

QQQ 4.2 Kate Fussner

[00:00:00] **Sarah:** Welcome to Queries, Qualms, and Quirks, the weekly podcast that asks published authors to share their successful query letter

[00:00:05] **Sarah:** and discuss

[00:00:06] **Sarah:** their journey from first spark to day of publication. I am your host, author Sarah Nicolas, and literary agent Sarah N. Fisk. Kate Fussner is a novelist, teacher, and accidental poet living in Massachusetts with her wife and dramatic dog.

[00:00:21] **Sarah:** When not reading or writing, Kate can be found baking, spending time with her family, or singing her favorite musicals. Kate believes in the power of a good laugh and a good cry, and hopes her stories will provide readers with both. Her debut novel, *The Song of Us*, was published with HarperCollins Catherine Teigen Books in May of 2023.

[00:00:40] **Sarah:** So please welcome Kate to the show. Hello!

[00:00:42] **Kate:** Hi, thanks so much for having me.

[00:00:45] **Sarah:** Hi. We Are going to start by going all the way back to the beginning. When did you first start getting interested in writing and then how long did it take before you started getting serious about pursuing publication?

[00:00:55] **Kate:** I have always wanted to be a writer. I was a voracious reader as a kid, um, and I have journals and notebooks from as young as second and third grade. I think the first novel I ever tried to write was a *Redwall* fan fiction in a tiny notebook. I didn't get Very far, but I found it recently and it all came sort of flooding back to me.

[00:01:25] **Kate:** And I remembered that feeling of wanting to write stories. When I was in high school, I started to get more serious about it. And Discovered that I really liked writing creative nonfiction, and so I got very interested in personal essays, and true stories, and memoir, and thought that that might be the direction for my writing career.

[00:01:52] **Kate:** I also knew I wanted to be an English teacher. I was lucky enough to go to a high school with a lot of out and happy English teachers. And so as a young queer and questioning person, having these English teachers who

were so invested in my writing and my reading, and also just who I was as a person made me want to pursue both English teaching and writing. I got more serious about publication after becoming a teacher. I moved to Boston a year after I graduated from college. I had, I spent the year in between living and teaching in Paris. And when I moved to Boston to get my master's in education, I really got my butt kicked by teaching. and the first few years I really needed time to get settled in my one career before embarking on a second career at the same time.

[00:02:51] **Kate:** After I got my feet on the ground, I began taking local classes at Grub Street to kind of re engage with the parts of me that really missed workshop from college. And I decided that I would start publishing personal essays. And so that was where like my publishing career, I guess, started. but now that I'm a kid lit writer, it's so interesting to me because I can see pieces of those personal essays and the things that I learned in the creative nonfiction classes

[00:03:26] **Kate:** being really useful, especially in writing poetry, as I think about concise language. So all of that is to say that I have always wanted to write, but I didn't know what it would actually take to be a writer, if that makes sense.

[00:03:45]

[00:03:45] **Sarah:** How did you learn more about the publishing industry? Like, how it works, how to query, how to go about it?

[00:03:50] **Kate:** That's a great question. began taking creative nonfiction classes at Grub Street and learned about publishing in Literary journals and, more local publications first. But when I wanted to write a novel, uh, I had my first novel idea for a young adult novel in prose, very different from what I ended up publishing.

[00:04:17] **Kate:** I started to work on it on my own and I realized that I needed more help. I took about a year to try to write. My first young adult novel and I kept hitting a wall and I was at the Boston Book Festival in the fall of 2018 and I saw a booth for Lesley's MFA in creative writing for young people program and I saw that Jason Reynolds was one of the faculty members and at the time he was all of my students favorite author and so I turned to my wife and I said I think I should maybe try to get an MFA and My wife is very supportive of all of my wild ideas and she was like sure apply see what happens I didn't apply to any other programs I didn't research any other programs because it was local

enough that I knew that I could attend. And I figured it would be a way for someone else to hold me accountable in a pretty high stakes way to, getting my writing done, and it would be a way for me to learn pretty deeply about the industry.

[00:05:27] **Kate:** So I started the program in June of 2019, During my time in the program, I learned both from seminars that were specifically about publishing, but I also learned from other writers. I learned the magic of Twitter at that time. Sorry, Twitter. I learned about how many resources there were. I learned about how many agents and editors were doing the kind work of offering.

[00:05:53] **Kate:** Low cost webinars on querying at times I would take those just to get other ideas from other people within the industry about what was working and what wasn't. I also took a pitch specific class. in the program for an entire semester. And during that time, I built not only my query letter, but a two page synopsis of the book that I was working on, a one page version, a half page, and the, the 10 second pitch.

[00:06:26] **Kate:** And so I, when I left the program with my middle grade novel in verse written, and all of those pitch materials, I had all the different possible things that an agent could ask for because one of the things I also learned was that every agent wants something different. And so I created the materials ahead of time, knowing that I would need different versions. in my fourth and final semester in the program, I also built a spreadsheet to start researching agents and keeping track of what they were looking for when they were open and what their submission guidelines were.

[00:07:06] **Kate:** So because I was a teacher also full time, I was very hyper organized about the entire process. And what I found by doing that research I was able to create a tailored list of who I thought would be the best fit for the work that I was querying at the time and who I thought I might most connect with. Of course, it's the internet. You never really know until you talk to someone if you think you will truly connect with them, but I gave it my best shot.

[00:07:36] **Sarah:** All right, and then what happened?

[00:07:39] **Kate:** So, in April of 2021, I was in my final semester in my MFA program. I had, in my third semester, I had had this wild idea. What if I wrote a middle grade, novel in verse, based on the Greek myth Orpheus and Eurydice,

but I said it in a Boston fictional middle school. I had never written a middle grade novel.

[00:08:04] **Kate:** I had not written poetry since high school. I liked Orpheus and Eurydice. I'd always liked Greek myths, but I'm not like an expert in Greek myths. So all of these ideas seemed like a terrible plan, except Something in my heart was saying, do it anyway. Like, what if you did it anyway? And so I worked on that story for a semester and then in my final semester, I worked with Jason Reynolds on turning the book really into poetry and learning how to sculpt

[00:08:35] **Kate:** poems one page at a time. And at that time, I had just turned in the final version. I had taken what was a 30, 000 word first draft. And with Jason, we had gotten it down to like 16, 000 words. It was very tight. It felt very complete. It was the weekend I was turning in all of my materials, and I happened to be on Twitter, of course, and I saw that there was a pitch event, LGBTN Pit. I had never done a Twitter pitch event, I had witnessed a couple of them. Something in me was like, that seems like a bad idea, or maybe it's a great idea.

[00:09:17] **Kate:** And so I quickly drafted a couple of tweets about my book, and I had interest from agents who I had not researched, and I didn't know, but something about my idea for this story sparked interest, and because of that, it seemed to me that if all of these agents that I didn't know that I hadn't carefully researched were interested, that if I was going to send them the materials that I had prepared, I might as well also query the agents who I had looked into who I had scoured manuscript wishlists for.

[00:09:59] **Kate:** And so, even though it felt sooner than I anticipated to query. I decided that if I was going to give this book a shot, I should do it to the agents I had specifically thought about and not just ones who happened to see my tweet, who happened to be gifted via the algorithm, my words instead of others. So I queried,

[00:10:27] **Sarah:** All right.

[00:10:28] **Kate:** I, I queried 12 agents Querying 12 agents is not very many. I have lots of friends, who have had much longer journeys, and so I recognize that I think part of this was my, my manuscript and my materials were very tailored, but also timing, right? And that is a thing that you can't control, and so I do think there's a certain amount of luck involved, but I queried 12 agents.

[00:10:59] **Kate:** Six of them asked for the full manuscript based on what I had sent. Then I waited, and I waited, and every day felt like a lifetime, and I don't think I have ever checked my email so many times in one day. I really, someone should have taken away my email from me. That would have been better probably for my mental health.

[00:11:19] **Kate:** But Several weeks of waiting, I was once again on Twitter, and, I saw that the agent, Eric Smith, had posted that he had responded to all of his, his queries that were outstanding, and I hadn't heard from him at all, And he is a person who makes himself very seemingly approachable and, and truly is approachable online and in person.

[00:11:47] **Kate:** And he is an agent who is always saying, hey, if you've queried agents and you didn't hear anything, you're allowed to nudge them. Like that is a thing you're allowed to do. Agents are in fact people. So you may politely ask them. And I hadn't heard anything at all from him. I sent him an email and I said, hey. I saw on Twitter, you said you were caught up, but I never heard anything from you; is nothing a no? And he wrote back very quickly and was like, no, your query letter got lost in my inbox. but I just read it and I love this premise and these pages. Could you send me the So I sent him the rest of my manuscript and I waited again, although not very long.

[00:12:40] **Kate:** he sent me an email saying that he wanted to have the call. And so Eric and I connected. I found that right from the get go talking to him was very easy and he understood what I was trying to do with this story. And he felt very confident that we could find it a home. I signed with Eric in June of 2021, so all in all, from first query sent to signing, it was about seven weeks, which again is, I know, a really short journey. And I feel for people who wait a lot longer, because I know how long every one of those days felt. Um, but Eric and I worked for about a month on revision. Mostly he was concerned that the ending of the story was too sad for middle grade. To which I said it was a Greek myth. Don't you think it's supposed to be sad in the end?

[00:13:40] **Kate:** But I could understand his concern about me perhaps devastating too many 12 year olds with this story. And so we worked together, for a few weeks on it. , I went out on submission in July of 2021 and, uh, started getting interest in September of 2021. And I ended up having interest from two editors, one at a, smaller press and one at one of the big five and ended up meeting with both of those editors.

[00:14:13] **Kate:** I signed with Catherine Tegan books and Harper Collins in the fall of 2021.

[00:14:21] **Sarah:** Nice. I really like that you shared this because I've seen a lot in writing circles where people, writers will be like, Oh, I haven't heard back from this agent by this time. So I'm going to assume it's a no. And. Which directly often directly contradicts what the agent puts in their own, you know, instructions and everything.

[00:14:42] **Sarah:** So, yeah, definitely don't assume is no, unless the agent has said, if you haven't heard back from me by this time, assume it's no for sure.

[00:14:49] **Kate:** There are lots of awkward power dynamics in the publishing industry, but ultimately behind every awkward publishing dynamic is a regular human who is trying to function in this very difficult industry. And so it took a little extra Uh, guts to send that email, but that email also changed my life, and so I'm grateful that I sent it, but I'm also grateful that Eric is the kind of agent who routinely puts out the message. Hey, if you haven't heard back, you might want to nudge.

[00:15:31] **Sarah:** Yeah. All right. It is time for the first Q of the podcast. Can you read your successful query letter for us?

[00:15:38] **Kate:** Of course, Dear Eric Smith, O& E is a queer, novel in verse adaptation of the tragic Greek myth Orpheus and Eurydice. A story of two middle school heroines learning to love themselves when they lose each other. O& E is the lyrical poetry of Sonya Sones's What My Mother Doesn't Know meets the journey to self acceptance of Ashley Herring Blake's Ivy Aberdeen's Letter to the World.

[00:16:06] **Kate:** It is 16, 000 words of first kisses, love poetry for sale, understanding mental health, and one very dramatic school dance. Impetuous 7th grade poet Olivia knows her words never fail her. That is, until she impulsively breaks up with her first girlfriend, Eden. Full of self doubt caused by her homophobic father and her heartbreak, closeted Eden sets out on an underworld like journey to find herself with a new group of risk taking friends.

[00:16:39] **Kate:** Meanwhile, Olivia plots to win Eden back by planning a poetry night that will end in a sweeping romantic apology. But when the cost of the event drives Olivia into a complicated money making scheme that lands her in deep trouble, Olivia is forced to make promises to the principal that ultimately out Eden to her father, destroy their relationship, and separate the young sweethearts forever.

[00:17:05] **Kate:** I am sending you my work because of your interest in middle grade novels and own voices work. In addition, as a woman who was born and raised in the Philadelphia area, I can't help but appreciate your great taste in cities. As for me, I teach high school English. I'm currently earning my MFA in creative writing for young people at Lesley University, anticipated graduation June 2021, and spend time with my wife and our cocker spaniel mix, Weasley.

[00:17:34] **Kate:** My personal essays have appeared in the Boston Globe, WBUR's Cognoscenti, and elsewhere. This is my first novel. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon. All my best, Kate Fussner.

[00:17:49] **Sarah:** Awesome. Thanks for sharing.

[00:17:50] **Kate:** Of course!

[00:17:51] **Sarah:** So how has your experience been since signing that contract, especially let us know kind of what surprised you along the way.

[00:18:01] **Kate:** It is truly a rollercoaster, perhaps it is because I am a person of big feelings and so I feel all of the things quite big and quite hard, but it has been an adventure. I have heard other folks on your podcast say that a lot of the adventure is in the waiting, and this is true. It is the kind of industry where there's a wealth of things happening or there's nothing happening.

[00:18:29] **Kate:** There is suddenly everything is needed right away and then there is, you won't hear from anybody for three months and that is considered normal. I will say for me, one of the most positively surprising pieces of being in publishing is that my older sister also debuted this year with her first novel,

[00:18:49] **Sarah:** Oh, wow.

[00:18:50] **Kate:** yeah, um, her, I'm plugging it, Nora Fussner, The Invisible World, she writes adult horror.

[00:18:57] **Kate:** And it has been a real adventure because I'm at HarperCollins and she is with Penguin and we've had really different audiences, really different experiences and it's been a nice bonding experience for my sister and I to go through A similar experience, but in super different ways and in super different parts of the industry.

[00:19:21] **Kate:** Much of the work that I'm doing now involves things like school visits, and workshops for 13 year olds, and my sister teaches creative writing and composition at the university level. She has a really different experience as an author, and so it's been That's been a pleasant part, of the adventure.

[00:19:43] **Kate:** I would say another piece that surprised me was, the ways in which I, as an author, have to really make space for the joyful moments in the industry. Because there's so much waiting. Even when you get good news, at least for me, it can be hard for me to take it in and to really let myself feel the joyful pieces as much as I feel the devastation and the sadness in things not happening or not working out.

[00:20:16] **Kate:** So I have made it a point to reward myself in small ways when good things happen, and to try to mark the moments. Because if I'm not celebrating those moments, no one else is going to celebrate them. And so I'm trying to conduct my author life in such a way where I take time to give myself credit for the good things that are happening.

[00:20:46] **Sarah:** Yeah. It's just so fascinating that you debuted the same year as your sister, because we often say like, um, don't play the comparison game. Right. But siblings have spent their entire life playing the comparison game. So it's just like more of that, I guess.

[00:21:01] **Kate:** Well, and my sister and I are very different and we are almost six years apart and so we have always had very different interests but on very parallel tracks. My sister has always been interested in horror stories and ghost stories and scary stuff. I won't touch it with a 40 foot pole. I get scared by my own nightmares.

[00:21:24] **Kate:** I'm not interested in reading anybody else's. and for the longest time, I really thought I was going to be a memoir writer. And that included going to memoir classes in my early twenties, oftentimes in classes that were filled with people in their sixties and seventies. And they would rightfully look at me and be like, memoir, really at 23?

[00:21:45] **Kate:** I'm like, I have so much to say, but. I didn't think that I would end up in fiction. I also didn't think that I would end up in poetry. And so both of those things were delightful surprises. But it's true, when it's your sister, it's hard not to feel some level of comparison. And instead, I think this has been an opportunity for us both to celebrate.

[00:22:07] **Kate:** Oh my God, we did something so hard at the same time. And our journeys looked Really different. but we're both able to physically hold our books in our hands now and say, Hey, look, we did this.

[00:22:20] **Sarah:** Nice. I'm gonna have to get her on the podcast too.

[00:22:23] **Kate:** You absolutely should. Her, her journey was very different.

[00:22:27] **Sarah:** Nice. All right, it is time for the quick round. I call it author DNA.

[00:22:32] **Sarah:** Are you a pantsier or a plotter?

[00:22:35] **Kate:** Plotter.

[00:22:36] **Sarah:** Do you tend to be an overwriter or an underwriter?

[00:22:39] **Kate:** I overwrite poetry and I underwrite prose.

[00:22:43] **Sarah:** That makes a lot of sense for some reason.

[00:22:46] **Kate:** I wasn't sure if that was gonna make sense, but that is, that is how I work.

[00:22:51] **Sarah:** Do you tend to write better in the morning or at night?

[00:22:53] **Kate:** Morning, my brain stops functioning after 4pm.

[00:22:57] **Sarah:** When you start with a new project, do you typically start with a character or plot or concept or something else first?

[00:23:03] **Kate:** Concept comes first.

[00:23:06] **Sarah:** Do you prefer coffee or tea?

[00:23:08] **Kate:** My anxiety dictates one cup of coffee per day, but as many herbal teas as a person can drink.

[00:23:16] **Sarah:** Whenever you're writing, do you prefer silence or some kind of sound?

[00:23:19] **Kate:** Sound.

[00:23:20] **Kate:** So I tend to create playlists that match the vibes of my book, but specifically that they evoke emotions in me that go with the book. So they don't always, they actually often match the age that I was of my main character. So like my, my YA book requires me listening to a lot of Counting Crows and Goo Goo Dolls because that just brings back those adolescent feelings for me in a way that makes it really easy to write.

[00:23:52] **Sarah:** When it comes to the first draft, are you a get it down kind of person or a get it right kind of person?

[00:23:58] **Kate:** Get it down. I'm very much a, I prescribe to Shannon Hale's saying that a first draft you are just putting sand in a sandbox and that revision is when you build castles.

[00:24:08] **Sarah:** What tools or software do you use to draft?

[00:24:12] **Kate:** I am a recent convert to Scrivener. I could not figure out how to use it for a novel in verse because you end up with something like 200 poems and it just felt very unwieldy, but I'm working on a young adult novel in prose right now, and Scrivener is working really well for me.

[00:24:30] **Sarah:** Do you prefer drafting or revising more?

[00:24:33] **Kate:** Revising.

[00:24:35] **Sarah:** Do you write in sequential order or do you hop around?

[00:24:37] **Kate:** I write sequentially.

[00:24:39] **Sarah:** And final quick round question, are you an extrovert or an introvert?

[00:24:43] **Kate:** Extrovert.

[00:24:45] **Sarah:** All right. Now we're going to talk about the second Q of the podcast. What were some of the qualms or worries that you had on your journey? And do you feel like they were realized or did you overcome them or, you know, how did that work out?

[00:24:56] **Kate:** I am a person who is who lives her life qualms first. I am always worried about everything. I would say that some of the qualms that I have, thankfully, are ones that I've have found are pretty common for authors, particularly when debuting things like, how do I ask other authors for blurbs? And What do I do if I get tagged in uncomfortable reviews on Instagram?

[00:25:28] **Kate:** Or how do I get myself to stop looking at Goodreads? I had a lot of worries. Thankfully, I found some friends in the debut Slack for all authors debuting in 2023. And I connected really closely with a few of them and we went and made our own. Smaller discord where just the few of us could chat and support each other and It makes all the difference to have other people on your side.

[00:26:02] **Kate:** I will also say, in both the querying and submission process, finding the right people to be my agent and to be my editor made a huge difference. Because my agent is someone that I can reach out to when I have a qualm or worry and because he knows that I am a person with big feelings and big worries, he knows how to ground me and how to remind me of the things that happen in this industry and to, how to approach them with kindness and clarity.

[00:26:38] **Kate:** I will also say that having writing friends who are in various stages of the journey has made a huge difference. I'm in a writing group that meets fairly regularly and everyone has had different amounts of success in their publishing, but we all care very deeply about each other's work. And having that care and that respect for each other's work, regardless of whether or not we've published in traditional publishing, Has been really great and connecting with authors who are much further into their writing careers than I am, has made a tremendous difference. At first, it feels a little bit awkward, like, I can't believe I'm reaching out to this person on Instagram. But for the most part, I have found that other authors that I really respect have been very respectful and very welcoming and very much like, yes, let's connect, because I think that it can be a lonely industry and a lonely life.

[00:27:39] **Kate:** And so It's important to have that community and to lean on it.

[00:27:45] **Sarah:** All right.

[00:27:46] **Sarah:** Now it's time for the third Q. Do you have any writing quirks? Is there anything about your writing process that you think is kind of different or interesting or unique?

[00:27:54] **Kate:** There always comes a point in writing, usually in both the drafting stage and the revision stage, where I find myself having to be on the ground to write. And so, you know, I have a writing space that is dedicated for me to get my work done. But I will also write. On our living room couch, or in a reading chair, or at the kitchen table, like, I will sit in various places, but there is inevitably a point in my writing process where I'm like, okay, I need to be laying on the ground now, and it's a funny thing, but somehow it helps me get my work done.

[00:28:33] **Kate:** It is a little different, of course, from those moments where during revision, I inevitably end up on the floor of my wife's office asking her why I decided I wanted to be a writer. Those are, those are different. Those are perhaps brain quirks than, rather than writing quirks. I also find it incredibly helpful to be in water to get my thinking done.

[00:28:56] **Kate:** So showering, taking baths, swimming laps, something about being in water really helps my mind relax. And when I'm able to get to that place, I often have lots of breakthroughs. I, my first novel idea I had while walking by the ocean. I think there's something about water to me that just keeps my creative mind alive.

[00:29:23] **Sarah:** All right. You kind of already touched on it a little bit, but when you were in the lowest parts of your journey, what kept you going and why did you stick to it?

[00:29:31] **Kate:** When I was offered my book deal, I had just started my 11th year of teaching in Boston Public Schools. And because I had taught Well, before the pandemic, and then through the some of the hardest parts of the pandemic, I was extremely burned out and I needed to step away from teaching. Because it was making me unwell. I was having anxiety attacks, uh, regularly. And I started having them even at school. And I realized that I needed to tend to my mental health in ways that My teaching schedule didn't allow. In particular, I was teaching full time. I had been pursuing a master's full time.

[00:30:20] **Kate:** I had been trying to sell a novel. I was doing multiple jobs at once. And it was this Very strange moment for me. I had been offered a two book deal from HarperCollins at the exact moment that I felt like my teaching life was imploding and my mental health was imploding. And I had to step away from teaching.

[00:30:47] **Kate:** And by far, it's, it's strange to say, but getting the book deal coincided with the lowest part of my journey. And I needed to take time to

grieve this career that I had had. I needed to take time to process the start of a new career that really had been a dream. But why didn't it feel like a dream? Well, because I was really depressed and I was very anxious and I needed to take care of myself in a way that working multiple full time jobs was not allowing.

[00:31:23] **Kate:** What kept me going then for sure was the support of my wife and my family and my friends and honestly my teaching colleagues who are like good for you. We are so glad that you are able to step away and take care of yourself. Um, I also at the time applied for a grant from my undergrad university.

[00:31:46] **Kate:** Vassar College has a grant for graduates under the age of 36 who have not yet achieved substantial recognition in their art field. And I was 35. I was like, this is my last opportunity to apply for this grant, but the grant was meant to cover a year of, basically a year of income so that you could step away from another job in order to write.

[00:32:10] **Kate:** And so, the stars aligned in such a way that I was able to get that grant and the book deal and step away from my teaching life and take some time to reset and take some time to grieve. I think one of the funny parts about the book journey is You might think you know how you're going to feel along the way.

[00:32:33] **Kate:** You might think, oh, everything will be perfect. I'll have my book deal and it will feel amazing. And then when you get there, if you don't feel that way, that can also feel like a loss because the dream that you had constructed and the reality that you encountered clash with one another and suddenly the thing that I thought that I had really wanted.

[00:32:58] **Kate:** Didn't look like the way I thought it would, and there was sadness in there and I had to manage it.

[00:33:05] **Sarah:** Yeah.

[00:33:05] **Sarah:** What do you feel like are some of the biggest mistakes that you made along the way so that maybe listeners can not make the same ones?

[00:33:13] **Kate:** I think one of the biggest mistakes that I made along the way was having expectations for how I was gonna feel at certain moments. And then if I didn't feel that way, giving myself a hard time about it. And so one of the

things that I have tried to cultivate in my writing life is making space for me to work on projects that in the moment feel good.

[00:33:40] **Kate:** So I'm not projecting. some future idea. Well, when X happens, I will feel Y. Instead, I think, okay, when I work on this in the moment, I feel this way. And because my expectations match what I'm doing. I feel more satisfied about what I'm working on and about what's happening. I think another mistake that I made was in the early days of the slack, for 2023 writers, everyone was very kind.

[00:34:13] **Kate:** But for me, just personally, it was too overwhelming to be with so many other writers, many of whom were rightfully kinds of feelings and anxieties. And for me as a person, I craved community because I left my teaching community and my students and I'm I was suddenly working from home by myself with my very lovely dog, but that was not the same.

[00:34:43] **Kate:** And so I longed for community and I thought I would find it in that big space. And in some ways I did because I found my handful of people there. Stepping back from it and sticking to a smaller community ended up serving me better because I was able to form deeper connections Without getting so caught up in how everybody was feeling at all times about all of the pieces.

[00:35:12] **Kate:** Once being in the industry for a little while, you realize how many, disparities there are in what What some books are offered and some authors are offered and others aren't. It can be Disappointing and overwhelming and I found finding my people and my real friends made me feel like okay I have found the people who are going to root for me no matter what and I'm gonna root for them No matter what and that's really what I needed here And so that has to be enough and I'm probably missing out on some opportunities.

[00:35:47] **Kate:** No doubt that's also a worry of mine that by not engaging all the time with all the industry things. I'm missing things, but I have to take things at a pace that works for me and at a size that works for me.

[00:36:02] **Sarah:** Yeah, I think as we're seeing right now, because we're recording this in in early December, there's large. groups can sometimes have a lot of drama in them, right? So,

[00:36:14] **Kate:** I don't know what you're talking about. I am definitely not reading about it

[00:36:19] **Sarah:** yeah.

[00:36:19] **Kate:** times. I definitely have not had to pick my job off the floor.

[00:36:25] **Sarah:** And it's not the first time. It's not even close to the first time.

[00:36:28] **Kate:** No, that was actually one of the most amazing things I saw that because there's Twitter trauma. someone mentioned, someone reminded me of the romance author who came back from the dead this year.

[00:36:39] **Sarah:** Oh, yes.

[00:36:40] **Kate:** And I was like, I forgot about the romance author who came back from the dead. That was a beautiful story.

[00:36:47] **Sarah:** Can you share with listeners one of the most important lessons that you learned on your journey?

[00:36:52] **Kate:** I think one of the most important lessons that I learned on my journey to publication. was that sometimes the only person that is preventing me from doing a thing is myself. So I'll give you an example. I had been working on my YA prose novel the first two semesters of my MFA program. And when I finished the first draft, it was the first time I had finished a draft of an entire novel.

[00:37:23] **Kate:** And I was so excited. To revise it because I knew there were tons of things wrong and I just wanted to dive in in my third semester And write it. My mentor at the time said to me, you may absolutely not work on this for a third semester. You need to work on something else. And I was furious. I was like, how dare this author tell me that I can't work on the only story idea that I have ever had.

[00:37:51] **Kate:** The only story idea I ever will have. And I spent about 45 minutes stomping around the apartment. My wife loves this part of the story because I never get angry. And I was so angry because I just really wanted to revise this book. I had set a goal for myself that at the end of the MFA program, I was going to go on submission with this YA prose novel and everything was going to be great. And my mentor told me that I could not do that. So I. Sat down on my yoga mat. This is about three months into the pandemic. I am all kinds of burned out, but I had found Yoga with Adrienne on YouTube and I was one of those people when I was like, yes, I will do yoga in my living room because I cannot leave my house.

[00:38:37] **Kate:** But I sat down on the mat and all of a sudden I had this idea to write a middle grade novel in verse about Orpheus and Eurydice, but seventh grade girls. And the whole plot came to me, no joke, in that day. Like I wrote that entire plot that day. And while the drafts and the poems changed substantially, the original plot idea did not change substantially. And I think about that moment where I was so certain that I could not possibly have another idea. And something inside me said, but what if you do? And by listening to that voice, that second voice that was like, but what if you do have another idea? I ended up writing the book that became my debut novel.

[00:39:27] **Kate:** And then that first semester, when I drafted the whole book and I had no idea how to write poetry, I remember getting to my first workshop with Jason Reynolds, where we were going to go over thinking about revisions for it. And I remember Jason saying, the plot here is fire and the language is fabulous, but.

[00:39:49] **Kate:** It's still not poetry. What if you wrote it like real poetry? I remember turning to my friends and being like, Of course Jason Reynolds says, What if you write it like real poetry? Like, Jason Reynolds grocery list is probably a poem. Like, I can't do that. I'm not Jason Reynolds. And then that second voice in my head popped up again, and I was like, but what if you could do it?

[00:40:13] **Kate:** What if you really could turn these into poems? What if you approached it as if you knew what you were doing, and you treated it like It was something already alive inside of you.

[00:40:28] **Sarah:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:40:28] **Kate:** And when I tell you that, it's like, so incredible to look at the first draft of the book and the last draft of the book, and see all of the ways it really did become poetry, because I challenged my mindset to say, Hey, what if I did do this?

[00:40:44] **Kate:** It completely changed my craft in ways that I never could have anticipated.

[00:40:50] **Sarah:** I sometimes call this the acknowledgements portion of the podcast. This is not a business that most of us succeed in completely on our own. So who are some of the people who helped you along the way and how?

[00:41:02] **Kate:** Well, a huge shout out to my agent, Eric Smith, who really has been a tremendous advocate for me for my book and for all of my questions and all of my concerns. I was debuting with HarperCollins and trying to edit my first book and work on the starts of my second book during the strike. And Eric was a huge support for me and helping me navigate a challenging time in the industry.

[00:41:36] **Kate:** my editor, Sarah Schoenfeld at HarperCollins has been absolutely lovely and has really pushed me as a writer in ways that I'm forever grateful for because I feel like my stories are better and more thoughtful and more generous and kind towards young people than they would be without her. So I'm very, very grateful for her.

[00:41:59] **Kate:** Very grateful for my wife who will never hear this podcast because podcasts are not her thing and the internet's not her thing and that's one of the things that I love her for. and the small group of friends that I have made who I debuted with, we call ourselves the Pride Five. Ronnie Riley, Justine Pichello Winans, Caroline Huntoon, and Jen St.

[00:42:19] **Kate:** Jude. The five of us have been really close over the past 18 months, and I'm forever grateful because It's so important to find your people and to find the people who understand the moment of debuting. And so I'm, I'm very, very grateful for them. I'm also grateful for my writers group, the Thursday Elevators, Jasmine Paulino, Pacha Dabinga, Adria Carlson, and Rebecca Gatulin.

[00:42:53] **Kate:** The five of us, again, we are Very close, and I am grateful for the work that they create and the way that they handle my work with such care.

[00:43:04] **Sarah:** All right. Okay, before you go, can you tell us what we can look out for from you in the future?

[00:43:10] **Kate:** My next book will be out early 2025 with HarperCollins. It is another queer middle grade novel in verse. It is called 13 Ways to Say Goodbye. And it is about 12, almost 13 year old main character who sets out to complete a bucket list that her sister made, um, of 13 things she wanted to do before she turned 13, but unfortunately her sister died before she was able to complete the list.

[00:43:43] **Kate:** So my main character sets out to complete the list on behalf of her older sister, but as she completes things that her sister didn't get to do, something magical.

[00:43:54] **Sarah:** All right. Well, thank you for coming on the show and sharing your story with everyone.

[00:43:59] **Kate:** Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this conversation and I really enjoyed this podcast, so I'm very grateful to be here.

[00:44:06] **Sarah:** Awesome. Thanks.

[00:44:08] Before I play the outro. I want to let you know that Kate's sister, Nora Fussneer will be on the next episode of Queries Qualms and Quirks. So come back on February 8th for that.

[00:44:19] **Sarah:** Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Queries, Qualms, and Quirks. You can find the text of Kate's query in the show notes along with links to find out more about her and her books. If you enjoyed the show, I'd really appreciate if you'd help me find new listeners by leaving a review, telling your friends, or sharing this episode on social media. If you're interested in supporting the show, go to patreon.com/sarahnicolas. That's Sarah with an H and Nicholas with no H.

[00:44:44] **Sarah:** And if you're a published author interested in being a guest on the show, please click on the home based link in the description or go to sarahnicolas.com and click on the podcast logo in the sidebar. Thank you so much for listening and we'll see you next time.