

Timeline of a Novel

I Should Be Writing S17 Ep9

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SPEAKER

Mur Lafferty

Mur 0:32

This is I Should be Writing season 17 episode 9. And I hope everybody had a good slash productive weekend. Still doing a lot of goal focusing and it's still hard to think big picture when you know there's little picture stuff that needs to be done. I feel like my evil brain hijacked my ADD meds this morning, because I-I took my ADD meds and then I looked at my budget. And I've mentioned it before, I am not sponsored at all but the You Need a Budget app has been pretty much life changing for me in the fact that I finally, finally understand how to budget and how to keep up with the budget. So I'm very aware of my budget now but I was doing something new with it and I decided to spend hours on it this morning. Hours. And while it is important, it is not a priority, like say, writing. Hence the name of the show. Yeah, so what I wanted to talk about is someone was asking in the discord about how a book comes to be from the very, very early moments, and this is gonna be different for everybody. So I'm going to go through my book Six Wakes and I'm going to go through the book I'm working on right now and sort of work out that time period for you. A lot of people say how long does it take to write a book and I never know the answer because there's a lot of thinking. And then there's some procrastination in there. Does, do they want to know like how-how much time typing do I do? It's-it's very nebulous thing, so I figured I would take you through the life's, lifespan, or timeline of my books.

Mur 2:30

I think probably the first idea I had for six weeks had to do with reading a generation starship book and thinking, it seems like a lot of generation starship books take place well, well into the journey. Like well to the lifespans of people who were not born on Earth and will never see the end destination. Their lives are going to be on the ship and their only job is to make babies. And you know not have horrible things happen. But horrible things do happen because that's how stories go. So that was my first thought, and I thought, I, I'm kind of interested in generation starship from the beginning. Like how does somebody begin that kind of thing and then I thought, a lot of what I've read had been people who forgot they were on a generation

starship. They've been going so long that they'd forgotten their goal. They forgot, they didn't, some people, one book didn't even know, people didn't even know they were on a ship. But I thought, what if they had the same crew the whole time. And then my brain went to, alright well what's immortal. And I actually went thinking, well there's vampires and elves. Which I don't really want to do in space. And you know this is like, these are thoughts that just kind of brew in the back brain. They're not, I don't sit around and think of this. I just think about it every once in a while. And then I was playing the game FTL, Faster Than Light. It is a starship simulator. I discovered it is a roguelike because the, the levels are randomly generated and if you die once you die and you start over from the beginning, which if you saw my ama yesterday is part of what makes Hades such a brilliant game, because that story evolves as you die and come back and die and come back, but FTL not so much. It's a very difficult game. But in the game they have these clone vats that are only used to bring people, when they die. So it's not, you can't clone one of your people, like, people are a resource in the game if you, you know your captain dies, you have to put somebody else in that seat and that might be the person who's really good at shields, you know, that kind of thing. So if you want somebody who's really good at shields to also do something else you can't clone them and put them in another room. They're only cloned when they die. And I hadn't really seen cloning used as a way of extending life so much. Like specifically extending life not making multiples of a person. And that was, that also-that-that started to become another seed of an idea.

Mur 5:42

And the next thing was actually kind of sad. Um, the writer Jay Lake heavily chronicled his experiences with cancer on his blog and was entirely open about it. And when he knew he was pretty much at the end, he decided to throw his own wake and invite people to come because he wanted to say goodbye to people. So he threw a big party, and people came from like all over the country at least. I don't know if anybody traveled internationally, but I know a lot of people traveled there. And so that kind of, the idea of throwing your own wake is what kind of was the last piece I needed to where the characters would be in the middle of space, and their technology will have broken down, so they know that they're going to die and they're not coming back. And so they decide to throw their own funerals. That was the concept of Six Wakes. And after the first draft my editor said, I think, or maybe it was just the full outline, I can't remember. At one point my editor said, 'You know, I think the idea of throwing their own wake is a good one but if you throw six of them, it's going to slow the book down narratively'. So I said okay I can condense that. Then I said we'd have to change the title and she said 'No. Marketing really likes the title' so that's another story. But, so that's-that's how the wakes got changed.

Mur 7:41

So at this point I was writing. I got inspiration from pretty much everything I was watching. I would get inspiration from watching really well told TV, playing really good narrative games. I had inspiration for my characters but I'm embarrassed to say what they were, because sometimes I feel like characters are hard for me to write. So I usually take them from inspirations. But there were inspirations for the characters. And it was fun, I, at some point I realized that I didn't know how to write a mystery. And that I was writing a mystery. Oops. Um, so then I did a lot of research. I did read a lot of Agatha Christie, I read a book on writing mysteries and learned a lot. So, the, like what I learned that I just hadn't realized was the

determined, the detective, and that's anybody. So the detective has to be the one to solve the case. Not, and that sounds obvious but it's not like somebody helping the detective and it's not the detective as in a private eye. The detective is whoever is your protagonist in the story. So they have to be the one to resolve it. And the other thing I learned was that the important thing is there's always something connected to... Well, I keep thinking of Agatha Christie and she did not do this but if you have like most, most mysteries told these days are the person who's the detective has some sort of connection to the murder but they don't know what it is. Either it's, they know someone involved or their father was killed in the same way 30 years ago or some sort of little thing which is one thing you uncover in the, in the story. This is why people need means and a motive. The motive the killer has is got to be personal. And it was the realizing that I had to make everybody a suspect, which means they all had to have a reason to have killed everybody. So, that helped me a lot with realizing what I had to come up with.

Mur 10:44

And I still don't want to spoil it. I know it's several years old. But when I came up with who the real murderer was that happened organically as I was writing, because as I was doing the flashbacks of these clones long lived lives-that's a fun sentence to say-I came, I realized that there was, I was subconsciously putting in one similar factor. And this, as this factor threaded through all the flashbacks I realized that that was the connection to the murderer. That's all I can say. Because I would love people to read it if you haven't read it. If you like space mysteries. And then there was, I had some more violent things with less reason for being violent happen and that got changed. I did careful research on the space stuff. And on the rotating ship gravity stuff. Than I probably needed to. But I did almost no research on the cloning thing and that was total hand waving. And it still makes me laugh that Kirkus dinged me on my space research, but not-but not on the clothing stuff. I don't know. Six Wakes available as an audiobook anywhere, not on Audible UK or Scribd. Any plans? If you are not, I think it's only available in audiobook US and Canada. The UK rights and world English rights never sold. The book sold 50,000 copies here, not even counting foreign sales and was nominated for almost every major genre award, but the Brits didn't want it. So, no you can't get the audiobook in the UK and I'm very sorry. I could self publish the audio book, like I did self publish the, I self published the ebook, and Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the UK and Ireland. But I couldn't, I would have to completely re-record the book to have my own copy that I own the copyright for that I could release over there. And I've already read the book once so, I'm narrating the one over here. So I was not really up for making another one. So it's bizarre, I don't know. I'm really baffled why the world English rights never sold. Sold many, many other rights, Hungarian, Russian, Turkish, Hungarian? Definitely Turkish. I know I sold Turkish rights.

Mur 14:12

Yes, that's because I sold those books to, Shambling Guides, to Orbit US and UK but Orbit UK did not want Six Wakes, and neither did anybody else so, I don't know. I have so many strange and awkward annoyances about the publishing side of that book but. So my editor is awesome. She is currently with Tor. But I nominate her every year for the Hugo because she's just so good. She-she-she has the ability to find things in my books that I, often have happened to be like running themes that I don't want and points them out to me and tells me to fix them. I pretty much followed all of her advice because she-she said those more violent

scenes needed to be cleaned up and she wasn't telling me to remove the violence. I had plenty of violence in the book. It was just the plotlines I had for those characters, actually, I think this led to another decision, major decision which was you can, if-if you can clone people that means people can be reduced to computer code which means they can be edited. And so, I made it so you could hack both the mind and the body of the people in order to push them to believe or do something you want them to. And it was using that ability as a way to fix those scenes, because I had other, right. Sorry, I'm having to remember and still don't want to spoil too much. I had one character who had two illegal clones on board. And he didn't know this, but-but someone else had cloned him and edited him to make him pretty much a psychopath, and put them on board and that's where the violence was coming from, but not the actual murder. It was the violence that happens during the book. So yeah, she-she nixed that and then there was just a lot of writing.

Mur 16:41

So we've got, you know, the months it took to write the book and then it took them a couple of months to edit it and get it back to me and then I, then we were doing a couple of edits back and forth. Usually it's-it's one big edit and then probably a smaller edit and then hopefully you get to like line edits and continuity edits which is usually one thing. And line edits and continuity edits are: this is misspelled or this person's middle name was George in chapter three and Ronald in chapter nine, what's up with that. So after that, you turn it in, you say it's the final. And it, you turn in a draft that you're finally at the point where you're doing so few edits that you know they're not going to send it back to you. And that's a good feeling. But, so you turn it in and now it's-it's-it's on their side. I didn't mention this but bringing in the whole publishing thing. When you sign a contract for a book typically, you sign say January 1st, you're signing for the book to come out in the middle of the following year. It's usually an 18 month type production schedule. And they need that for the writing and the editing and switching drafts back and forth and knowing it's not the only book they're working on. But then they have to get it to, marketing has to do their thing. The art design has, art department has to do cover mock ups and that can go back and forth with the author. But the author never has final say. And I know so many people who hate this but it's for a good reason. Ultimately -the mail is here by the way- it's because they know what sells the point of a cover is not to depict what's inside the book. It's to sell the book. Now obviously it's got to give you some idea of what's in the book, because then people will be angry that they did not buy the book that you promised them. But there are things like, if you've read any of the Dresden books, Harry Dresden does not wear a big floppy hat. But the cover design has had a guy in a big floppy hat every single book. Every single one has that guy and the big floppy hat. Butcher, I heard that Butcher dislikes this so much that he actually like put a joke about a big floppy hat in one of his books. It's not, but, you know, people love those covers and they grab them and they buy them. So, you may not think that your book, the story is properly told via the cover. But it's, marketing, and the people with the graphic design and art design degrees that have the final say.

Mur 20:12

Um, I wasn't crazy about my cover but a lot of other people liked it. And the book sell, or the book buyers, from the bookstores loved it and that's important too. So they're looking at a book, and a cover going, that's going to sell. While the author is looking at it going, that does not tell the story of what's in my book. And it's, it's a personal thing. It feels like a personal

attack. It really does, but it's not. You just, I am so not, I am so devoid of thinking visually that-that I rarely have many comments because I know-I know that people with degrees are gonna know more than I am about visual design. I got fussy with the Shambling Guide to New York City because they had a woman who was very pale with blood on her lips, walking in broad daylight. And I'm like, that's a vampire. That's clearly a vampire. Vampires don't walk around in the day. And then, I can't remember how they edited it, but I said 'No, that won't work She's still a vampire out in daylight'. And so they finally just took the blood away and so now she's just a pale woman walking. Yeah, so that was that-that was the only thing I really, really pushed back on. I would not have a vampire one walking around the streets in New York, during the day. But otherwise, I mean the Shambling Guides covers were done by Jamie McKelvie who does brilliant comic book art. So was very glad to have him work on those. So yeah, while this is going on, you're, also one thing that takes time, is they have to send the book out to reviewers and the reviewers need time to read it and publish their reviews before the book comes out. So that's like, I think they want the book done with at least six months left to go before release. Reviews are a big deal. So that is another thing that happens. And then you need, in today's world, you need to be available for whatever social media stuff they have you set up for. Most people are not going to get a book tour. I've never gotten one. I used to want one really bad and then I have friends now that have taken them and they're not that, they don't seem that fancy anymore. A lot of getting up early and going to the airport and talking and then the next day getting up early and going to the airport and talking. Once you well, land and then go to the bookstore and then talk.

Mur 23:15

Um, but yeah so they're gonna, in the-the weeks before book launch, you're going to be probably answering questions or answering interviews or agreeing to interviews that will usually run a little bit after the book comes out. And the weird thing is by now you're probably already working on the next book, you turn this book in. It's off your plate, it's out of your mind. And as everybody else in the world ramps up for it, you're like, thinking about the next project and then when your book comes out, you have to pull yourself back and say, 'Okay, I got to be on this project again'. And then you start to lose little, little decisions you made. I'm very bad with losing the reasons why I make decisions and just having the decision. And having the decision is good, you know, but-but sometimes I don't remember why. And then when people ask me, I don't, I'm like, I'm sure I had a reason at the time. But my brain just said okay, decision made. Check that off. We can remember the decision. So, I've had people ask me about decisions I've made in books, and I'm far enough away from the story where I'm just like, I-I don't remember. Which is funny because there was a Neil Gaiman piece that I would read every year that I couldn't quite parse. That, there were just some questions about it and I promised myself I was going to ask him someday. And now that I'm a writer, I'm like, no, I'm not gonna bug him with this thing he wrote decades ago. Definitely not going to do that. So that's, if any, if there are any Gaiman fans out there it's Murder Mysteries. That story has been, I really can't tell what happens at the end of it. So that's-that's all. Um. Sometimes they'll want you to do a sequel before the book comes out and sometimes they'll want to wait and see how the sales are. I'm kind of in that boat now. I'm still working on my book edits for my current book but it's kind of, but I am thinking about the next book and I'm not sure whether I should be thinking about another book in this series which I, you know, cleverly tried to leave some threads so I could pick it up and keep going if they want me to or something completely new.

Mur 26:13

Yep, I'm being checked on by the dog. Yep, I'm here. Wait, I should say one more thing. I should say one more thing. The thing is, the other thing is, if you want to do a sequel and you haven't been asked to do a sequel or you're not contracted for another book, the publisher will probably have a right of first refusal on your next book. And you can propose a sequel, and they can take it and publish your sequel, or they can turn it down and then they have no more rights to your work anymore. That, so that happened with Six Wakes. I pitched the sequel and they said no. So, that was cool. Yeah, so the new book, that concept also came from watching television, where you know the old joke, people have been making this joke since the 80s, which is, or maybe they were making it in Agatha Christie's time. I don't know. Just that, you know, boy, people seem to die around Jessica Fletcher, and Miss Marple lives in a quiet little English cottage town, village thing, and people die around her a lot too. Even when she travels. Maybe especially when she travels. And even if you've got things like Midsomer Murders where the guys are actually homicide detectives, that show's been going on for so long that-that-that area of Midsomer has got to be the highest murder capital of the world because of how many people have died there. There's actually a page on Wikipedia of all the different little hamlets in Midsomer that have been created for the show. There are a lot of them. And so basically the joke is, why is this person around so much death. You know, if it's a cop and it's a city it makes more sense. But, you know, when you've got the just everyday Joes who were really good at figuring out crimes, why. So, I took that idea and just went, actually had a friend who had a day where he wasn't getting hurt, but people around him were getting injured. And, you know, it's not my story to tell, so I'm not gonna go into details but you know he saw like person get hit by a car on a bike, and saw an injured or like somebody going into diabetic shock on a run. He saw, it was just like, people kept getting injured around him and he was getting freaked out. And that made me think more that if-if you were this person, you would not enjoy your life. And everybody around you would completely say goodbye. You would be a complete pariah. There will be no having tea with Miss Marple. There would be no old writer friend welcoming Jessica to their town. Because they would know that murders would follow.

Mur 29:43

And so I decided to take that idea and say, if I were that person, what would I want to do and I thought well, probably get away. And so I just basically created a world where we had first contact with superior beings, but they thought we were, you know, basic and warlike and didn't want us to be living on their multicultural space station. And so, my character decided to say maybe people won't die around me if I'm among aliens, instead of humans. So she makes an appeal to the station. A sort of a sanctuary exile type thing, and leaves Earth. And unbeknownst to her there's another human who ends up on his own reasons, for his own reasons. And there's a human ambassador, also on the station. So, it gets to be, and of course murder does come, of course. I'm trying to think of other inspirations for that. I don't know. I think those are the only main inspirations was we were watching just a lot of watching and reading a lot of Agatha Christie and Midsomer Murders and Miss Fisher. And the story kind of grew from itself at that point, but I finished it. It was rough. I lost my editor. She was laid off halfway through the production cycle, and I had chosen this publisher because of this editor in part, but, you know, she was a big reason. And so that-that was rough. And it was harder to

put together. I can't really remember why. That's embarrassing but, so I turned it in, to my new editor. She wanted extensive rewrites which I kind of knew it was flawed. And I was welcoming to the rewrites. But then, 2020 happened and I haven't gotten into too many details but my 2020 started sucking with January. Things were already bad at the beginning. Luckily the things that were making my life stressful had actually cleared up by the time COVID hit. But still, I was dealing with stress pretty much the whole calendar year. I had a lot of trouble writing. A lot of trouble writing. That's why this book has been, I've been working on it for a couple of years, because, took me a while to write it and then it took them a while to get the edits back and then it took me a very long time to work on the edits, to work on their edits.

Mur 32:59

Now I have a new edit letter. I got it last week. And they're happy with the new direction of the book and just have some more comments on the plot so I'm hoping, really hoping that we can solidify the actual meaty hunk of the novel, with this next edit. And then, it's not on the schedule actually so hopefully they'll put it on a schedule and marketing will come up with a name. We've been sending names back and forth. That's another weird thing about this book is it has no name. I don't know if I had a hang up about that or not. I might have. It's just weird saying I'm working on this book. And the working name was Midsolar Murders thanks to a friend of mine who really likes puns, but my new agent read the book and he's like, I think that's a little too frivolous for the fact that even though the idea of murders happen around somebody and taking that to the logical conclusion is kind of funny. It's, and I do put humor in my books anyway but you know it's a murder mystery. There's not a lot of fun and lampooning in it. There is actually kind of a disgusting funny scene and I don't know if my editor likes that one. And I'm gonna have to look that up because I really liked that disgusting funny scene. That might be one of the darlings they want me to kill. So right now I'm dealing with two other smaller projects that I can't announce yet. Edits on those. And then hopefully, by April I'll be working on a new book. I just don't know which one because, again, I don't know if they're gonna want me to work on another book in this series or something else. But I have been working on some ideas to throw at them. So I can be prepared.

Mur 34:53

So I don't know if that fully answered the question because I actually didn't say like the times involved because, again, I don't like, write down okay today is the day I start the book. And then oh I'm stopping the book now so I can have a couple of months of writer's block. I don't track that. It just kind of all mushes together as in those were the years I was writing that book. But hopefully that gives a little bit more information on-on the lifespan of a book. Some people can think about books for decades before they write them. One of the projects I'm working on now is not actually a book but it is from an idea I've had since, for about eight years, I guess. And I never wrote it to a point where my previous agent was really in love with it so we never moved past the idea stage. If you find yourself with a question, be sure to email me mightymur@gmail.com. And you can come back to next episode of I Should be Writing which is episode 10, and it'll be this Thursday at 12:30pm EST. You can find me on Twitter, usually, at mightymur. On Instagram I'm mightymur2, with the numeral. And I just started TikTok and I'm not real sure what I'm gonna do with it so if anybody has any ideas. I thought about maybe taking my bag of mustaches and all my evil Mur advice and doing TikToks. But I am over 40 and not sure if they're going to let me on the site or not so we'll have to see. Thank you all for

coming. Thank you for spending your time with me. It-it, I say it every time but it really means a lot, because it's, this has been my lifeline during COVID of, I know it feels kind of one way. But the fact that I get to communicate with y'all is very important to me. It really makes me enjoy this show a lot more. So, I very much treasure you and you guys showing up.

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