors so much of my own thinking about my work. Okay, yeah, that's nice, a nomination, but have I actually done anything good today?

**Courtney:** Gosh.

**Mona:** I can relate to that. That's actually a question I've been wanting to ask, I guess, and it's never really come up, but how do you view your successes when the people, and I don't presume to know your relationship with your mother, of course, but my dad is very similar. When I shared with him the first story that I ever got published, I think his response was something like, "Well, I'm glad you're happy with it," something like that. He couldn't even be bothered to tell me his own opinion because he clearly -- I can read between the lines, he didn't like it. It wasn't for him.

When the people that you care about, the people who are important to you don't get what you do, and in a way, are ambivalent or apathetic about what you do, how does that color your experience? I feel like personally, even though I try not to, a lot of my motivation in the back of my mind is like, I'm going to impress my dad. He doesn't read the fiction I write, he doesn't care. That is a fool's errand through and through, but when you grow up your whole life in that environment, it feels like the ultimate achievement is finally breaking through that shell and finally getting that validation when you're ignoring all the other external validation coming from people who actually value the work.

I just think that's interesting and I wish that wasn't an experience that you had, and I'm sorry that that's something that has happened. I've been there and it's hard, and you're going to keep doing the work, but there is always that little nagging voice in the back of your mind, isn't there?

**Danai:** It creates a wound, doesn't it? That you have to learn to live with and create in spite of. If we're trying to find a positive in everything, I will say that having people in your immediate family that either don't believe in you or are never pleased with your achievement, also offers a kind of strength that perhaps you wouldn't have if everyone in your life had always supported you, like family should support you, but that's another --

I've often joked that there is nothing publishing can tell me about my writing that will be worse than my own mother's words about me. It also gives you a shield from the harshest aspects of the industry. It's a very, very, very heartwarming thing when you get to meet people who might be strangers on the internet, but share the same struggles as you and our creators and can really understand the importance of what you do and what you've done. These people seem to read and appreciate your work. That adds another layer to it, that I really appreciate my community and my friends, because they've helped me and pulled me through some very tough times when the external validation isn't there.

**Mona:** Yes, you say it's a wound and I agree. It's not a wound that ever heals or goes away, but it's one that you can prevent from festering and metastasizing. I think you're right, that community and finding that support from people who not only do similar work, but just unabashedly support you in what you're doing, opposite to what you've experienced in your personal life, that is a very solid and strong band-aid. That's just a constant theme in this podcast is community, community, community, that's how you get through it, every aspect of it.

I appreciate you sharing that, because like I said, it's something that I've experienced and I've been very interested to hear about what other people, what their experience has been with similarly. Thank you for sharing that. Thank you for indulging me in that conversation.

I think we can get back on track with our questions.

**Courtney:** Sure. I have one more question about awards and then want to talk a little bit more about debut. I guess I'm just wondering from the outside looking in, it seems like awards are this pinnacle in a writing career and that they must open so many doors and change everything somehow. I'm wondering if you can just speak a little bit to what the experience is actually like. Have you noticed sort of any impact on your career in terms of solicited stories or doors opening?

**Danai:** Not yet. It has offered some nice opportunities in connecting with people from various magazines, from various market. Though it hasn't resulted in solicited stories, it has resulted in getting reviews on my stories, which was a very, very emotional milestone for me to see my work reviewed by people who do this for a living. It's also interesting because I live so far away from the publishing world, both from the hubs in the US and the UK, and coming from writing in my second language. You always feel that you're outside the party in a sense.

I guess these nominations, although they haven't changed a lot in my life, but they have made me feel like maybe I am a part of this community and I deserve to be here. It has helped in more of an emotional, I guess, sense than in the practical sense.

Do awards and nominations in general help? Yes, I do think they do. Perhaps on a bigger scale than what I've had so far, like if you're nominated for a Hugo or a Nebula or a Stoker Award, if you're in the short list for that, then perhaps editors are starting to pay attention to that, perhaps magazines are starting to pay attention to that. I'm not there yet, so I cannot speak to it.

**Courtney:** Fair enough.

**Mona:** I am curious about your thoughts on this. This is a wonderful conversation by the way, I'm really enjoying this and my brain is going a million miles a minute trying to find -- because I have so many other questions. I'm very curious what you think about the fairness of a system that eventually when someone reaches a certain level of success and certain amount of cachet, starts to open more doors and offer them more opportunities. I find that idea very interesting that once you've had a certain degree of success, it's so much easier for you. Meanwhile, there's so many others that now won't have an opportunity to be in said magazine because that slot is dedicated to a solicited story, that sort of thing.

I get it when you've had that level of success, you have more attention, you have more eyes on you. Of course, it's going to lead to more opportunities. Part of me, maybe the cynical, admittedly a little jealous part of me, feels like it doesn't actually make the work better than

other people. There's so many valid, important, and amazing stories out there that are never going to get that recognition and may never see the light of day. Do you have any just controversial opinions?

**Danai:** Oh, I have so many thoughts on this. I think the industry in general suffers from, "We're waiting for someone else to tell us a story is good first before we take risks on it." It happens, I think, on every level. It happens at the agenting level, it happens at the editor level, at the publisher level, at the short fiction magazine level. Sadly, it happens a lot.

Like you said, just because a story has hit that golden spot of momentum and has gathered a lot of nominations, doesn't necessarily mean that it's a better story than a story that hasn't been acknowledged yet. That's why it's so important to me, the work we're doing in **Khoreo**, where we do not accept solicited stories at all. We just have an open submission window for all writers, and we try to judge every story based on its merit and not based on the author's bio. That's why I also appreciate a lot of magazines that read blind.

I think there are some efforts to create a kind of fairness in an industry that is not fair. It's especially not fair for marginalized writers. It's especially unfair for BIPOC writers, for people like me, for whom English is a second language. I've had so many people tell me that when they're querying, they have to change their second name, their surname to sound more Anglo, because it becomes difficult for people to pronounce their names or to believe that because they're coming from another country, they can't write so well, and they don't even judge the work by its own merit.

It's not a meritocracy at all, and I'm furious about it, and I am just trying to contribute to publications and teams of people who are devoted to promoting new authors, new talents from all over the world, marginalized authors. I'm sorry, I went on a tangent.

**Mona:** No, I appreciate it. I started that tangent, and I agree with you. I think you're so well positioned in the work you're doing as doing some of this agenting work and just voicing this and reading for *khōréō*, which, as you said, doesn't solicit. I think you are advocating for that and advocating for that change that's so important to really platform the people who may not otherwise be read.

**Courtney:** Awesome. We have one last question for you. You're a little ways out from your debut year, but it is like once you make that sail, you're in this Schrodinger's Book limbo, but you're also experiencing this wave of huge success. This is what so many people have worked for. Can you talk a little bit about, again, from that outside-looking-in perspective, it feels like this must be amazing and good and everything, but have there been any unforeseen pitfalls or struggles that you have been surprised to experience as part of this long debut process? What do you wish was different, or what do you wish you had in terms of resources or anything along those lines?

**Danai:** That's a tricky question for me to answer right now, because I'm more than a year off.

We're at the stage yet where a lot is uncertain. I don't have any answers or expectations of how things will go. What I will say is that one of the biggest problems with publishing is that there are no standards. There is no standard, for instance, as **Publishing Rodeo** has told us, has shown us through their episodes, you can be a debut author with the same publisher, debuting in the same genre in the same year, and just have a wildly different experience from everything from the amount of your advance to the amount of your sales of your book to how much marketing attention you get from your publisher.

I am aware of all these discrepancies and I am aware how they might unfold for me. We will always want more and better once we get something, it's the human condition, sadly. Sadly, we always compare to what other authors may have. "Oh, this one is a flashy debut. Oh, this one got a huge deal, as it was reported, for instance, in [Publisher's Marketplace](#). Oh, this one already has foreign sales in five different countries." There will always be something more to judge yourself against and feel like you're not doing enough.

I guess what I'm trying to do is take a step back and realize that where I am now, I would be so keen on being a year or two ago. I would be so happy with this, with where I am now. I'm just trying to do this exercise a lot.

**Courtney:** I'm in the same place. I keep reminding myself like, a year ago, two years ago, decades ago, this would have been the biggest dream come true, and it is. It really is. As long as I keep resisting the comparanoia. I think that the uncertainties and the lack of standardization, I agree, that's one of the biggest issues. Nobody gives you a checklist, a timeline of what you can expect when you can expect your edits. Even publisher to publisher, imprint to imprint, the terms for things are different. The order things happen in can be different.

Even if you've done a lot of reading and a lot of research and prepared yourself as best as you can, you still might not be able to anticipate what the process will look like for you and your book. That's hard, especially for those of us who are neurodivergent or anxious or living in precarious financial situations, which a lot of us are in one or many or all of those categories.

**Danai:** Exactly. Also, this industry is so fickle. There's such a turnover in terms of editors leaving the agency or agents quitting or imprints closing. You might start with the best under the best circumstances. You might have the best editor in the world who is super psyched to work on your novel, then a reshuffling happens and you have to find a new editor with a different imprint or within the same imprint that maybe is overwhelmed and overworked and doesn't have the bandwidth to.

These are not my personal experiences, but I've seen this happen so often. You never know until the book is out. After that, you can never really know how things will evolve. That can be hell for a neurodivergent brain.

**Courtney:** Yes, and then, that's not even factoring in the world around the publishing industry, like paper, there might be paper shortages, the government might be having a hostile takeover in your country, the topic of your book might become this controversial thing that the fascists are trying to prevent anything --

**Danai:** I can tell you, it's very interesting to try to debut with a queer book in this day and age.

**Courtney:** I have a queer norm disability justice book and it is very much about disability inclusion, diversity inclusion in higher [education], which is just as I am watching [crosstalk].

**Danai:** All these bad words we're not supposed to say right now, right?

**Courtney:** Yes. It's kind of a surreal year for so many reasons.

**Mona:** Yeah, there's a degree of uncertainty now that I think, at least in the US, we haven't really had to contend with in our lifetime, which is probably going to change a lot of the conventional knowledge about this industry and this work. I think that's all the more reason to keep writing the things that you're passionate about and writing the topics that are important to you and writing the stories that are important to you.

It is very cool that you do have stories coming out that are representing these populations and these ideas at a time when it's going to be so, so important for people to be able to find those stories. I am a typical American. I am not very well versed on what's happening in the rest of the world, but I know that what's happening in our country has ripples in other countries. It's having international ripples.

**Danai:** Oh, definitely.

**Mona:** I think for all of us it's important to continue to hold onto our community and write the stories that we want to write and we know deserve to be out in the world.

**Courtney:** On the topic of debut, can you tell us a little bit more about *Vile Lady Villains* and tell our listeners where they can find you online?

**Danai:** I'm going to talk about my mother again. Forgive me, but my mother was an actress and a theater director. Both my parents were actors, so I grew up reading ancient drama monologues and helping them memorize their roles, especially my mother. She was teaching people how to become actors. It wasn't a very unusual sight for a seven-year-old Danai to just recite [Clytemnestra](#) or [Lady Macbeth](#) in my living room. That, I think, has left something in me. I've always been fascinated by these characters and I always wondered, what would happen if these two women met?

Because they're so alike in the sense they're both archetypes of female ambition and how this female ambition can be villainized very often in text. I just always had this, what would happen if these two women met? I know it was a crazy premise, but I started writing it as a short story



and then I realized it's a novella, then I realized it's a novel. And the rest is history, as they say. It's an interesting genre mix. We're calling it horromantasy, which I don't know, take it if you want.

[laughter]

**Mona:** Step aside romantasy.

**Danai:** Because there's, obviously -- yes, there is this sapphic romance at the heart of it all. There is a lot of horror elements, and of course, there this fantasy world where these two women find themselves in. It has just been so interesting with me to play with them, the source texts, and with the language use in the source texts and how the rewriting their story and redefining their vocabulary and finding new words and new names for themselves becomes ultimately a source of rebellion. To me, any act of retelling is an act of rebellion and I wanted to convey that through *Vile Lady Villains*. I really love this book. I don't think it's the book of my heart. I think it's the book of my bones.

We'll see how it goes. I hope people will vibe with it. It's coming out in March 2026 with [Penguin Michael Joseph](#) in the UK. I think that's all I know for now, but it's already out for pre-order. If you can go to my [link in bio](#) and all my social media, you can find all the places that you can pre-order it. Please do because it's so helpful for debut offers, especially for us who write queer books to show our publishers that there is an audience out there for these stories, especially for stories that are weird or between genres.

Please pre-order it if you can, otherwise you can add it on [Goodreads](#) or [StoryGraph](#). That's also very helpful. You can find those links in my profile as well.

**Mona:** How can people find your social media? What is your handle?

**Danai:** DanaiWrites. [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), [Bluesky](#), and basically everywhere I can be.

**Mona:** That pitch is, I'm the audience for this book.

**Danai:** I'm so happy to hear it.

**Mona:** I'm so excited about this and just the mash-up of genres and ideas, that's fantastic. I will be pre-ordering.

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

[END OF AUDIO 56:28]