**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 55: Into the Creative Labyrinth with Sara Zarr**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

[Literaticast theme plays.]

Jenn: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran and I'm a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency where I rep kid’s books, from baby books through YA and everything in between. A couple orders of business, the Literaticast has a Patreon, throw in a buck and help support the pod. And if you liked the podcast, tell a friend, leave a review on Apple Podcasts or your favorite podcatcher. More reviews help more people find the show.

[00:00:31] Now, lots of times I riff on so I'm going to topic at the top of the show. But today I want to get right into it. I am so excited to talk to one of the first YA authors I really got to know before I was ever even an agent, Sara Zarr. She is an award winning author who also hosts a great writerly podcast herself called *This Creative Life*. And soon there will be a companion book to the podcast coming out. It is really about making and sustaining a creative life. Not just writing, living. It is chock full of great advice and encouragement for both newbie authors, mid-career authors and everyone in between. Plus, if you listen to the very end of the show, there's a surprise for you. That's a tease. So if you like the interview, stay tuned, and you will get something special. Anyway, we're going to talk about all of this and more. Let me see if I can get Sarah on the line.

[00:01:34] Hi, Sara.

Sara: [00:01:35] Hello.

Jenn: [00:01:36] I introduced to already a little bit in the intro. And I'm so excited to get to talk to you about so many things. But before we get into it, would you be a dear and introduce yourself to the listeners and give us the nutshell version of your origin story?

Sara: [00:01:50] Yes, I am Sara Zarr. I am the author of I think, 10 books, and I mostly write YA. I also have written one middle grade and one on the way. And one book-length work of nonfiction for kids and then one for adults that we will be talking about. And my origin story is, I'm old and I've been doing this a long time. I think it was the mid ‘90s When I started writing seriously with the idea that I wanted to get a book published and got my first agent in 1997, which is very, very olden times in publishing. And wrote a few books. She wasn't able to sell any. And I was not ready to be published, is the thing, which is a good realization to have. And you know, the YA market, as you know, was very different back then. It was very small. So it was hard to get published unless you were really, really good. And I wasn't really, really good yet. But there were other reasons that that agent was not right for me so we parted ways, I think in 2002 while I was writing the book that became my first published book, which was *Story of a Girl*. And so in 2005 I signed with the agent that I still have now and pretty quickly sold *Story of a Girl*. And it came out in early 2007.

Jenn: [00:03:35] Nice. When I first got to know you it was before *Story of a Girl* even came out.

Sara: [00:03:39] Yes.

Jenn: [00:03:39] We were LiveJournal friends. I remember distinctly getting an ARC of *Story of a Girl* and being like, oh my god, it's my friend's book even though we had not actually met. And that book, of course, went on to become a National Book Award finalist among so many accolades. So cast your mind back through the mists of time, if you would, what was it like to have gone through this long road to publication, and then have your debut novel be so very celebrated?

Sara: [00:04:06] I have to do like wavy *Wayne's World* lines in my head, because it's really hard to go to go back. I mean, you know how the experience of being human is strange. And you barely can comprehend the person you were last week. So it's difficult to go back, but I know that I didn't expect any of it. It was a wonderful time. I was very unaware, in a really nice way, of a lot of things about publishing and awards and lists. So every time something happened, I was like, oh, what's that? Is that good? That sounds good. And of course now you know everything. I'm like, am I gonna get this thing? Am I gonna get that thing? And then like, if you don't get it, you're like bleh.

[00:04:50] But everything back then was, just felt like gravy. And it was it was great. There’s downsides when you're writing your next book. Now you're like, oh, people noticed me, oh, no. This can’t flop, you know. But overall, it was great.

[00:05:14] And I think because I had been at it for like, nine or ten years, it was just like, oh, it was kind of just a relief, like, okay, like, I was not lying to myself that whole time. Maybe in the beginning a little bit. But, I felt that the book was good, and I was happy with it. And so it just felt good, and it felt like a relief, and it felt very affirming.

Jenn: [00:05:40] So since then, it's been 15 years *Story of a Girl* got made into a movie, which means you're one degree of separation from Kevin Bacon.

Sara: [00:05:48] I know.

Jenn: [00:05:48] [crosstalk] And everyone who knows you at two degrees, hello. You've published 10 more books you've taught in MFA programs, you do consulting for authors, you host an excellent podcast. Your debut middle grade just came out, which we're going to talk about, not to mention your budding TikTok presence. When you were a debut, is that what you imagined a career author would look like?

Sara: [00:06:13] No, I had nothing in my imagination other than getting books published. Well, for one thing, again, as you know, a lot of the way that we experience publishing today, and particularly in the YA world, is really only something that happened in that last 15 years. *Story of a Girl* came out right when that was shifting, because it was, I think, *Twilight* had come out the year before and a few other big books like that, and it was starting to blow up in a way that was impossible, would have been impossible to predict.

[00:06:57] So I didn't have a concept of what opportunities could be available for a young adult author, because in my experience, starting out, being a YA author was still seen as being kind of a lesser version of a writer than writing adult stuff. And there weren't very many. I think the Vermont College was the only one doing a writing for children and young adults MFA. And then there was an explosion of that. So all these opportunities didn't exist when I started, so I couldn't have expected them. So yeah, I had no concept of what it would be like and really, and I know, we're going to get to this later in the conversation, but a lot of how those things, not how they come about, but that the reason you try to get those opportunities is because as a writer, if you don't have another job, you're just looking for ways to keep the lights on between books. Or all the time even with books, not between books. So yeah, I couldn't have foreseen it.

Jenn: [00:08:11] I'm currently reading your excellent book, *This Creative Life.* It's kind of a companion to your podcast, and it's full of writerly inspo and practical advice for writers, both newbies and mid-career authors. I'm loving it. And there will be links to order it in the show notes. But first and foremost, let's plug the podcast, *This Creative Life*, you’ve been doing it on and off since 2012. How did that get started? And what have you learned from it?

Sara: [00:08:36] I know that in 2011, I gave a talk at an SCBWI at the New York Conference. And it was called, I believe, crafting a creative life. And it's just sort of, I just sort of started thinking about all those things that I had been learning through the experience of being a writer and different obstacles I had and things I had noticed about what it feels like for me and for other people. And this was also right around the time the ability for just regular people to make podcasts was becoming a thing in a way that it hadn't before. It was still early days. I think I was the first person I know that like started their own podcast. I know lots of people were doing it, but I just wanted to do it because partly it fulfilled a fantasy I always had as a kid growing up in the era of radio. I always loved the idea of being on the radio and would make pretend with my little cassette recorder I would like have pretend radio shows. So it's just something I've always liked the idea of and then to marry it with the talk that I gave that was really well received and like, oh, people want to talk about this stuff. And I want to talk about this stuff. And I want to hear what other writers have to say about this stuff.

[00:10:12] Also in 2012, I was kind of between… I was tired, I was a little burned out, because I had written five books in a row. And I'm like, what, what else could I do that is like something separate from the publishing business that can just be mine and be on my schedule, and be just when I can do it the way that I want to do it, and no one's telling me what to do. And then I just started asking writer friends to come talk to me on the podcast. I think what I've learned from that is just, there's all these recurring themes in the life of many writers. And that's something that I talked about in the book, because the book, like you said, it's a companion book, but also it doesn't directly connect to the podcast. I'm still working on if I'm going to have little footnotes to refer people to different episodes, but it's a philosophical companion. And I just realized these themes are kind of universal for people who are writing and especially people who are writing with the intent to publish. And kind of be in the publishing industry world.

[00:11:33] And I've just learned that doing a podcast is fun but it's also a lot of work, as you know, especially just like the editing, all the technical side of it, scheduling people. So that's why it kind of, I did it for a few years, and then I stopped for a while, and then I restarted it during the pandemic. But I still, I just kind of do it on my own schedule, which I know when you have a podcast, you're supposed to be really regular. So people can just be like, it's the second Tuesday, I'm gonna get a new episode. But I just realized if this is going to be sustainable for me, it's just going to have to be a thing I get to when I'm able to.

Jenn: [00:12:09] Yeah, 100%. I hear you. So as we mentioned, *This Creative Life*, the book is about to come out. And the book does unpack some ideas you've talked about on the pod, though, of course, it totally stands alone. I think it's really great for any writer who needs a jolt of inspiration. In the book, you use a metaphor for the writing life comparing it to a labyrinth, not necessarily the maze kind, but rather the meditation path kind. Can you talk to us about that?

Sara: [00:12:42] Sure. Yeah. For people who don't know what the heck I'm talking about. You may, if you have an Episcopal especially Episcopal church, or anything related to Anglo Irish, spirituality, a labyrinth, it looks kind of like a maze inside a mandala. It's round, typically round, it's like just on the ground. Flat. It's not a three dimensional maze that you walk through. And it's just supposed to help you meditate. So you walk through it, there's no dead ends. You're walking through it. And you walk to the center, and you walk back out. And I just I liked that as a metaphor, because I don't think there's an end point to being a writer, there's not like, oh, like with a maze, you know, like, I made it through the maze in X amount of time, or I got out and I didn't have to like get airlifted out of there.

[00:13:48] I think writing is just more like you're continually on this same path. And it feels like oh, shouldn't I have gotten somewhere by now? I’m just back where I started. I think it feels like that in a lot of ways, whenever you start a new book, or if you have a career change, like you move publishers or change agents, or you just go through something personal that shifts your perspective as a writer. It's just this constant, revisiting old territory but doing it as the person you are now versus the person you were when you did it last year, you know?

Jenn: [00:14:28] Yeah.

Sara: [00:14:28] That's my little metaphor.

Jenn: [00:14:31] Fair enough. You've been candid about the fact that novel writing wasn't something that came naturally or easily to you, per se, that your successes are more about determination and persistence than some inborn writerly genius. And you share a quote about talent from Barry Moser, which made me laugh. I think it's very true. Will you tell us the quote and what it means to you.

Sara: [00:14:53] He said, and I know he said it many times, not just at this conference where I heard him say it, but he says, “Talent is common as house dust and useless as tits on a boar.” And you have to think about that for a minute and be like tits on a boar. Okay, I get it, I get it. And it's just that I think we all know, as writers through our writing life if we’re part of critique groups, or we have friends who write, or if we’re teachers and read student work, we all know, like, very talented writers who never sort of get established in a writing life where they don't finish things, or they don't have the persistence to keep submitting. So the fact that they haven't, quote unquote, “made it” is not an indicator that they don't have talent. And we also know, as readers, we read a lot of books where we might think this writer is not that great, how'd they get published? It’s like, well, someone likes it, and they clearly just kept writing and kept submitting, and they finish things. So I like the idea, I think it's very freeing to think of like, I don't have to be like a born genius. I can improve. I can grow. I can be persistent, I can try to understand the system and how I might get in there.

[00:16:32] I just think the idea of innate talent is kind of suspect to begin with. When I look at feedback I got early on, like, I applied for different work in progress grants, and things like that, when I was starting out, and I would get feedback, like, there's nothing special about this writing. Which is, it's a kind of thing when the person like running the grant calls you and they're like, did you want to hear some of the panel feedback? And you’re like, oh, sure, I guess. And then they're like, they just read you. Nothing special, nothing stood out to me. I was like ooh.

[00:17:10] But then I got better. I just kept writing and reading and getting feedback, and got better. So I feel like I have talent now. I don't know how much I had when I started. But it can develop and get reset and change depending on what you're working on. So I just think that should be an encouragement for anyone who feels like, I'm not a natural genius. And I also think about what Elizabeth Gilbert wrote in *Big Magic* about genius. She might have done a TED talk about it, too, where it's like the ancient idea of genius was not something that was inside you. But it was like, it wasn't like you have genius, it was like you have a genius. And it was seen as this external thing, similar to a muse, where it could come and go, and it sort of has a mind of its own. And it's not really in your control. I just, I like that for all the people for whom writing is really hard. And I think that's most of us at various times. That's not a sign that you're not good at it. It just is hard.

Jenn: [00:18:21] It is hard. I think that actually, the genius of it all might trip people up. I think if you're the kind of kid who's a gifted kid, and you're really good at writing or whatever, when you're young, let's say, and you're very used to acing every test and winning every award and whatever. Publishing is different and it throws big roadblocks at you, even if you have thought of yourself as being a genius. So if you’re used to things coming very easily to you. It's very easy to give up fast.

Sara: [00:18:58] Yeah, and I've seen that happen. I knew someone who was sort of like a wonder kid, got tons of positive feedback from early on all through college and graduate school and like you said, the publishing business is different, and they weren't waiting with a you're finally here sign. It's like proving yourself all over again, in a specific way. And realizing like, you might have been the only one in your small town school that was a good writer, that you're not the only one in the publishing world who's a good writer, you know, it’s competitive.

Jenn: [00:19:40] Totally. So if it isn't about this talent, or genius, or whatever, per se, and we've got that you need determination and persistence, but what are some other traits you might need to have a crack at being a successful writer and how can we cultivate them?

Sara: [00:19:55] I think one key is kind of thinking of yourself as a lifelong learner. Just always being curious, like, why is this thing the way it is? Or why are people how they are? What can I find out about this thing? Just having curiosity, and paying attention and managing your attention, which is a finite resource, which, as we've learned, as all these books have come out in the last, like 10 or 20 years about how it may be that our brains were not designed or evolved to handle all of this information that we're getting nowadays. And so I think you have to recognize your attention is a lot like time. You only have so much of it. If you spend it in one place, it's not going to be available for something else. So I think just cultivating like, how am I managing my attention? Am I curious about things? Getting up and away from the life through the screen, getting out of the echo chamber of publishing, just kind of trying to have a rich inner life, as I like to call it.

Jenn: [00:21:12] You talk about the role of faith in building a sustainable writing life, not like in a religioso or like woo-woo kind of sense. But how do you define faith here? And why is it important?

Sara: [00:21:22] I think I see it as the opposite of cynicism. But not exactly optimism. You just have to believe that what you're doing matters, because, I think Annie Dillard wrote about this. It's just like go do something useful. The last thing the world needs is another book, what am I doing? I should go do something useful with my life. So you have to have some kind of faith or belief that stories matter, that your story matters, that the voice you can lend to the world matters, that you have a unique way of telling a story. All things that sound… if you're like me, and you're constantly having arguments with yourself in your head, you can argue with all those thoughts. And each side can provide evidence. So I think you just have to have that faith in the face of even a lack of evidence? Or a lack of reassurance, I guess, from the external sources. Because there's going to be times when there's just like, no one telling you, you should keep going. So you do have to have a little bit of a foolish optimism and just have faith that it's worth doing, whatever comes of it and not based on the result of it so much. But that if, okay, if I keep doing this, and the things that I want to happen don't happen, is it still worth doing? And that's a question you have to, I think, revisit time and time and again, and over the course of your writing life.

Jenn: [00:23:14] Yeah. There's a chapter in the book about sharing work with others, whether it's a critique group, partner, workshop scenario, do you utilize a crit group for your own work?

Sara: [00:23:26] Not in a formal way. I did when I started. When I was writing *Story of a Girl*, I was in a writers group. I had just moved to Utah, and I had a friend here who was in a writers group. I joined that writers group, I learned so much, because I never took creative writing classes, and never had any formal education in it. And so this writer's group was like a little education for me, and I just soaked it up.

[00:23:53] Now, what kind of functions as critique group for me is asking one or two trusted writer friends with each book when I'm like, kind of on the last draft, that I'm going to send into my editor, just sending it and being like, hey can you read through this? And tell me is there anything that we're missing? Any glaring problem? Because the thing is, yes, we know that when you're a writer, you lose perspective, and you're too deep in it, and you need a little step back. But editors need that too. I mean, editors get really deep in it and they don't always see things. So it's really helpful to just have, as they say, fresh eyes. Is this… is it our imagination or is this book good? And then just having some confirmation of that so that's what I kind of do now, is call on friends to give me a read. Not so much a deep back and forth critique, but just hey, can you give this a read and then I'm available to read their stuff next time.

Jenn: [00:24:59] But you also have been a teacher and a mentor to people. So what are best practices for giving and receiving feedback?

Sara: [00:25:07] I think it's all about… Not all, but it's a lot about expectations. It's very important to communicate what… if you're sending something to someone for feedback, it's very important to communicate what kind of feedback you're looking for. Because if you're, for example, what I just described, if you're me, and you just want a read from someone, and they send you back, like a line edited, manuscript, you'd be like, whoa, whoa, I didn't ask for that. That’s not helping me because this has already been through the whole editorial process. So no, thank you. But sometimes you do want like, I need, in document comments, I need like, help with my sentences. Or it might just be a section like, can you particularly pay attention to chapter five because I'm not sure it's working? Or an aspect of the book like, is this secondary character’s emotional arc worth the space, it's taking up on the page, whatever the thing is. And then of course, you want to like pick the right people. I think you have to have some respect for the person's writing, to get their feedback. Communicate your expectations, and be ready… don’t ask for feedback before you're ready for it. I think, when I was starting out, I made this mistake. And I see writers doing it, where you're just, you're, getting people to taste the soup before you're done making it. I think, get the thing to the best possible state that you can on your own, so that you don't get thrown off your own gut instinct about what you want to do with it.

Jenn: [00:26:59] Totally. I would say that the same goes for sending something to your agent. It probably should be in good shape. If you're sending really rough drafts that are not even remotely close. Unless you're saying, like, Hhey, this is really rough, and I know that.

Sara: [00:27:18] Yeah, I mean, even then, like, right now I have something I like 2019, I wrote, and my agent has been like, what about that book that you wrote, and when am I gonna see that? I'm like, uh. And he's like, I know it's rough, just send it. Just send it. I just feel like, if I send it like it is now you're never gonna be able to see what I'm trying to do, and I just haven't had time to go back to it. So you know, you just have try not to be impulsive. And I know. I totally understand being impulsive because when you are working on something, and you're excited about it, you want to just dash it off and send it to your agent and be like, hey, what do you think? And I've done that in the past. And just once that happens, and if your agent is anything less than like, wow, yeah, incredible. You just start doubting, and you're like, oh, maybe I shouldn't. So I just think it's important to keep your work close to you until you're really, really ready to let it be exposed.

Jenn: [00:28:25] Of course, the other piece of the puzzle, though, is—

Sara: [00:28:29] Money!

Jenn: [00:28:29] Well, money, but also not to hang on to something for so long that you never send it.

Sara: [00:28:33] True, true, true. That's true.

Jenn: [00:28:37] Like something a lot of my longtime and very well published clients have in common is the ability to roll with the punches and let it go.

Sara: [00:28:44] Yes.

Jenn: [00:28:45] You know, not be so precious about a manuscript. You talk about that a little bit. Why is that, letting it go, important?

Sara: [00:28:53] Well, like you said, you can get too precious. And if you have any perfectionistic tendencies, which I think most writers do, you can easily end up the a situation you described, where you just, you never send it and then it can't be anything. Because it only exists on your computer or in your notebook.

[00:29:19] And you have to be able to move forward. This is another thing I've seen over the course of giving workshops and teaching in MFA programs. And I'm sure you've seen this too, when you've done conferences and whatnot, where you'll have someone who is like, yeah, this is my one thing I've been working on for eight years, and they've been taking it to every conference and workshop they've been going to, and they applied to the MFA program with it and all of that. To say to them, you need to set this aside and start something new, can be very difficult for them, or it can be extremely freeing.

[00:29:57] I one time did a workshop here in Utah. And there was this one woman in the workshop who was in that exact situation, she had been working on only this one thing for years and years, and it had been workshopped to death. She didn't even know why she was doing it anymore. And there was some generative time during the week, you know, where people were going off, supposedly to work on their revisions. And I pulled her aside, and I just said, for you, your assignment is to just this week, just start something new, anything. And by the end of the week, she was just like, oh, my God, like, this is the best thing that's ever happened to me. Thank you. Like, I just needed somebody to give me permission to not keep working on this one thing.

[00:30:41] I think that happens with published writers too. You have a project you're excited about, and you're working on your work on and you're just like, you know what? I don't think I want to write this. And it's okay, I can move on to something else.

Jenn: [00:30:54] Yeah.

Sara: [00:30:54] I think about, I think, Sarah Dessen, somewhat famously, has talked about, like, out of however many, 20 books or however many she has out, there's been like an equal number that she has written to the end and then not published. I think you just have to know when to keep moving forward.

Jenn: [00:31:14] Yeah. And also like not… sometimes you get tunnel vision, seems like. And so something doesn't sell or whatever, and it's hard to see a way past that. But there is a way past, it’s to write something different, or change it or whatever.

Sara: [00:31:32] Take a break.

Jenn: [00:31:32] But it’s to not do what you're doing because it isn't working. So there is a point at which persistence becomes, I don't know. Too much doggedness or something, I don’t know.

Sara: [00:31:43] Yeah, dogged was the word that came to mind, just picturing a dog with a chew toy that won't let go. You’re like, this game is not fun anymore. Just drop it and go to bed.

Jenn: [00:31:56] Yes. So you mentioned money. And there is this push pull kind of thing when it comes to talking about money for authors, like lots of people want to quit their day job. But also sometimes people think that if you say you're writing for money, then you're some kind of sellout or you're not being creative, or you're a hack. So I was excited to see that you explore some of this in your book, because I feel like a lot of books aimed at authors and also MFA programs and stuff just kind of never mentioned the money part. Like we can all live on creativity alone. So talk to us about this.

Sara: [00:32:27] It's complicated, boy. As anyone probably who's a little familiar with the publishing industry, and maybe listeners of your podcast, who are learning more about it. And as you get into it, you can see how a certain kind of class privilege perpetuates itself in the publishing world, where, because of the nature of entry level publishing jobs, don't pay enough to live in New York City that they are in New York City. So kind of to get those jobs, you need to be able to afford to live there, which probably means your parents have money. They're paying your rent, or there's a family apartment, or some version of that, or they know people, that's how they heard about the job. And just overall that can… the upper middle, upper class, white people world and publishing. There's an overlap. Let's just say. There's a big part of the Venn diagram. And I know different publishers and organizations are working to change that, and making some progress. And now that we've learned so much can be done remotely, that often opens up more opportunities for people who can't live in New York.

[00:33:47] But yeah, when I read books about writing, they hardly ever admit that part of why they do it is to make money. And it's just strange. It's like, huh, there's usually like, you get the feeling, okay. There's an academic job in there. They're like a tenured professor or something. I think the Stephen King *On Writing* book is a good example of an exception because he really goes into his backstory and working as a teacher living in a trailer writing on his little typewriter, in a lean-to off the trailer or something. I don't remember the exact details, but just that feeling of desperation, like I have got to find a way out of the situation I'm in. Which is a fine admission. I think that's a fine motivator to get you to finish something. That's what got me to finish my very first book was I was going to submit it to the Once Upon a Time Well Known contests, which was a Delacourt prize for first young adult novel.

Jenn: [00:34:53] Oh, right.

Sara: [00:34:53] And I believe in the ‘90s I think you got like $6,500 and a publishing contract. And to me, that just sounded like a fortune. And if that wasn't dangling in front of me, I don't know that I would have finished that first book. Now, I didn't win the contest and nothing ever happened with that book. But like, it got me to finish a book. So I mean, money was a motivation to get me to finish a book.

[00:35:21] In terms of the quitting your day job, and just finding a way to make it work, I get into this in *This Creative Life* book, and it just depends so much on your own situation, and what else you could do for a job. I mean, if you have a career, that's good, and you don't hate, but you would like to write. I would find a way to do both, and keep a foot in that career world, for the security that it offers, and the regular, predictable financial situation.

[00:35:59] When I sold my first book, I was working part time for like, $11 an hour. So it didn't take much to get me to quit my job and just be like, I'm a writer now. And that's how I did it, for better and worse, because it's, I'm going into my 50s now. And the idea of like, well, if I had to get back into the job market what could I even do? Part of me wishes I had, maybe taken some of the money I'd made with my first few books and been like, oh, I'm gonna, like, go back to school, or learn, I don't know what, learn a trade, I don't know. But I just think…

Jenn: [00:36:37] Learn to plumb.

Sara: [00:36:37] It's not a bad job.

Jenn: [00:36:41] It’s a great job.

Sara: [00:36:43] I think it's fine to have money be part of why you write. When it's the sole motivation, that's not going to feel great. And I don't really know anyone for whom it's the sole motivation. But you do get into a situation, even if you genuinely have ideas and you still want to create. If you're like me, and trying to make it work, where writing and writing adjacent things are your main job. You do make creative decisions based on financial need, like sending a book to your agent, when it might not really be ready, because you're like, I gotta get a contract going. Writing faster than you might really want to, if you had your druthers. So when the money comes into the creative decisions, it's hard, but it's also just life. I mean, everyone needs some kind of food, clothing, and shelter. And you got to figure out how you're going to get that. And writing could be a way to do it. I wouldn't suggest it as a solution to financial problems, but it can be part of a bigger picture. Yeah, I don't know. I think there's no shame in it and I think the people who feel like that’s selling out, or who don't like to talk about it are people who already have money and have never had to worry about it.

Jenn: [00:38:11] 100%. So we've all been inundated with so much in the past few years, from politics to the pandemic. It's so easy to get lost in doom scrolling or whatever, and just not work. We sort of talked about that with where your attention is. I know that you and I are quite alike, in some ways, brain wise, and I've seen your TikToks where you're very clearly not working.

Sara: [00:38:33] Sara Zarr [crosstalk].

Jenn: [00:38:36] So I'm guessing that you, too, like me can be bedeviled by procrastination demons. Do you have any wisdom about that? Asking for a friend.

Sara: [00:38:46] Wisdom, I don't know. I think after all these years of trying to overcome it. I think I've learned to live with it and work around it. And I think that's also true of imposter syndrome. Whatever other kind of obstacles we have, I think for like the first 10 years I was trying to be like, if I just like find the right process, I'll overcome this. Or if I'm just more disciplined, I'll overcome this. Or if I just like, do this kind of journaling. Like I'll never feel self doubt again, or if I get this prize or list or type of review then, yeah, I'm never going to feel like an impostor again. And it just doesn't work that way. So I've just learned to live with it. It's part of my life, procrastination, not just in writing, but with a lot of stuff.

[00:39:47] I try to just use practical things like setting timers, making lists, doing little rewards, having kind of a bare minimum level have to and then make the rest feel optional. The most effective thing for me for procrastination with writing has just been using timers of just setting a timer. I used to say 15 minutes or 12 minutes. Right now I'm very big on 23 minutes. Because then feels like I'm a full time writer, and I only expected myself to write 15 minutes a day. Whereas 23 I mean, 25’s too much, obviously.

Jenn: [00:40:44] Yeah, I like 23.

Sara: [00:40:43] In all seriousness if I set a timer for 23 minutes, and I commit to myself, and like, I just have to write for 23 minutes, when I'm done with 23 minutes, I can stop, I can go do anything I want. Because every time with maybe a very small exception rate. Once I'm doing writing for 23 minutes, I'm definitely going to keep going for at least an hour, maybe two. It's the overcoming, it's doing the transition, it's transitioning from dicking around into work, that is really difficult. And you can feel like you're at the transition point all day and never do it. And so the timer for me is just a way to bargain with myself and just be like the timer is starting now. I have to write for 23 minutes with total focus everything else off. And it pretty much works every time.

Jenn: [00:41:42] Yeah, I agree. My thing is, I don't open my email when I sit down to my desk. So I have, the night before I wrote down my most important tasks, or whatever I absolutely have to get done first thing in the morning. And I try to do it before I open my email, because once I open my email, all bets are off. There’s gonna be some emergency in there or some weird thing.

Sara: [00:42:07] Yeah, with agenting, in particular, I know your email inbox is the source of everything.

Jenn: [00:42:12] Yeah. So if I can just not start dealing with that, because once I started dealing with that, there's no coming back [crosstalk]. Anyway, the other thing that a lot of people are feeling in this moment is, you see on Twitter, people talking about burnout, which I don't know if it's sort of like maximum level procrastination or if procrastination is a symptom of it or what, but it feels like they're kind of hand in hand problems. How do you define burnout? And what do you do when you have it?

Sara: [00:42:46] I think with a lot of things in the social media era, and I see it, especially on TikTok, people are changing the definitions of words, or just, you know, like, right now you see a lot of things about gatekeeping on TikTok. Like, I'm gonna gatekeep this recipe.

Jenn: [00:43:07] What?

Sara: [00:43:07] It’s like what? Or, you know, everyone is convinced they have ADHD, which they might, but it's a whole, you can have characteristics of ADHD or same with autism spectrum and not have that diagnosis. But so I think burnout has become one of those things where it's like, it's just shorthand for just being over it. But for me, burnout, where I have to really pay attention to it is when I don't have any ideas. Like, if I'm not able to, think of one book idea, or essay idea, or Medium post idea, or newsletter content thing, then something's wrong. It just means my well, another very popular metaphor in the writing world, my well, my inner well, is dry. It's kind of scraped out. So that, to me, is burnout when I'm like scraping bottom and like nothing is coming up. And so there's a number of things I kind of have to do to deal with that. One is, stop demanding of myself that I have an idea. Take a break. And trust, this is another where the faith comes in, take a break and trust that if I back off, something will come.

[00:44:45] I have to step away from social media, especially Twitter and Instagram, because it just exacerbates the burnout feeling when I'm just absorbing a nonstop stream of, it's a mix of war, and politics and recipes and reality TV. It's just like all mixed up together.

Jenn: [00:45:15] A heady brew.

Sara: [00:45:16] A shit sandwich. It's just, I just have to do old school things, which it's sad to say because before the 2000s, this was just normal life. So nothing old school, but just listen to music, like listen to music that I like, take walks in nature. Lay on the bed and read a book. If I need to make money, go do something, like sometimes I do Instacart. Just anything that's not staring into my screens and trying to make words. I just have to give that part of my brain a rest. During pandemic, like a lot of people, I bought a bunch of art supplies that I've barely used. I just like, went to Michael's or went on Michaels.com and was like, oh, my God, I could buy all these art supplies. I was making shrinky dinks. Just kind of a self reboot of just step away, turn it off, go do something else. Take a rest.

[00:46:33] And particularly, when you have the opportunity to do that. So if you're a working writer, and you have deadlines, and the day you meet a deadline, it's tempting to just jump into the next thing and try and like keep the momentum. But I think you have to take opportunity of those little pockets of inaction. Like right now I turned in a draft for my next book. It's been a couple months now. And I'm not asking my agent, like, when's my editor going to get me my notes. I'm just like, you know what, this is a good time to do some other stuff. And I'll turn my attention back to that later.

[00:47:15] So, I think it's, to use another overused word, self care, but it's more like care of your inner, what I talked about the rich inner life. You can't have that if your head is just full of the voices, and anxieties of other people, which is what I get from being online. I just absorb everyone else's fear and anxiety and every crisis. And so it's just like, oh, I just need to go do some like *Little House on the Prairie*-type activities.

Jenn: [00:47:53] I mean, I do think it's like, a difference between, I'm having burnout. In this moment, I cannot come up with words, I am just staring at this screen for six hours, I'm not doing anything. I need to go outside and touch some grass or whatever. Versus the chronic situation where you're truly not able to refill the well in that way. And there's such a thing as quitting.

Sara: [00:48:17] Yes.

Jenn: [00:48:19] Like you can stop.

Sara: [00:48:21] Yes, I'm at a point now where like book, that draft I just turned in, is my last outstanding contract. And whenever I'm in that place, where I don't have any contracts left, I always take a pause and just ask myself, like, do I want to keep doing this? And I think it's important to just, it goes with the letting go thing of just being like, it's okay to not be a writer. That was your only dream at one point. It might not be now and that's okay. And it really is okay to stop and I think we don't say that enough in the writing world. Or to take a really long… That's where I feel like I am right now. I don't want to stop, I still have lots of things I want to write. But in terms of the business side of it, I really, I need more than just like, weeks or a couple months or something like that. I need a nice stretch where I'm really thinking carefully about what I really want to write and do I just want to finish it before I try and sell it and all that kind of stuff. And if I take a long break, and I don't feel like going back to it, that's okay. I have to always give myself that option and make sure I'm actually choosing to do this.

Jenn: [00:49:38] Yeah. And I mean, I think that freedom will give your inner whatever the opportunity to be like, oh, wait, oh, I do have an idea like, oh, hello.

Sara: [00:49:49] Yeah, totally.

Jenn: [00:49:49] And you will want to go back to it and you'll be excited to go back to it and that's where you want to be.

Sara: [00:49:56] So far that's happened every time. Every time I tell myself I'm gonna stop, days later I’m full of things I want to do. But I recognize that might not happen every time in the future. And that's okay.

Jenn: [00:50:10] Yeah. So something that a lot of writers do struggle with is comparing themselves to others, not keeping their eyes on their own paper. All my friends have book deals, but I don't or so and so got paid this enormous advance and I didn't or whatever. But publishing is hard, and there's frankly a lot of shitty stuff that happens to anyone who's writing for publication. So how do you avoid getting consumed by jealousy or bitterness?

Sara: [00:50:35] I have to let myself acknowledge it. First of all, if I'm feeling jealous, or feeling envy, I guess career envy, or feeling bitter about like, what about me? Don't they know who I am? I was a National Book Award finalist 14 years ago. I have to let myself feel it and not just immediately try and suppress those feelings, which I think a lot of women, especially, are conditioned to do, because we have to put on the happy like, I'm in a squad, I'm cheering on my squad, and everyone, we're in a community and everyone's my friend. It's okay to like, go nurse a grudge.

For me, then there's a limit. It's like, okay, I can acknowledge this feeling and feel it. And then if I want to express it to a trusted friend, I could do that. But I can't live there. I can go there for a visit. But I can't camp out in the career envy, bitterness place. So to deal with it and like get some distance from it. It's a bunch of different things. One is, again, getting off the feeds, because a big part of that feeling is the fact that you're in an echo chamber. And it does feel like literally everyone I know is *a New York Times* bestseller. But then you just realize, no, this is a tiny fraction of people who are writing, it just happens to be that I follow all of them, you know. So you have to like step back, get some perspective.

[00:52:19] And then gratitude is a big part of it for me, which sounds very live, laugh, love, which I don't like but just acknowledging well, you know, the publishing business doesn’t owe me anything. I'm doing this of my own free will. I'm grateful for what I've gotten to do, the people I've gotten to work with and get to know, the experiences I've gotten to have. And if someone else is having them now, it's okay. That's how the world works.

[00:52:48] Or if it's before anything has happened for you at all, it can be harder, because I'm in a place now where I've been able to check a bunch of things off my bucket list. If you haven't had that chance yet, and you really want it, I don't want to make it sound like it's easy. But I do think you have to step back. And like you said, keep your eyes on your own paper and find what you enjoy about it again. And I don't see how that's possible without at least very carefully curating what you do online. And it's okay to just leave. You don't have to, all this stuff about you have to have a platform. Well, have to is a overly strong word. It can be helpful, but it's not like a law.

Jenn: [00:53:37] Yeah. Yeah, I do think, it's funny, when you said, I think that people a lot of times don't have big picture perspective about things. And that thing that you said about like, oh, everybody I know is a *New York Times* bestseller. Oh, wait, actually.

[00:53:55] It's tough because I know thathe everybody follows certain big writers. And so does seem like, okay, well, I had a new book come out. So it's gonna hit the list, right? Like, no, probably not.

Sara: [00:54:08] Probably not.

Jenn: [00:54:09] 10 books do. 9000 books don't. I don't know what to tell you. It's really rare, actually. It's really rare. So I mean, it's special and fantastic when it happens and cool. But it doesn't mean that you are succeeding more than anyone else. It doesn't mean that you're better than anyone else. And if you don't hit that extremely rare thing, then you're not worse, or you didn't mess up.

Sara: [00:54:39] It's also helpful to remember that most people just your average John Citizen, that you might run into the grocery store. They've never heard of, even the people who in your little world are the most famous. Most people have never heard of them.

Jenn: [00:54:58] Most people have heard of three authors.

Sara: [00:55:02] Exactly. It's like, are you Stephen King? No, well, don't worry about it, then. Perspecitve is a huge part of it. And that is a gift of aging, as the older you get, and the longer you're around, you get that gift of perspective. But it's definitely harder when you're younger. And, and there's a lot of really young people in the YA publishing world. And I think when I say young, I mean, like, people in their mid-20s, who haven't developed perspective yet, so it's on both ends. The people who are doing really well are currently living in a false reality that’s like a temporary. It’s real, but it's temporary. But you get the impression sometimes that they believe that this will be how their career feels forever, and that this will be like standard for them. And it's probably not. It’s rare to sustain that over book after book after book. So enjoy it while you have something. And then don't let it become your whole personality.

Jenn: [00:56:16] I remember many years ago, I think before I was even an agent, I was talking to Cecil Castellucci, about her first book. It came out around the same as *Story of a Girl*. And she too, had been working for like 10 years. Maybe this was after she had a couple books out. But she had tried for a decade to try and get published, and not succeeded. And then she had a certain amount of success. And she said, I truly think that every author will have 10 years of failure. Either it’s going to be the first 10 years or it will come later, and you won't know. Oops. But it's gonna happen. You can't get away without paying that 10 years.

Sara: [00:56:59] Yeah, yeah. I think that's right. I remember her saying that to me, too. Yeah, I think that was a good insight.

Jenn: [00:57:04] So I always think about that. When you see these people that are super successful, somewhere they paid that 10 years due and if they haven't, then they will.

Sara: [00:57:14] It’s coming.

Jenn: [00:57:15] Yeah. Sorry. Anyway.

Sara: [00:57:23] With say that with no bitterness whatsoever. No. And there's a rare few who it never seems to come for and good for them.

Jenn: [00:57:31] Yeah. But then something else will happen. Anyway. So I feel like this feels like kind of a downer. We've been talking about bitterness and failure and burnout and all this negative stuff. But in fact, your book is super practical. It's inspirational and hopeful. Do you have any just good vibe wisdom for those who feel maybe stuck in the query trenches or they’re shoulder deep in revision quicksand, or whatever?

Sara: [00:57:59] I mean, I know I did have time to prepare this answer. And now that it's now that it's upon me, I'm just like, I just think, I don't like the mindset of we’re just lucky to be here. And that's not what I mean, when I say talk about gratitude. But it's that we somehow do have an expectation that life, if we're doing it right, should be easy. And that is just absolutely, absolutely false. American Dream capitalism, hustle culture, kind of, I don't know, narrative. I don't know what it is. It's a myth. And so, if you're stuck in the query trenches, I think the wisdom that I have is, stay in it. If you have a story that you want to tell and get out there, or you just know in your heart, you're not going to feel fulfilled until you achieve some publishing goal, then stay in it and remind yourself you're choosing it and you don't have to do it. And so try and find some enjoyment in the process, even when it's going badly, I guess. And I was in this place for a long time. And I know, it's really hard. And when you're in it, it's hard to hear any encouragement or any advice that sounds like, enjoy it now. Because it feels easy for people to say to you, but then it's hard to experience.

[00:59:41] But I do remember a couple of writers I knew saying, enjoy this time when you're a writer now before you're published because it's never quite the same after. And I think that's 100% true. And there's a lot to be enjoyed about the part of the process where you have nothing to lose. And if you can kind of lean into that adventure aspect of like, I don’t know how this is going to come out but I've got nothing to lose, and I'm going for it. And if you really want it, go for it and give yourself the option to say, I don't want it that bad if it's making me miserable. And it's okay to take a break.

[01:00:21] And then, with revision, all I can say is, every first draft of all my books is terrible. And they've all gone on to get really good reviews, and get on a bunch of lists and stuff. And just all the magic happens for me in revision, and in late stages of revision. So I can have a bad discovery draft and an okay, second draft. And then that's where it starts getting good. And when I started out, that was much longer. There were a lot more drafts in that. I think with *Sweethearts*, which was my second book, and the first one I did from beginning to end with a with my editor. I think we did seven drafts of it. And it feels terrible at the time. But that's, how books get good. So, you know, I don't know if those were good vibes or not.

Jenn: [01:01:24] Sara Zarr: life is a lot harder than you think.

Sara: [01:01:31] It's kind of a Zen thing, I guess, where you're just like, oh, to an extent, you know, life is suffering. Again, I mean, it's in the most positive way. But I think the thing that I think makes us most miserable. And I think this goes back to what we were saying when you're asking for feedback, is expectations. So if you're having an expectation that it should feel easier, or it should be easier, or it should happen faster. That's what's making you unhappy, not the act of doing it, and waiting and revising. It's the expectation you had. So I think if you can kind of lean into the idea of this is hard, it may take a long time. And I'm going to keep living my life while I'm pursuing this. You'll be a lot happier than if you're just like God dammit, like, why? Why is this not happened yet? And dwelling in that then—

Jenn: [01:02:35] That’s part letting go right?

Sara: [01:02:37] Yeah. Exactly.

Jenn: [01:02:38] Okay, so we've got a Zen place, I appreciate it.

Sara: [01:02:41] Yes. Yes.

Jenn: [01:02:41] So, let’s talk about books. Last year-ish, I don't know, what is time, during the height of the pandemic, your book, *Courageous Creativity* came out. It's geared towards younger writers. It includes both encouragement for them, as well as very practical ideas for how to get started even putting pen to paper, like brainstorming. What made you decide to write a writing book for tweens and teens? And what did you learn from that?

Sara: [01:03:07] That was one of those publishing stories where that you get to experience after you've been around for a while, it's probably not how your first book or two is going to go. But after you've been around for a while, you get the opportunity for things like this to happen, which is I was at a conference, I was having drinks with a friend, and a friend of a friend and the friend of a friend was an editor at this arm of 1517 Media, Beaming Books. And he was like, have you ever thought about doing kind of an inspirational, like nonfiction book for young readers? And if you did, what would it be about? And we talked about, like, oh, I could talk about growing up in a dysfunctional family or I could talk about writing, or creativity.

[01:03:58] And when I got home from the conference, he emailed me and he was like, he had actually written up a proposal. He did most of the work, let's face it. He had sort of drafted a proposal based on what we talked about over drinks and was like, if you were interested in this, how does this look and then I added to it, and then it was just an opportunity that came to me. And I took it.

Jenn: [01:04:24] Cool.

Sara: [01:04:24] And it was fun. And it was it was the first time I'd worked with a small publisher. And I really liked it because I would there would be things like I'm getting on a Teams meeting and we're gonna talk very specifically about like a marketing plan and pre order stuff and just the stuff you don't often do if you're with a big five publisher unless you're one of the top tier people. And it was just, things felt kind of smooth and easy and lots of good communication. I really enjoyed that process.

[01:05:04] It's hard to write… nonfiction is hard in its own way. But it's especially hard for me to write nonfiction for younger readers, because I think my voice that wants to come out is more for adults when it comes to nonfiction, which is why, after I did *Courageous Creativity*, I was like, I want to do a version of this for adults where I'm not like kind of trying to limit the scope of what I'm saying, or the way I'm saying it. And I'm like bringing in some more pragmatic business-y grown up life stuff. So what I learned from that was that I wanted to do it again, but for adults, and I do I really like writing nonfiction. Yeah, it was fun.

Jenn: [01:05:46] So your debut middle grade novel came out last month?

Sara: [01:05:50] Yeah.

Jenn: [01:05:50] Called *A Song Called Home*. And it's already gotten three starred reviews, I think. It looks fantastic. I just bought my shiny new copy. Although, I’ve barely ripped into it yet.

Sara: [01:05:58] Aw, thank you.

Jenn: [01:06:01] Can you just give us the pitch?

Sara: [01:06:02] In as much as I can give a pitch because I'm terrible at pitching. I don't like to write the kind of books that can be easily pitched. But I will say it's loosely based on my own experience. When I was around 11, my mom remarried. Very soon after my dad left, my mom remarried. We moved from our apartment in San Francisco, to my stepdads house in Pacifica. And it was just a huge life change for me at that age, so much going on. So this character and her family, they're not me and my family. But that provided me the basic structure.

[01:06:45] It's a very classic, middle grade type of story where it's like a move and a new parent just those big changes that you don't have any control over because you're 11. And I sort of blended it with this experience I had when I was a kid, which was, well, really my mom had it, but I was there. She and my dad met in music school, and they both always did music, and my mom played cello. But when they moved to San Francisco in the early ‘70s, they had to sell everything, and basically arrived in San Francisco with like next to nothing. And so one of the things my mom had to sell her cello. And then, so she's a cellist, but she didn't have a cello. And then one day, there was like a knock on the door of our apartment. And someone had left a cello for my mom on the doorstep, just anonymously. Someone in her life knew that she didn't have an instrument and she was a musician.

[01:07:49] And so I brought the idea of an instrument showing up on the front porch, only in the book, it's for the main character who, for her 11th birthday an instrument shows up. She makes some assumptions about who it's from. And throughout the course of the book, part of it is she's learning to play the guitar. And it all ties into her estranged alcoholic father. See, I can't do like a two line pitch.

Jenn: [01:08:17] So all right, we get that. Following that up, though, how has writing middle grade been different from writing for teens, if it has been?

Sara: [01:08:28] It's very different. I wasn't sure I could do it. It was something that, again, was brought to me as a suggestion. Because, as an agent, you know all this, like the YA market has changed a lot in the last 10 years. And it's not the most hospitable place right now for the kinds of books that I write, which are just these smaller family stories, where the sort of interpersonal and intrapersonal dramas are based in the family unit, and there's no big epic, external, quote, unquote, “plot,” who cares, going on?

[01:09:09] And both my agent editor were like, hey, we think that the middle grade market is a great place right now for what you do. And that you could find more readers and more appreciation for the kind of thing that you do in this space, and would you be interested in trying that? So I was like, I don't know, it seems hard because I'm one of those people who deeply believes that the younger the audience you're writing for the harder it actually is, depending on what your natural internal voice wants to be. And I just kind of started playing with it. I had a good talk with my editor, Jordan Brown at Balzer & Bray who gave me some pointers about, he'd had other YA authors moved to middle grade and just talked about the kind of obstacles or missteps to look out for in the writing.

[01:10:04] And I just played with this idea inspired by what had happened to me when I was a kid. And I decided to do it in third person, which was something my editor recommended. He’s like, if you're just starting out and you haven't written this age group, you might not want to go straight to first person because it's really hard to do first person middle grade well if that's not your natural voice that wants to come out. So I did that in third person. And yeah, it worked. So I've got another middle grade after this one and then we'll see.

Jenn: [01:10:43] Awesome. So are there any books not your own, that you'd like to pitch because we've talked about the podcast. We've talked about? *This Creative Life* and *Courageous Creativity* and *A Song Called Home*, which of course, there will be links to all of them in the show notes. But I'm curious, let's say somebody is a fan of you. Whether it's a writing book or a YA, or middle grade, or whatever, anything goes, what are your suggestions for them?

Sara: [01:11:14] I have two that I thought about. The first one is a writer's book that has to do with a lot of what we're talking about earlier in our conversation about procrastination, and those sorts of issues. It is called *Around the Writer’s Block*, by Roseanne Bane. And this is something that I saw Stephanie Perkins recommend on Twitter a few months ago, and I was like, ooh, that sounds good. I'm gonna get that. And it’s specifically about using neuroscience, understanding your writer's resistance and procrastination through the lens of neuroscience, like what is actually going on in your brain that is causing some of these troubles and then giving some workarounds. And one of her big things in the book is this 15 minute timer idea, which is something I've always done. But she kind of presents it in a little bit of a different way. And then I started doing that again, but using my 23 minute system. And it's just got a lot of, it's not, I don't love everything about it, it's got some different exercises, like journaling exercises, and little contracts you make with yourself or someone else. And I'm not into that.

[01:12:30] But the overall sort of self management tips, I found really helpful. And then the other one is, this is gonna seem dumb, because it would seem like, of course, everyone knows and has read this book by now. But it's Malinda Lo’s *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. And the reason I'm recommending it, even though it's won every single award is just because of that, because sometimes when books get that much attention and you haven't read them yet, you start thinking like, it can't be that good. Like, there's no way I'm gonna actually like this or ah, that books gotten enough. I don't need to read it. But it's so good. It's just a really good book. It's barely YA, which is something I love about it. It's like set in the mid century in San Francisco. I just, I loved it so much. And when I got to the end, I was like, yeah, I can't remember another book. I've read that as gotten so many awards, or I read it and go like, yeah, it deserved all that. Yeah. So if anyone like missed the boat on that, and you're thinking like, now it's too late, and you can't possibly like it, because it's been hyped so much. I'm just going to add my recommendation.

Jenn: [01:13:44] I agree. And I also think it's good for you to sometimes like, especially if you've just been knee deep in your own revisions, or reading drafts of things and drafts and things. You got to reset your palate sometimes and remember what a book is supposed to look like.

Sara: [01:14:03] Yeah, like, it was the first book I'd read in a long time where as I was reading it, which I'm not as fast of a reader as you, I'm usually pretty slow. But anytime I wasn't reading it, I was thinking about when I was going to next be able to sit down and read some more. And that, yeah. When you've been writing and you're sick of writing, you just don't feel that way about books.

Jenn: [01:14:26] Yeah.

Sara: [01:14:28] So then it's great to be like, oh, yeah, that's why I love reading.

Jenn: [01:14:31] Right. Totally, reignite you and reset your taste level. I find that when I'm when I'm doing a ton of editing or reading slush, reading slush, reading random unpublished manuscripts. I have to take a break between each one and read a regular book. Because otherwise my sense of what I'm supposed to be looking for is off.

Sara: [01:14:55] Yeah, that makes sense.

Jenn: [01:14:57] And it makes me remember like, oh, I like this, actually. Books are good.

Sara: [01:15:01] The other thing I love about that book in particular, not the book itself, but thinking about Malinda is a perfect example of when when writers have been around a while, and you start thinking because she debuted near the same time I did, maybe a little bit before even or shortly after and got…

Jenn: [01:15:24] Right at the same time or a year after.

Sara: [01:15:25] Yeah, and got a good amount of buzz. And then she just wasn't buzzy for a long time. And then this book, and it's just like which literally, I'm not joking, you know, really has won all the awards. And I just love it. I love a comeback story. But it's not even a comeback because she's been writing all along and having books but we have this idea that like if it's not like the hot book we're all talking about it's a flop is how it can feel because we're again caught in this industry echo chamber. But I love Malinda's story, because it's just a perfect example of you never know when the success train is going to come back around to your station. If it leaves, that doesn't mean it's never coming again. There’s just… careers are so and you and I have been around in this world for a long time. And we've seen it. We've seen the people who were the hot shit in the mid-oughts. Never hear about them. Or people that you thought were over our back. You just never know. And so I love Malinda’s story for that aspect too, of just like, here's a woman who's been around doing her thing for a long time. And then sometimes the thing you write just hits and it's awesome.

Jenn: [01:16:44] Yes. So finally, the most popular part of the podcast is probably my final question. Which is what are you obsessed with right now it does not have to be bookish, but it can be. For what it's worth, mine are usually to do with like food or reality show because I'm trash.

Sara: [01:17:02] I know. I was like, that's not going to be books, trust me.

Jenn: [01:17:04] Ew.

Sara: [01:17:05] Gross.

Jenn: [01:17:07] So I'm gonna go first, but actually, I have to say that this time around, I'm cheating. I have two, so you're allowed to have two as well. Do you have two?

Sara: [01:17:13] Good, I have two.

Jenn: [01:17:15] Alright, so my first one is a TV show. *Our Flag Means Death* on HBO.

Sara: [01:17:22] I have been hearing so much about this show.

Jenn: [01:17:24] Okay, so it's from the same folks that brought us like *Flight of the Conchords*, *What We Do in the Shadows*, so you know it's gonna be weird and funny. And like goofy. It's about this rich and pampered dude who decides he wants to be a pirate. So he basically leaves his entire family, this is like in the golden age of piracy. Leaves his family, buys and outfits a very fancy ship and departs for the seven seas to like pirate it up. But then it turns out that he's afraid of blood and conflict and really is a bookworm and he's like, I'm not sure about this danger stuff.

[01:17:55] So first, you think okay, this is like a rollicking comedy fish out of water. But then he meets Blackbeard, the notorious, scary pirate, who's played by Taika Waititi, who is amazing, and suddenly it becomes, still a rollicking comedy, but also a super heartfelt queer love story. Like—

Sara: [01:18:14] With Blackbeard?

Jenn: [01:18:15] Yes. Literally, everyone on the show turns out to be queer. And, so it's like, I read some review that was like, oh, this is the opposite of queerbaiting, actually, because what starts out as just a sort of mild mannered comedy about pirates or whatever turns into this queer love fest.

Sara: [01:18:36] I love it.

Jenn: [01:18:38] And it is amazing. And also, I mean, I liked it from the beginning, but I can't tell you how much I loved it by the end and they better renew it. Because it ended on a cliffhanger.

Sara: [01:18:49] Did you say this is HBO?

Jenn: [01:18:51] It is HBO? Yes.

Sara: [01:18:53] This is, I'm in a constant state of juggling all my streaming subscriptions to try and at least mitigate the expense. So I'm just like, okay, I just finished this set of shows on HBO. So I'm going to suspend my account and re-up on Hulu. And I'm always going back and forth. And so I just was letting my HBO expire. But now I might have to go back to it.

[01:19:18] Yeah, I mean, you can get through it pretty fast. But also the Julio show is pretty good. And there's a lot of good shows on HBO right now. Anyway. Sarah, do you have your first obsession ready?

Sara: [01:19:28] Yes. Although now I want it to be something else. Okay. I'm gonna say the new Harry Styles single “As It Was”. Because if you haven't heard it, anyone who’s listening. Go find it. Go watch the video on YouTube and listen to it. It sounds like a song from the ‘80s but it also sounds modern. So this is what I love about it. It’s very much ‘80s synthpop feeling especially like, A-ha. It has this kind of steel drum hook. But the lyrics are kind of anti nostalgia. The chorus is like, you know it's not the same as it was, you know it's not the same. In the video, he's like, going backwards. He's like knocking on closed doors. He's running on this turntable and can't quite ever catch up to his love interest, whatever. So I just love that it's simultaneously tapping into my nostalgia. And it's like, a warning against nostalgia.

Jenn: [01:20:47] [crosstalk] impulses, nostalgia.

Sara: [01:20:48] And it's a good video. And I'm not one of these people who's been, like, all whipped up about Harry Styles in the past or anything, but I just really liked this video.

Jenn: [01:21:00] Because you’re an adult.

Sara: [01:21:00] Well, he's an adult now, too, Jenn. And he looks great. And it's a great video. It's a great song. I'm obsessed with it. I listened to it like, I had it on repeat, kind of unintentionally. It was just playing over and over again. And I just let it and it's very good. Yeah.

Jenn: [01:21:21] Well, I'll look into it. So my second obsession is this podcast called *Dead Eyes*. So it's about this guy. He's a character actor named Connor Ratliff is a real dude who got cast in a bid part 15 years ago in the show *Band of Brothers*. Tom Hanks was going to direct his episode, he was like, super stoked about it because he had, you know, gone to drama school and gone through a million auditions. And this was his big break to be this little bit player in *Band of Brothers,* so amazing. And he's like, had his costume fitting, and then all of a sudden, he gets a call from his agent. He says, you have to go in to the studio and meet Tom Hanks right now and reaudition, because he watched your reel, and he wants to recast you because he says you have dead eyes.

[01:22:09] And the guy is like what? Like, first of all, why did the agent… The agent should have never repeated that even if it was true, but whatever. The guy, of course rushes down to the studio meets Tom Hanks, and sure enough, loses his job. So this entire podcast is basically him unpacking that, which sounds like it would be insane. Like he's obsessed with this random comment somebody made a decade ago.

Sara: [01:22:36] No, I love it. It's sounds like it’s in my wheelhouse.

Jenn: [01:22:37] It is super interesting and really fun and funny. It looks at Hollywood from this weird perspective that no one has ever approached it. And he talks to actors and casting directors and comedians, like, who actually got that role. He talks to Jon Hamm, who was like… Anyway, he talks to all kinds of people about all kinds of things like failure and fate, and things that I think actually are directly relatable for authors and other creative folks, too.

[01:23:08] And then in the final episode, I know he actually talks talks to Tom Hanks. Confronts him with [crosstalk]. I'm really looking forward to that. I mean, because at the end of the day, for him, it was actually a life defining moment. For Tom Hanks, he doesn't remember that shit.

Sara: [01:23:25] Right. Right, right.

Jenn: [01:23:27] It doesn't mean anything to him.

Sara: [01:23:29] Right.

Jenn: [01:23:29] So like, it will be a very interesting conversation. And I can't wait, but I only listen to podcasts in the car. So I have like 20 more episodes to listen to. But I'm so excited every time I have to drive somewhere because I can listen to more and I really love it. *Dead Eyes.* Okay, Sara, do you have a second obsession?

Sara: [01:23:50] I have like three that I'm even in the moment trying to choose from but I think based on your *Dead Eyes* recommendation, I'm going to go with another podcast recommendation that is relevant to listeners of your podcast, of my podcast. It is a podcast called *Waiting for Impact* that Dave Holmes, who has been a guest on my podcast and is just an all around… He was an MTV personality back in the ‘90s, early 2000s. And he was always my favorite. And now he's like a podcaster and writes for *Esquire* and he's a great writer, and he also has a memoir out that I love.

[01:24:35] But anyway, he did this recently, this podcast called *Waiting for Impact* where he's following their trajectory of this also ran boy band that never quite took off around the height of the boy band frenzy. And it's exactly what you just said about *Dead Eyes* where it's just finding all these people from back in the day, talking to them, asking them what happened. This idea of, again, expectations, things that felt like failure, being happy in a creative career that doesn't look like the one that you thought you were going to have when you started out. The weird things about fate like, just a few things aligning, where suddenly you're like, you know, meeting Michael Bivins from Bell Biv DeVoe and getting a contract and all that stuff.

[01:25:31] It’s interesting, because when I started, I was like, I don't know if this will really be my thing because I was not into the boy band era. But as it goes, it’s very much about anyone who is like has a dream, is on a creative career trajectory, experiences let downs, things that feel like dead ends that turn out not to be. *Waiting for Impact*, Dave Holmes, good podcast.

Jenn: [01:25:58] All right. I’m putting it on my—

Sara: [01:26:01] And because I'm the guest, and I can do what I want. I'm just gonna say, oh, go ahead. The Hillsong documentary on Discovery+, if you're into churchy, ex-churchy stuff. And yeah, that's all.

Jenn: [01:26:15] Okay. Noted. Sara Zarr, it has been such a pleasure to catch up beyond random text and DMs. I’m so glad you made the time to talk to us. Thank you so much for being here.

Sara: [01:26:26] Thank you so much for having me. I love talking to you because we go so far back. And I love that I still have connections with people that I met on Live Journal in like 2004. And just watching how… I remember people like Jo Knowles was in that little group, and Gwenda Bond, we all kind of knew each other on Live Journal before any of us really, were doing what we're doing now. So it was pretty awesome.

Jenn: [01:26:54] I know. It's crazy. And they're both my clients now. How do you like that?

Sara: [01:26:55] I know! That’s… I love it.

Jenn: [01:26:59] All right, I’m going to let you go, but, thanks so much.

Sara: [01:27:01] Thanks for having me.

Jenn: [01:27:01] Thanks again to my guest, Sara Zarr and thanks to all of you for listening, and a special shout out to those of you who are patrons, your support of the podcast means the world. As usual, all the books we talked about today are linked in the show notes on my website, JenniferLaughran.com/Literaticast.

[01:27:20] And I promised a surprise at the top of the show. So if you got this far, this is just for listeners. Sara has given a special coupon code just for listeners of the podcast. It'll be up in the show notes. And it will give you 30% off of *This Creative Life,* the book if you buy it through Sara's website. Now. The paperback of this book will be available later in May. The eBook will be available at the very end of April. The eBook is actually up now just on Sara’s site and this code will give you a big discount. So go check it out. And happy reading and happy writing. And I'll see you next time.

[Literaticast theme plays.]