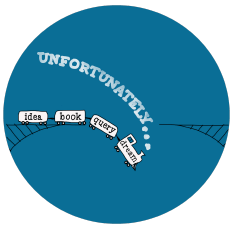

Unfortunately…

You Have to Learn to Edit Yourself

Podcast Title: *Unfortunately…*
Episode Number: S1E4
Length: 55 minutes
Hosts: Mona West and Courtney Floyd
Guest: David Goodman
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 we're talking with David Goodman. He's a novelist and short story writer who works in a range of genres from spy novels to space operas. He grew up in and around Edinburgh and started writing in his early teens. After studying at the University of Aberdeen, he lived and worked in Aberdeen, London, and Edinburgh. His debut novel, *A Reluctant Spy*, is out from Headline Books on September 12th, 2024. He lives in East Lothian with his family. Welcome. Thank you for joining us today.

David Goodman: Thank you so much for having me.

Courtney: Yes. We're going to kick things off today, I think, with an icebreaker question. Our question for you today is how many submissions and rejections do you have to date?

David: I was trying to do the maths on this. (We say maths, not math in the UK.) I was trying to do the maths and I think that I've got 55 rejections for my first novel, although that's counting people who never replied, which I think is a rejection in and of itself. Then I've got, let's see, seven short stories in print, along with a half dozen others. Each of those racked up two or three rejections. I'm going to guess it's somewhere in the 100 to 120-odd range, which is amateur numbers for a lot of folks.

I think a lot of people start earlier and persist a lot longer than I did. What I did was to do a few early submissions and then give up quite quickly and sit and practice my writing for 20-odd years before I started submitting again. My overall hit rate is actually quite high, but that's largely because I wasn't trying. I would say 120 rejections or thereabouts is probably my total.

Courtney: Yes. I think I've similarly estimated numbers because I didn't track rejections for a long time. I only recently started tracking short story rejections. I'm at 62 right now, but that's only since 2018 and I've been doing this for longer than that. Then probably about 30 novel rejections and 50 query rejections and--

David: Yes, they do add up.

Courtney: It racks up pretty quickly.

David: They do. I don't think you don't have the physical rejection slips any longer. I'm giving away my age, but when I started submitting short stories, you would still get a little quarter page rejection slip through the post, usually in an envelope with your own handwriting on it because you'd paid to have it mailed back to you, which was an expensive proposition when you were doing it from the UK to American magazines. I had an envelope full of those at one point. I think it got binned in a house move, unfortunately, but which it would be quite a nice little memento if I could find it somewhere, but I think it's gone. These days I could probably actually find them all in my email just with some clever search terms, but I've not been anywhere near as detailed in my record keeping as I probably should have been.

Mona: I'm actually, it sounds like, I'm a rejection twin with you, Courtney. In the two years that I've been submitting, I've now racked up 62 with two acceptances. I've had 64 submissions in all that time. I certainly am not, gosh, I'm not sentimental about those things. Once I see that email come through, I take a quick look at it and then I banish it forever. [laughs] I do keep a spreadsheet because I do like to see my progress for better or for worse.

David: Yes, I have a Kanban Board and Notion, which I periodically remember to update. I also use the Submission] Grinder, not that grinder, the other one, Submission Grinder, which is very, very good, although you have to get used to the interface, but that's probably the most complete record of my submissions since I started submitting again in about 2019 when I started trying to get published again.

Mona: Yes, big fan of the Submission Grinder. I am always logging things in that because it's nice to also be able to go back and see where you've submitted before, because more than once I've accidentally subbed to a single story to the same place twice, and then I check on the Grinder and it reminds me, “Yes, I've got a rejection for this one.”

Courtney: Awesome. Do we want to move on to our next question?

Mona: Yes, let's get started. All right. We're in an industry where so many of our efforts and our failures are invisible, where it's easy to think of people as overnight successes when it may have taken decades to arrive, which is what you were alluding to earlier. 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?

David: Yes. My debut novel came out just shy of three months ago now. It's Sunday the 8th of December when we're recording this. On the 12th, that'll be three months.

It came out on September 12th. That was my debut novel. I have been writing since the mid-90s. That's just shy of 30 years. I think it's been a very sort of up and down, mostly down. It looks like a hockey stick. The last three or four years have been the real spike upwards as I've started to actually try. The big thing that I did was to spend a long, long time just writing and not actually pursuing publication really. I think partly through fear, partly through external factors.

I started writing when I was in high school, just in the last couple years of high school when I was 17 or 18 years old. I'd been, prior to that, I'd had a few two or three-page long stories I'd written that various teachers had been very impressed with. I think mainly because I was writing anything and I think growing up in the mid-90s in a state school in Scotland, if you're a teacher, you'll probably lavish praise on anyone who's writing fully formed stories of any kind. I probably got more praise than I deserved for those stories.

It was definitely both a really good thing, because it encouraged me to study English literature at university and to read a lot, and probably a bad thing, because I, like a lot of kids who get praise early on in life, I think they over-index on that praise and tend to pursue things in a slightly haphazard way because you feel like you've got talent so you don't really need to work at it, or whatever, internal machinations. I can see you both nodding.

I think that I joined a creative writing society after that when I was at university. I met some really good friends through that, but it was lots of quite wordy stories and tone poems, and things like that, so it was quite focused on the more literary side. I was the weird kid at the back writing mostly ghost stories at the time, bit of science fiction, very much genre writing.

I kept working on that, and I actually mentioned this in the in the acknowledgements for my novel, but the professor that I had at the time, who was my dissertation supervisor, we were doing these long tutorial sessions where we were talking about different kinds of tropes and novels I could look at in my dissertation, and I fixated on 20th century spy fiction, so John le Carré, Graham Greene. We had these long conversations, I read a bunch of books, and then decided on the books I was going to write my dissertation on, and he was the first person who said, "You're obviously very into this genre and you seem to really enjoy it and talking about it, you should probably try and write one of these yourself at some point." It was very offhand, but it stuck in the back of my head.

I was also, and this remains true, I was also very interested in science fiction and had been writing short stories in that area the whole time I was at university. When I was down in London after I graduated, I would write short stories and try and send them out and get them published. I would read a lot of “how to write” books and books about the Clarion writing course in the US. I would have killed to go to Clarion in the early 2000s when I was doing a very demanding corporate job and working 15-hour days. I was dreaming about going to Clarion instead, but I never really pursued it. I just thought about it a lot, which I think is also quite common.

Then I sent off a bunch of short stories, got rejections back fairly quickly, which is valid because they weren't very good. I think, at the time, I was pretty **skint** and

spending £6, £7, £8 a time to send out a short story and then wait 2 to 3 months, which actually a lot of places don't respond that quickly these days, I think just because they're drowning in submissions. But back then you would send it off and you would wait and wait and wait, and then you would get this little envelope back and you'd open it up and say, "Oh, right, okay, there's another one. That was another £10 down the drain."

I gave up on that, but I did NaNoWriMo in 2005 and wrote really terrible… I think it's best described as like a Cory Doctorow knockoff. I'd read a lot of Cory Doctorow novels at the time and I wrote this novel set in South London, where I lived, about cyberpunk-y South London. It's called *Freenet*. It's an absolutely dreadful book and I hope it never sees the light of day, but it taught me a lot, mainly, that I could finish a whole book. At the time I was living in hotels for my day job. I worked for an IT consultancy so I was sitting on these bleak industrial estates in the southwest of England working on big IT programs during the day and then I was going back to these anonymous business hotels at night and trying to get my 1,600 words a day.

Then I finished that and I polished it up and wrote it as well as I could at that age and with the skills I had at the time and I sent it off to two or three agents. This was 2005-2006 so it was pre-in-depth information being available on the internet. We have the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook* in the UK and that was about the only source of information outside of just knowing somebody. I read that and I found two or three agents, like Iain Banks's agent at the time, Mic Cheetham, and I sent a few queries off. I emailed Cory Doctorow and asked if I could get an introduction to his agent, and amazingly, because it was 2005 he said, "Yes, sure," and just forwarded the email [chuckles] on to his agent.

Mona: That's incredible.

David: Yes. I think it was mostly just because it was a different time and there was just far, far, far fewer people online, but I didn't really know what I was doing. The book was terrible so it didn't go anywhere. I then basically did nothing on the publishing side for the next 15 years. I just wrote a lot of books. I wrote, I think, in that time seven or eight novel drafts and then the book that I eventually got rep[resentation] with was a book that was called *Stringers* when I first wrote it but I retitled it to *The Burning Line*.

What had happened is in 2019 I wrote a book called *Chronocosm,* which is a big science fiction generation ship book. The first draft of that was 186,000 words which is too long for a debut. It's too long generally, I think, but it's far, far too long. I looked at that and went "I have no idea how to edit this. I don't have the skills. I don't know how to edit." All the editing I'd done to that point had been moving commas around and just, I just didn't really know what I was doing.

I said, "Right, I'm going to look through the novels I've written over the last four or five years and find the one that I think is the most editable and the most commercial." That one was *The Burning Line*. I basically taught myself to edit over the course of rewriting that book and did a bunch of different things. I've written a series of blog posts explaining how I figured out how to edit.

I think figuring out how to edit is the big- that's the first major hurdle I think you need to overcome as a writer. Once I'd done that, I sent it out on submission because when I finished it I went, "Oh, I think this is actually not a bad book." At the time I was starting to meet other writers in Edinburgh and starting to just build a network and start to understand how the querying process worked and so on. That went out in early 2021. I sent it out to 56 agents by the time it got to Harry Illingworth who's my current agent and he signed me for that book.

That same week I'd started also sending out short stories and I got my first acceptance at Clarkesworld. I got Clarkesworld's acceptance on the Tuesday and then on the Thursday my agent phoned me up and said, "Can we have a chat." It was a very good week. It all started to happen at once and since then it's been most of the-- I think you said in your question, you said the hidden failures that are in the invisible side of things and probably the biggest one that you'll notice is the book that I debuted with, it's not the book that I got representation with.

That book, *[The] Burning Line,* went out on submission. As a story, it's about a city being invaded from the east by a mysterious force. It's semi-post-apocalyptic book and it went out the week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It didn't really hit at the right time, I think, and a lot of people were like, "This is probably not the right time for this story or this book." I think as well it fell in between the gaps. It was too much of a thriller for the science fiction imprints and too much of a science fiction book for the thriller imprints so it perfectly just slid into the gap between those two genres, which was a shame. That's why Harry signed me is that he loves those cross-genre books and he's been quite successful selling those kinds of books but this one just didn't quite get there.

I wrote another spy novel. That one also didn't sell, which is incredibly common but nobody talks about it. Then the third one, *A Reluctant Spy*, we sold that one on proposal to Toby Jones, at Headline [Publishing Group], who had read the first two books, really liked them but couldn't buy them, and he said, "Have you got any other ideas?" We had a really exciting conversation on Zoom when I was at a writing retreat a couple of years ago and I wrote my sample and we went from there.

Courtney: Wow.

David: A hockey stick, the end goes up rapidly but before it's just bumping along the bottom.

Courtney: Yes, on the subject of those hidden failures I'm curious, just I think because I'm at this point right now, did you find that writing those books post-getting an agent and post-going on sub, was that a different experience? Was it hard? Did you struggle with anything in particular? I've been just thinking a lot about, what they call “second book syndrome” and what causes that.

David: Yes and no. I think when you are writing a book within the context of a contract there's a very different vibe. When you're writing a book that's another book that might be going out on submission, you are writing it in within a time limit that you might not have for your debut or your first book that you get an agent with but you are writing conscious of the commercial environment that the book might be going

into, probably in a way that you're not quite so conscious initially.

Interestingly, my second book syndrome has not been as pronounced as I think a lot of my peers and friends. I think in part because the first book was sold on proposal so I have already had the experience of writing a book under contract within quite a short time frame with lots of editorial input which I think is where a lot of people come unstuck with their second books because they're not used to that. They're not used to dealing with lots of voices, lots of different voices both in their heads and exterior voices telling them you need to do something different this time around.

I think that I'm also quite used to critiquing and going back and forth with other people because of my critique group that I'm part of which has been a huge factor I think in how I've been able to write three novels in the space of two and a bit years in order to get to the one we're at now and I'm about to embark on a fourth while editing a fifth and planning a sixth. It's pretty busy but I think I would struggle to do that without the input of the critique group that I'm in.

Mona: One thing that has come up multiple times in the short lifespan of our podcast already is this idea that the community around writing is so important but it's also a very isolated and sometimes isolating craft. It's interesting to hear your journey because so much of it was self-directed. It was you doing the work, you identifying the hiccups, you teaching yourself, you talking yourself through the challenges that you ran into and the downsides of it receiving those rejections, and then suddenly, once you hit that point of the hockey stick where you're on your way back up, suddenly, it seems like, as someone who hasn't been in that world yet, so many people descend upon you from every direction and it just completely shifts the tenor of things because now you have so many people giving you input and so many people giving you their opinions.

I find that dynamic very interesting that so much of this is done alone and then suddenly it's just not. I guess there could be a question out of that, just how have you navigated going from so many years of this on your own and now, suddenly, being part of this bigger machine?

David: Yes, I think that's probably the most important question for most writers because I think there are a few writers who start isolated, and stay isolated, who don't join convention culture, don't find critique groups, don't make any contacts. Their sole interfaces with the writing and publishing world are the commercial ones. They end up just talking to their editor, talking to their agent and that's it. I think there's actually quite a few writers I've met who have been in that situation and I met them on their first interaction with a broader scene, whether that's at a convention or at some other event. I've seen it twice over because I spent four or five years building a community and meeting people in the science fiction world and then debuted in crime and thriller.

I'm now basically meeting an entire new group of people. Last year I went to four conventions over the course of the year. Three of them were crime and thriller and one was Glasgow Worldcon. I've definitely had this feeling of being plunged into it, but equally I've been looking for that community for a decade plus. When I lived down in London, I tried to start a writing group that only lasted a couple of meetings,

largely because I was the only person pushing it and I was having to go out to the shires to work in business parks so I could only really do it when I was back in London. I was only in London for the weekends, and I had to do my laundry, so I basically just didn't have it, didn't really have the time, didn't really have the focus to do that.

Then when I moved back to Scotland in the early 2010s, I tried again. I'd heard these stories of these of-- That makes it sound like a myth, but I'd heard people talking about writing groups in Edinburgh, where I'm from, where I grew up, that had some quite famous writers in them. There was the East Coast Writers Circle. It was the one that I'd heard about, that used to have Iain Banks as a member. It used to have a bunch of science fiction writers that I really admired, but I couldn't find any real information about these groups. There's some sort of things, like there's a group called Writers Block. There's another one called Shorelines of Infinity that runs a magazine in Edinburgh, but they were a cohort that was 15-20 years in advance of me, so it was a lot of people in their 40s and 50s and I was in my late 20s.

At the time, I was looking around, I was saying, "I need to find my own cohort instead of trying to get into the published writers cohort," because I think that is how it works. I started another group called Edinburgh Genre Writers. It's still actually going. I'm no longer involved in it, but that was a classic Milford-style critique workshop. That was interesting because I found it was a great way to meet people. I'm still in touch with two or three people from that group. It wasn't a hugely useful way to get critique, I think, because open critique groups where anyone can join tend to attract a very, very wide range of skills, shall we say.

Sometimes you can be in these really tough situations where you're trying to find a community, you're trying to find other writers who are operating roughly at the same level as you, and you end up in this bind where you're interacting with people who either don't get what you're writing, or are offering feedback that is based on the genre or the thing that they write that's useless for what you're doing. In the worst cases, you end up with people who are, maybe not actively malicious, but they're just giving your self-confidence a kicking every couple of weeks when you have a meeting.

At the time I worked for an agency, so I was doing digital marketing and it was long, long hours, very long hours, and I had to give it up. That's the reason I left that group. When I went to our local science fiction festival here in Edinburgh, which is called Cymera, I met a bunch of people there and I found out about somebody else who had started a Discord server called Edinburgh SFF. I jumped in there with all the enthusiasm of a Labrador just because I was astonished there was that many people who had found some sort of community and who liked the same sort of stuff as I did and I freaked out because I was so excited. This was just before the pandemic, or just mid-pandemic, so everyone was spending a lot of time online. I'd just moved out to the country here and I just spent a couple of years basically just hugely getting involved with that group.

That's how I met Nicholas Binge, who wrote Ascension and who is one of my critique partners now. He told me about this critique group that he had and he said, "Yes, it's quite intense." I was like, "What do you mean by intense?" I was looking for that

investment in time and energy where I could give somebody a 3,000 word short story and reasonably expect to get comments back within a week instead of a month or a month and a half because I was just in a hurry. I wanted to do things quicker essentially. It's really hard, I think, to find people who are at the same level of availability as you.

You've got to match multiple factors, you have to match skill level, you have to match aspirations, you have to match time available. Once you have that match it can be absolutely transformative because you're able to get feedback really quickly, you're able to improve really quickly, and working with other people, who are at that same level as you, levels you up really quickly. You can see it in their writing, they can see it in yours. I think that's been the primary change agent in how quickly and completely things have changed for me, definitely.

Mona: That's so cool. At the risk of repeating myself, I've said this in every single podcast basically, but I found my community at Viable Paradise and it changed everything. It's incredible how important it is to find your people in this field and how little emphasis, I guess, is placed on it when you are starting out because not only is it sometimes difficult to find that advice when you're trying to seek out “what are you supposed to do to become a writer,” but I took creative writing classes and things like that, and there was never an emphasis on “make sure you find your community, make sure you find people that you can talk to, not just about the work itself, but about the industry and the craft and the fun of it and the hard times.”

I think that we probably should do a better job of really encouraging people to find that as early on as possible because it's going to benefit them, not just in their writing, it's going to benefit them emotionally. It's so nice to have people to talk to when you're going through the hard times and others have gone through the same thing. If there's nothing else, I think, that people take away from what we're doing here, it's the importance of community at the end of the day. Whatever failures you're facing, community is going to be the big piece that keeps you going.

David: 100%, yes.

Mona: We have loads of questions for you. The downside, I think, of a chat cast is every conversation leads to a hydra of many more questions, but we have a couple of key questions that I want to make sure we get to. Courtney, I have one. Do you want to do yours first or do you want me to-

Courtney: Yes, go ahead.

Mona: -jump into mine. Your path to this point in your career has been a long one, and there's been a lot of ups and downs, as you said. How does your career in this moment compare to what you may have imagined for yourself when you were first starting out and even at different stages throughout this entire process?

David: That is a deep question with a lot to unpack. I think that there was a period I was starting to think seriously about writing and I was maybe 22, 23. I lived in London and I was single—this was before I met my wife-- and I was living this quite busy corporate job lifestyle during the day and then had a few friends. I was an early

adopter of a website called Flickr, which is like a large format Instagram for anyone who doesn't remember it.

Mona: I loved Flickr in my 20s.

David: Yes, Flickr is amazing. Flickr is how I met my wife, actually. Through Flickr, I met a big community of photography nerds, essentially. I was on other early noughties websites like MetaFilter and other-- they're very old school now, but I met all these cool people and I was very, very tangentially connected at the edges to sci-fi fandom in London. I met Cory Doctorow a couple of times at events. I was loosely involved with the Open Rights Group, I went to a couple of their events. But this was all very much just me hanging around at the edges of things and not really getting involved.

But I remember reading Cory Doctorow's book he wrote, I think for the Rough Guides series, called *The Guide to Writing and Publishing Science Fiction*, which was very much of its time, all the advice in it, is what you should have done in the late '90s to mid-2000s in order to break in. It's very much “send your short stories to these magazines, try and get on this course, go to Clarion.” All the stuff was very much like “this is the path, this is the ladder that you need to climb.” I was like, "Right. That's what I'm going to do."

I think there's an alternate universe version of me who got over some of his self-doubt about his writing, focused a bit harder, quit the super-demanding corporate job earlier, and focused on his writing more, but that guy probably had other issues. I think that the one thing I would say I'm happiest about is that the hockey stick moment, the exciting stuff has happened when I am at a much quieter, more stable part of my own life. I'm in my early 40s. I've got a good day job that I enjoy with people I like that's interesting. I'm in a stable, happy marriage. I live near to my parents. A lot of these things, a lot of the things that caused me emotional or structural pain in the past in terms of how I spent my time and what I was dealing with are no longer a factor. I'm very much on solid ground.

I'm super glad about that because I think if there is any industry out there that either maliciously-- and I don't think it is maliciously-- but I think just by the nature of the processes, it's almost designed. If you wanted to design a process to make people anxious, you would have a job doing a better job than publishing does. I don't think it's malicious. I don't think anyone's setting out to make a machine to produce anxiety, but modern trade publishing is a very, very good anxiety machine. I am now in a position I think where I'm much more able to weather those ups and downs.

I think if I had had the path that I was hoping for at age 23, 24, where I would save up for a couple of years, go to Clarion, hopefully get a book published in my late 20s, then put out a book a year or two books a year for the next 10 years and be a mid-career science fiction writer in my early 40s… if I'd had that career, I probably would have had to navigate some pretty rough shoals. The advent of the ebook, the huge changes in what's selling and what's not selling, all the dramas, various fandom dramas that erupted during that time. I missed all of that because I was just sitting there in various spare rooms and various rented flats over the course of 15 or 20 years just writing books.

I think there was a life that I could have had where I got myself together earlier, I'm kind of glad I didn't, because now I'm in this very online connected community where I have huge support from all kinds of different people, from all kinds of different genres and walks of life that I've met through all these different events. I've got a book out in a genre that I love. I've got other books coming that are, hopefully, going to sell in other genres, and I feel much more able to deal with all of that. I think that it's very tempting to see yourself as having wasted time or not achieved what you should have achieved by a random arbitrary date, quite often round number birthdays, 30, 40 are the ones where you sit there and go, "I've not done what I was going to do."

Writing is one of the few art forms, I think, where you can keep doing it as long as you have some method of putting words on paper or digitally. You can even do it if you can't type. There are still ways to write. I think because of that it's the most accessible art form and nobody can stop you. You don't need particularly space to do it. You do need time and you do need-- there are some things that make it easier, but I think it's the most accessible art form we have. Having that knowledge and knowing that I can just keep writing, nobody's going to take that away from me, I think makes me reassured that it doesn't really matter when I started really focusing on it and trying to achieve those goals. The fact is I did it when I was ready to do it.

I have been very lucky and I've had a series of quite fortunate events where I've written a good book at the right time and I found a good agent and I've had some success in short fiction as well. All those things build on each other and there is a degree to how much I capitalize on that. There's a Scottish phrase we say, "What's for you won't go by you," which on one level I don't really like because it suggests you should sit back and just let things happen and you don't have any agency over your own future, but I do quite like the idea that if something's going to happen, it will happen eventually as long as you're pointing yourself in the right direction. I think that's definitely how I try to do things. I try to put myself in the right place at the right time and then, hopefully, things go the right way.

Courtney: Yeah, that resonates with me so much, so much of that. I'm in a similar place where this is all happening later than I originally hoped it would. I was writing novels and querying as a teenager, unfortunately. [chuckles] I think because it's happened now, I am feeling really stable. I'm feeling like-- I did a PhD. I learned how to weather extreme emotional states, extreme stress in the relatively more confined public space of the ivory tower. Now facing down being on a national stage for 15 minutes, whatever, is not as terrifying because I know how to handle that and I have resources for managing my expectations and a better sense of what success means, which I think leads us well into the next question.

I think you've gotten at this or hinted at it in a couple of places. We've talked about hidden failures. When we were discussing what this episode might cover, you mentioned something called hidden success. I'm wondering if you'd talk a little bit more about what you mean by that. Maybe-- Mona and I were reading your recent blog post about working on your body of work-- maybe that's connected in there as well.

David: Yes, definitely. I think hidden failures-wise, I tried to be quite honest and open

about the things that have not panned out the way I had hoped they would. Honestly, I would have quite liked it if my novel that I got rep with had also been published, but it would have been quite a different starting point. I would have probably been much more focused, again, on the science fiction side of things. Science fiction, although it's a very popular genre, in some media, it's actually not that big a part of the book world, relatively speaking, when you compare it to thrillers or romance or horror even. It's a relatively small niche, even though to the fans who read it, it's probably the most important thing in their creative lives. Broadly speaking, it's a niche.

I remember I went to see Iain Banks speak about 10 years ago, or God, it must have been longer now because he's been dead quite a while. I went to see him about a year before he died. He was talking about how he quite often had questions from people who assumed that he did the science fiction as a sort of commercial thing just to pay the bills. He said, "No, no, it's the opposite. Science fiction is the work of my heart that I do, not because it pays the bills but because I love it. The lit fic that I write is 100% outsells the science fiction 10 to 1."

I was like, "Wow, okay, that was the reverse." I thought the same thing. I was like, "Oh, he must be doing the science fiction as a commercial endeavor rather than because he loves it so much." I'm in that same spot where I love the science fiction and I love writing short fiction and I love writing science fiction novels, and I will keep doing it as long as I have the energy to do it. The thriller world is just a different league. It's a completely different level of sales and success and so on.

I think what's interesting is that all of the discourse that I've seen over the years about success and how much people earn and all these different factors are predicated on observations from genre and from science fiction. I think that there are loads of genres out there where there are relatively large populations of writers making money and doing quite well and selling a lot of books.

I think quite often when we look at the hidden failures that we have like we write a book, it doesn't sell. We write another book, it doesn't sell. We write a third book and it does sell, but then it's not a lead title or it doesn't get a marketing push or-- naturally humans are adjusted to seek out the dangers. We're scanning the horizon for a herd of wildebeest or a jaguar to make sure we're not going to get eaten.

We focus on the things that we're worried about or the things that are bad. I think it's incredibly easy to discount the good things that happen and the positive things and the things that are serendipitous. You meet the right person at the right time you and-- Some of those things you need to have those connections or be in those places physically in order to find those but some of them you don't necessarily need to.

I did a lot of work around my book to email people and ask established authors if they would blurb the book after chatting to my publicist. He was getting ready to just send out a big email blast to hundreds of authors and I was like, "Let me try first. Here's a list of authors I'd quite like to approach." And he was like, "Yep, go for it," because a personal approach will 99 times out of 100 always do better than just a PR email.

I started doing that and this was this sort of little hidden success where it was the only part really at that time when everything else was in the hands of copy editors and printing companies and all the people that were actually putting the book together. That was the only thing that I felt like I had any control over. I know some people absolutely hate doing it but I quite like the excitement. It felt like a little microcosm of querying again but just like slightly smaller stakes because I wasn't trying to find an agent, I wasn't trying to get into the world of publishing. I was just trying to find and make contacts with other authors. I was absolutely blown away by the response.

It would be very easy for me to sit back and go, “Of course, I probably could have done more” or “they probably just did it out of pity because I was a first time author and they were just trying to be nice,” but I think you have to stop yourself when your brain starts to do that, starts to just say, "You didn't do as well as you should have done. You didn't do what you should have done."

I think that there's definitely real issues in the industry with distribution of wealth and relative marketing spends and lots and lots of things like that. I think there's also a lot of unacknowledged good that goes on, and a lot of people who are doing okay and getting little good things happening to them, but they perhaps don't talk about them, in the same way that you don't talk about the books that die on sub. Sometimes you don't talk about the IP book that you wrote, or the ghostwriting book that you wrote, or the book that's selling really well in paperback three years after it came out. A lot of these things I think are reflective of what people want to talk about, which is the stuff that isn't working. I think the industry has many, many, many flaws, but I think sometimes we discount the good stuff a bit too readily.

Courtney: Yes, 100% agree. I actually, just in October, went through a mini round of asking for early blurbs and was similarly blown away by the generosity and the enthusiasm. It is such a win, even though it is comparatively small in the scheme of what is typically considered a win in publishing.

David: Definitely, and I think that there are some authors who, obviously, don't respond, there are some authors who do respond but tell you, "I'm really sorry. I'm too busy," and they're just being very polite which is lovely, but I think a lot of authors remember being in that position and remember just finding their way into the industry for the first time trying to meet people. I think those authors reach back and pull up the next generation of authors, and then, obviously, it's contingent on us to do the same when we're in that position.

I'm now a year in after I went to Harrogate Festival, which is a big crime and thriller festival in the UK. I was just basically there as a hanger-on because my book wasn't out yet so I was just going to meet people, go to a few panels and so on. I'm now in the position where there are people sending me proofs and people sending me questions and asking me to do interviews and things, and I'm like, “I'm going to start passing that back if I can," because I think the more people do that the more difference it makes.

I think there's a very small number of writers who see the whole thing as a zero-sum game and are very much like, "Your failure is my success and vice versa so I need to

just keep my eyes on the thing I'm working towards. I don't want to get involved with anyone else because they're my competition." I look at folk like that and I'm just like, "That's no way to live."

Frankly, nothing is certain in publishing, certainly not money. The one thing that I have definitely found is very common is just making incredibly strong friendships because these are your people. These are people who are literate and interesting and love talking about books and love reading and love writing and love thinking about how to get across character. If you can't have a good party with folks like that, then who can you? I think it makes all the difference. The community is, I think, about 80% of the point for me these days.

Courtney: Yes. One of the most delightful things that I've gotten to do is be a reference for my agent when she's offering to new folks. It's just always such a exciting time. I get to be part of somebody's journey. It's like the door finally opening for them, perhaps after decades. It's so lovely just, yeah, giving back. I'm really looking forward to getting to blurb for people one day, too.

David: Yes, definitely. I'm in way too many group chats. I've got various groups. I've got a group chat of people that I was on submission with. I've got a group chat of people that I play a D&D game with. I've got another-- just a bunch of different pools of people that I've met. I've seen over the last year, I've seen five or six of them go through really tough times, losing agents, finding new agents, having books come out that didn't do well, having books come out that did incredibly well. I've seen a bunch of people get agented and sell books as well and, honestly, it's like the best thing possible is seeing other people get what they really want and what they've been after for years. I cheer them on. They cheer me on. It's just, yes, it's incredible.

Courtney: Awesome. I think we have time for one more question before we wrap up. You've mentioned saying goodbye to some of your stories, some novels along the way. There are, obviously, some industry signs when it's time to say goodbye, like if it dies on sub, but do you have experience having to trunk something before that without an agent or editor sort of death certificate? Wow, that got very bleak. [chuckles] How do when it's time to trunk something without that external voice telling you?

David: I have a pretty deep trunk of stories that I wrote in my 20s and 30s that are just not very good. They're subpar executions of, in some cases, subpar ideas. It's not the case that I'm looking at each story and saying this doesn't meet the bar. It's more that I'm assuming that anything I wrote before about the age of 35 is just, by definition, not going to meet the bar. I think what I do instead is to look back at things and say, "Are there any things here that I can salvage that are good ideas just done poorly?"

I think that's what I have done actually. I had two stories. In fact, I have three stories, let me see. I had a story called *Newtown* which was a ground-up rewrite of a story that I wrote a few years ago. I had another story called *Such is My Idea of Happiness*, which is a complete rewrite, and I had another story called-- No it's not-- I need to look at my-- I need to look behind me at my shelves to remind myself which story I'm talking about.

Yes, so I had another story that came out that was another ground-up rewrite. I've done three ground-up rewrites and I've got-- about half of the short stories that I have out are ones that are stories I completely wrote from scratch. What I tend to do there is I don't re-read the first version. Oh, it was *Best Practices for Safe Asteroid Handling* was the other story. *Such is My Idea of Happiness, Best Practices for Safe Asteroid Handling,* and *Newtown* all came out this year and all three of them were rewrites. Whereas, the only one that was new was one called *Kardashev's Palimpsest* in Clarkesworld. That was completely new.

What I did with all three of those was to not look at the original version and just rewrite my memory of it and just take the original idea because I think if you look at very old work, you get so hung up on the quality of the prose that you can't really see what to do with the idea. I would just try and remember what I originally hoped to do with that story and then rework it from memory and write the whole thing from scratch. Just do the 2024 version of the 2014 or 2012 idea and all three of those did pretty well and have sold. It's a good-- mind your own backlog, I think, is the message there.

I think the other thing that I would do with my old work is to remember that I don't think any book, any novel or story is ever really fully dead, not in a creepy Frankenstein way, but I think you can always do something with them. That Body of Wor-- I wrote this blog post that you referred to earlier in the year, and it got this incredible response where I was talking about the idea that every story is a cumulative addition to that body of work that you have, creating and managing and expanding that body of work is really the only thing that you have true control over. How quickly you expand it, the directions you take it in, that's down to you, and it's up to you how much you do that. You will also, when you're creating that body of finished work, you're going to create a lot of cast-offs, essentially, like other, compost.

Courtney: Yes.

David: I think that I have-- I literally have a folder on my computer called "Compost Pile," which is just all the old stuff. It's word-building notes, and it's random stories from 20 years ago, and it's copies of early novel drafts. There's just all kinds of stuff in there. Occasionally, I'll go in and just have a root around, and see if I can find an apple core or something interesting to pull out and base something new on. There's no cost, really, to keeping that around, aside from the very small mental cost of just cataloguing and maintaining it. You only really need to do that once. I think being aware that even a dead book, a book that hasn't sold to anyone, that your agent has submitted to everybody, that book can still come back at some point as an option book or a rewrite, and you can take ideas that you executed poorly 15 years ago and rework them.

Yes, I think it's very dispiriting when you're a new writer to think that you might have to write hundreds of thousands of words to "get anywhere." I think those hundreds of thousands of words aren't-- it's not like running on a treadmill. It doesn't just evaporate behind you. There will be an output and a product, and that pile of stuff can sit in a folder. You can print it out and stick it in a physical folder and stick it on a shelf behind you if you want. It'll be there. Just having it there, it's half comfort

blanket, half compost pile. It's just this really big resource. There's the body of work that everybody else sees. There's the other stuff. I think we shouldn't discount that other stuff because you always find something interesting in there.

Courtney: Yes. That's such a wonderful metaphor. I love it so much.

Mona: Yes. I also-- Actually, reading your blog post did help me think a little bit differently about my backlog of work because I have a lot of stories that are in progress that I've just abandoned. I have a lot of stories that I've submitted a few times and have just not had any kind of success. Viewing it as just a cumulative representation of the effort I've put in, not just knowing that it's there for me to pull from later, but also knowing that every word I've written is a stepping stone towards being the writer I want to be.

If I hadn't done that work and I hadn't created this body of work that isn't doing anything right now, I wouldn't be creating the body of work that's currently in progress and that lays ahead of me. I think it serves multiple purposes remembering everything that you've done and cataloguing everything that you've done. It helps give you material, but it also helps as a reminder that you're continuing to move forward and you're continuing to create and you're getting better every single time.

David: Definitely. I think as well, I'm British, so there's this standard amount of self-deprecation that I legally have to include in any statement about my work or myself. I think that it's very common to talk about your early work and just say, "Oh, it's awful. It's crap. It's rubbish." There may be clunky terms of phrase, there may be things that aren't up to the standard that you would hope for now, but I think if you do go and look back at your old work, I think you will quite often be surprised to find some real gems in amongst the slightly clunky prose because--

There's a famous quote from Ira Glass, the American audio producer, where he talks about how, when you are a creative person, you get into it because you have good taste and you can tell when things are interesting or fun or creatively high quality, but when you're starting out, your ability and your skills and your technique does not match your taste. You look at everything and you judge it incredibly harshly. It takes years of effort and work to get to the point where your taste and your ability are roughly on a par with each other.

I think that is very true, but I think, also, sometimes you can judge yourself incredibly harshly and *over* harshly, and there are little glimmers of possibility and the kind of writer that you might become in work that you did a long time ago. I'm not saying you need to strip mine your own past and go back and make sure you use absolutely everything. We're not talking about a chicken here that you need to make sure you've properly stripped.

We're talking more about just the-- you have all of these things that make up the person you are now. It's not true that everything in your past is awful. It's not true that everything you're writing now is awful either. It's hard to tell in the moment that you're writing something, whether it's good or bad. I tend to say, focus on the volume, make a lot of pots rather than trying to make the one perfect pot. That shift in mindset, I think, is probably the main determining factor in where I am now versus where I was

10 or 15 years ago.

Courtney: I think that's a perfect place to wrap up. This has been such a wonderful conversation. Thank you so much for agreeing to come chat with us, Dave.

David: Thank you. I'm very glad to have come. It was great.

Courtney: If you would, can you share with our listeners where they can find you online? If there's something you would love them to read or want to pitch to them, go right ahead.

David: Yes, absolutely. You can find me at davidgoodman.net. That's probably the best place to look for me. I'm on Bluesky and Instagram, sort of on Threads, though I'm not really vibing with Threads, if I'm honest, but if you go to davidgoodman.net/links, that's got all the purchase links for *A Reluctant Spy*. If you go to davidgoodman.net/short-fiction, that has links to all, that has all my short stories that are available to read online.

Courtney: Amazing.

David: Thank you very much.

Mona: Thank you again. Wonderful conversation. And, uh…

David: You need to come up with a sign off. [laughs]

Courtney: Yes.

Courtney: I've just been cutting them off. It's fine to end at “thank you.”

Mona: I know.

David: I was on a podcast a couple of weeks ago where the host says, "I'm terrible at coming up with sign offs. Can you give me your sign off?" She gets every guest to come up with a sign off.

Courtney: Oh, that's such a great--

Mona: Okay. Well, you've-- What's your sign off?

David: This is the thing is her podcast is called *The Read and Buried Podcast*. It's themed around what books would you be buried with. The sign off I used for that says, "Just like the coffin I'm in now, we've nailed it," which I thought was quite good.

Mona: You came up with that on the spot, that's--

David: Well, I admit, I listened to the podcast a few times. I was like, I'm going to use that as a sign off. No, I'm terrible in the moment. I think there are definitely-- The problem is if you get someone who just doesn't read the briefing notes beforehand or isn't very fast on their feet when it comes to coming up with things that can be not as funny, but just an idea.

Courtney: It's there in the name, right? Unfortunately, we're all out of time.

David: Unfortunately, we don't have a sign off, so we're just going to stop.

Mona: Yes, on-brand for the nature of the podcast. We can get away with anything on this podcast and just pitch it to verisimilitude.

David: Yes.

Mona: Attribute it to trying to like keep the vibe.

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

[00:59:48] [END OF AUDIO]