

Novel's Done. Now What?

I Should Be Writing S17 Ep15

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SPEAKER

Mur Lafferty

Mur 0:00

I Should Be Writing Season 17 Episode 15. Hi there. Welcome to I Should Be Writing, the podcast for wannabe fiction writers. I am Mur Lafferty. And if you're new to me, I am a podcaster, a science fiction writer, and editor. And author. Well I said that. Wow, getting off to a great start today. I'm suffering right now from what I'm realizing is a stress hangover. And I don't know if... I'm sure psychologists have a better return for it, but I don't know what that is. So, I had a very stressful day yesterday. I had to take my dog to the vet. He was sick. And so the first part of the day was worrying about him and then two hours at the vet. And then the last day was just trying to get him home and comfortable and recover from all the stress. This morning I was not with it. And I took my ADD meds and I still managed to try to find something to listen to while I wrote, find an interesting bug that changed iTunes or it's called music now. They're changing the album art with the wrong album, and it's like all mixed up. And so if you've been building your music library for years and years and years, then it's just complete chaos.

Mur 2:13

And I have just learned to live with it and move on. But Clippings' hip hop science fiction album, Splendor and Misery, received Matthew Sweet's Girlfriend album cover and I thought that was so funny, so I took a screenshot of it and I put it up on Twitter. And then I looked around Twitter and saw that a person that I admire is doing a comic on Kickstarter, so I wanted to go support that. So I went to support that. And then I looked at Twitter to see if anybody thought my post was funny, because I'll just admit it, that's what people do. And then I realized what I was doing, but I didn't get back to work because I had to get on Slack and tell my friends how bad my ADD was today. So, that's where I'm coming from but I did manage to get some editing done. And I guess to the end of chapter two now. I looked and saw what my goal was for the week and just started laughing, because I'm not there. But I had sick people and stuff. But excuses, excuses. Work is proceeding slowly on the novel. I did hear from my editor today and she has approved the direction I'm going with chapter one, which is a huge relief. She didn't like the first chapter I did and then the second draft I took a later chapter and made that chapter one and put the stuff in previous chapter one in flashbacks. And then she said she didn't really click with where it was starting and maybe I should start with this part over here. An that part over here was the thing that I started the first draft with.

Mur 4:23

I had to basically rewrite the first chapter and just say, "Does this is work?" and then she was out of town or away from desk. I don't know. But finally heard back and got the thumbs up so I feel a lot, lot better about going forward with the book and the path that I'm taking. But, the dog is much better today. Talked to the vet this morning and she is pretty much happy with all of his progress. So she was right on her diagnosis and the treatment is working. So, it was just very stressful. But he's doing better. And he's getting four meals a day, and I just hope he doesn't realize that he's getting them when... The total food he's getting is not what he usually gets in a day so hoping we can trick him that way. So today, as I mentioned earlier, just big stress hangover. Could not focus, very tired. But managed to get some work done, managed to go to my two and a half hour class that's right before this. I even have tea. So somebody asked in the Discord, which you can access if you are a Patreon supporter, how do you know when you're a new writer, absolutely new, how do you know when you're ready to go out with a new book. Or a new story, I can't remember what they said specifically but I figured I would approach that. This is the you feel really good about this book or story and you think it's polished, what do you do? So, first I would say, try to get three friends. I know for a fact that it's hard to get people to give you time to read your stuff. It's hard to set up a workshop. But it's really important because beta readers can catch stuff that you don't.

Mur 6:37

And one thing that's really great is when they all catch the same thing. You know that that's something that really needs to be fixed. But if you have somebody who says, I love this character and somebody else says, No, I hate this character. They don't fit. That's your call. You decide what to do. So you decide what to fix, but I will say if someone calls you out, politely even, for racist or sexist or homophobic imagery in your book, don't immediately get your hackles up. Try to understand from where they're coming, and be grateful that someone caught it before it went out. If you really disagree, that's your call. And I'm not even saying, hey all you racists and sexists out there. This kind of stuff is ingrained in our systems. It's just decisions we make. Horror writers don't sit down to go, okay, now let's cast a black guy and kill him first. They don't do that. But in their brain, they're like, okay, we have a black character. He's going to use the first one going down in just this movie. And it happens again and again and again. And that's when it starts to get a little iffy. I have had my previous agent Jen send something back and said, I'm not crazy about a black woman in this role and I'm like, okay, you're absolutely right. I will fix that. And this is not something that has come out, just for the record. But I'm just trying to go over everything here. So if somebody points it out to you, please try to listen and don't take it so personally. Just remember that all of these prejudices and assumptions are ingrained. And we're all trying to fight it. I hope. Okay, we're not all trying to fight it, but I'm hoping a lot of people are trying to fight it. So if someone calls you out, just be grateful that it didn't go out to a bunch of readers and editors and stuff.

Mur 9:13

While this is happening, this is if you have something longer or even if you have something shorter, while this is happening when your friends have your piece, now is the time when you start wondering where you want to send it. If it's a short story, you need to research your markets. You need to make sure you understand what they're publishing. I know a lot of people put science fiction and fantasy right next to each other but Escape Pod is a science fiction podcast. We are 100% science fiction. We shouldn't receive a horror story. We shouldn't receive something that kind of feels like science fiction but really isn't. Katwood says something I've been struggling with is to know when I should send back edits. Just when I address all the editor's comments because I can tinker with things for a long time. That is a really good question, Katwood. I will get to that in a minute. So while your friends are reading

your stuff, you need to be researching your markets. Make sure that you're going to the right place. Read the submission guidelines. If you're researching agents, you need to make sure that they're open to submissions, and they're looking for your genre. And let me tell you sometimes agents have nonfiction, as their genre, but then when it comes to science fiction and fantasy, they will pinpoint the genre as far down as they could go. Like feminist epic fantasy. If it's not feminist epic fantasy, they don't want to see it. Or some of them say, Lord God, do not send me epic fantasy. So you need to make sure that even if you hear somewhere that someone does science fiction and fantasy or whatever genre you're doing, you need to make sure that they're actually looking for the kind of thing that you're writing. I know I gear this toward science fiction writers but this applies to anybody. Make sure that the magazine you're looking at does your kind of work.

Mur 11:21

And then, I think looking for the agent, looking up the agent on social media, looking up if they have a blog post, if they have a newsletter. DongWon Song has a really great newsletter. I subscribe to it. I think it's called Publishing is Hard. And my former agent had a newsletter. Of course I can't remember the name of that. Good job, Mur. Anyway, I'll put both of them in the show notes. This is not stalking. This is trying to learn about someone you may work with. You know employers are Googling all the people that apply nowadays, just to make sure that you weren't doing something horrible while you were under the influence of something horrible. So, you can do that for them, too. One thing that I found incredibly useful was my current agent, Seth, had done a series of talks with DongWon Song about asking an agent, and this is available on YouTube. They did it like I do it, which is they did video but they didn't need to do video. They just did like a Zoom conversation between the two of them but it's really informative. It's informative in both finding an agent but it's also informative in I learned a lot about Seth, specifically when I watched that. Which helped me. He's like, do you want to ask me any questions. And I'm thinking well I'd asked that, but you said this in that episode, and I was already kind of there. This applies... Well, I'll say that in a moment. If you are wanting to submit your book directly to a publisher, just like the agents, you need to make sure they're open to submissions. There's not a lot of big publishers that will open to unagented submissions. There are some right now that are open to people of color or specifically black authors. You need to check and see what is available to you. You're going to find mostly small press that will be open to unsolicited, unagented manuscripts. But on the same line make sure they're open, make sure they publish the kind of thing that you write, make sure they're not listed, and this goes for the agent, make sure they're not listed on Absolute Write as danger.

Mur 13:57

And then, I remember this very clearly from trying to get short stories published in aught five. I feel so old and crusty when I say that. Back in aught five, here's what we did. This was back before... Magazines could receive electronic submissions, they just didn't. A lot of them didn't. I very clearly remember trying to get a story published and my floor was covered in not only the story but also- No, it was a novel. It was a novel because every agent I was approaching wanted something slightly different in what I sent them. You don't just send a query letter and the first three chapters. Some want a query letter, a paragraph summary and 50 pages. Some want a one page summary and the first chapter. It's like, each one has their own little specific. And I'm wondering if they do this on purpose, because it's one of those, are you paying attention things. Because, one of the easiest ways to filter out people you don't want to work with, is through submission guidelines. I know that sounds harsh but it's true. If you can't follow the directions to get your book out there, and in their hands the way they want it, how could they be sure that you follow instructions when they gave you edits? So, the formatting for each book is the rough thing. When you're working on your novel pitch, it's probably best... Well this is where the

snowflake method comes in handy, actually. Remember, this will be on YouTube on my channel Mur Lafferty, when I was testing out outlining methods and I was doing the snowflake method and it was just too fiddly for me. But one thing it does give you is it will give you a paragraph and three paragraphs, and a one page summary of your book. All of those. Because you have to write those all out. And while it's annoying, having all of those on hand is a good thing. So the formatting for each book, very important.

Mur 16:31

So your friends get back to you and have some comments. The first thing you want to look at is... I'll be honest. The first thing you want to look at is whether they liked it or not. And I'm saying that's what you want to look at. You're a very vulnerable writer and the first thing you want to hear is, I loved this. Here's some ideas about how to make it better. Which is really what a critique is. You got to look at these comments not as this sucks. Fix it. But this is great, here's how to make it better. So read the comments they put. If they gave you a letter, read that. And then start comparing them with the other friends. If they did their due diligence and they did the things you ask them to, you'll be able to see if a certain part doesn't work, or if people disagree on what something means. That one got me one time where I thought something was very clear, and one person thought it meant one thing and one person thought it meant another thing. And I'm like, oh wow, that's not clear at all. And I didn't need to fix it for them, but I knew I needed to fix it. But like I said it's your decision. And so here is where, oh and run a copy edit. Run a spellcheck, copy edit. Make sure it's as shiny as it can be. Books will go through several edits. You'll get, here's the rough draft edit. Okay. Thanks for the second draft or the second draft, it looks good. Here's a couple more things. And then, okay, now we're down to copy edits. So, it goes back and forth several times. Short stories do not. So, if you get a short story with editor comments, you pretty much just need to take care of the editor comments, unless you found something that they did not spot and fix that. And when you fix it, keep track changes on so the editor can see what you did. What you did. Think about what you did.

Mur 18:44

I've been massaging my novel, and I think it's better. But it is going slower than I wanted it to. Which sucks. But it's going to be a better book in the long run. Now if you're doing a short story, unless the magazine says something very specific, you write your letter and you say, dear... And it's really good to get the name right. And the gender right. It's really good. That is another tiny step you can do to show that you paid attention. You know if people send both SB Divya and I have kind of androgynous names for the English language anyway. And I think a lot of times we both are assumed to be male writers, but we're not. And we do get some dear Mr Lafferty or Mr Divya, and that's kind of like, petting a cat the wrong way. You don't want to start off with that. So just get the name right, get the gender right. You can find this out on the internet. You really can. Then you need to say the name of your story, how many words it is. Don't summarize it. This is for short stories. Don't summarize it. If you have any other publications, say where you've been published, and please make it a paying venue. Say no more than three places. Say the three you're most proud of. If you have no sales, you don't need to say anything. You don't need to say you haven't had any sales. You don't need to say it at all. You just say, here's my story, it's this many words. Polite sentence, goodbye. Hope you enjoy it, look forward to hearing from you, whatever. You don't need to summarize. You don't need to talk about how you've always wanted to be a writer. You don't need to say how you have admired the magazine for years because of x, y and z. The first person to read your stuff will be a slush reader. So, blowing smoke up the editor's bum is wasted effort, unless it actually reaches them.

Mur 21:37

With novels the query is a lot trickier. Query shark has some really good information on it. Although she has gotten to where she will not look at, she won't critique a query, unless it shows that you've read the entire backlog of her blog because she doesn't want to answer the same thing twice. But essentially, again, dear named editor, enclosed is my book, blah blah blah. It's this many words. I think you should maybe say the genre? Yes, say the genre. Just introduce the book. Then, say one paragraph on your person. I mean, on your story. Really, stress hangover over. I'm sorry. It's making my brain really weak. So, you want one paragraph about your story. This is where you don't be cute, you don't dangle threads. You want to interest them, but they're gonna look at it anyway so you don't need to do the "Hey, I'm going to do the back cover kind of information to make you buy it and dig in." because it's a different mindset. So what you want to do is: character wants something. Unfortunately, character, or conflict, or place, or something gets in the way. They're going to have to do a number of things in order to achieve what they want. And you know I'm basically saying like blanks here. So, it might make you think about your book a little bit more. And I know the last thing you want to do right now is turn around and go and edit it again. But if you can't say what your character wants you have a problem.

Mur 24:21

Any sort of story can be boiled down to X character wants Y thing only Z gets in the way. Even if the book spans the whole epic fantasy, goes into lots of different points of view, you can still do it. And then you do the paragraph about you. And this is also where people tend to get a little too wordy. If you have something about yourself, that has either sold writing before or you have something about your life that helps you with the book you're writing. If you're a mom and you're writing a character who's a mom, that doesn't count. If you are a brain surgeon and you're writing about a brain surgeon, that counts. The more specialized people get with their characters, the more editors want to hear that you're going to know what you're talking about. So you have to decide what about your experience says you can write this book. If there's nothing, and you've piqued their interest anyway, you might sell the book. It could happen. You don't need to worry that, "Oh I wrote about logging. I don't know anything about logging, or I have not been a logger." Well, did that's stuff you can research or interview. So don't think you have to be that specialized but if you are, it's a point in your favor.

Mur 26:18

So if you have any publications, say that just like in the short story. If you don't have any publications and you don't have a specialization, just say I appreciate your time in looking at this. I look forward to your response. You don't need to gush about... Actually no, no. I'm thinking of approaching editors. With agents, you might want to put something in there about why you're specifically contacting them. And this is not to blow smoke. This is to say, I really enjoyed the books by these people that you represent. And if you think your writing is anything like one of those, then you say that. When I was talking to Seth, I pointed out that he's got so many amazing clients. But when I saw he had Becky Chambers on there, I was very excited because I think... Becky Chambers is amazing, don't get me wrong. I love her stuff. But I thought, that is the client that is most like my work. Space, adventure, a little bit of humor, a little bit of heart. Read Becky Chambers if you can. Becky Chambers was the thing that got me through 2016. Long Trip to a Small Angry Planet, I believe. I think she won the Hugo for best series last year. But I can't say like, my writing is beautiful. I didn't try to compare myself to Mary Robinette Kowal or Yoon Han Lee because my writing is not like theirs. But you can say you admire the authors but if you can find somebody who you think you write like, then pinpoint that. That tells the agent that you have researched them. And you know what you want. Because, oh for the love of all it's decent and holy, remember that you're the boss. And you need to know what you want in this contracted employee essentially. All the agents I know would probably get mad at me for saying that, but you are their client,

they work for you. So you need to find one that will work well with you. And if they don't, that's going to be a huge waste of your time.

Mur 29:17

I'm not going to go into this because I told the story several times, but believe me, I speak from experience. You want an agent that you're excited about and who's excited about you. If the agent seems lukewarm, know that they're not for you because you don't want to try to convince someone to love your work. That doesn't work. So if they don't love your work, you move on to the next one. Or you go back to the drawing board. After you send all this out, the best way to stop obsessing about a reply is to start something new. If you feel like playing in the same universe, you can but there's no guarantee you'll sell a series even if you sell the book. You can start something new. You can do a short story if you did a novel. Either way. But start something new because that will stop the obsessions. Now I have not done... I've only written solicited short stories in the past couple of years. I've been focusing on longer stuff. So I'm actually not sure about the websites that are really good for tracking this kind of thing. If you guys know in the chat, can you please let me know and I'll put it in the show notes. Don't post URLs, just post the name of the site, and I'll look it up. Because I can't remember them off the top of my head and apparently that wasn't in the notes that I took. But if nobody says anything, I'll look them up. Isn't there a submission grinder something? Submission grinder is one. So that was a lot more than I expected I would say about the first steps for new writers. But the most important thing you need to do is have persistence and don't quit.

Mur 31:19

Again I speak from experience, don't quit. If you think you're too old, or not educated enough, or whatever, none of that matters. You don't need an MFA. You don't need a college degree. You just need to love writing and keep getting up when you get knocked down. This was good. I know this is all basic stuff but I think it's sometimes good to go over the basics, because some of you listening, either live or in the feed right now, haven't heard this before. Or this might be your first experience with I Should Be Writing. It's always good to remind yourself of the fundamentals. So if that is it, thank you for either showing up and hanging out, or listening later on the feed. I appreciate everybody who's chatting, who's lurking, who's listening later, who's listening years from now. I appreciate anybody taking the time to listen to me babble about writing. And if you want to support me, you can go to miverse.com and buy my books, or support at patreon.com/mightymur. Or you can support at Twitch and by subscription. Yeah I'm on Twitter, mightymur. On my website [miverse](http://miverse.com) and Instagram, mightymur2. I don't update as often as I should, but I am updating more. And, actually I'm curious. People watching live- actually people not watching live your opinion matters too. How do you feel about the mid afternoon Eastern Standard Time time slot? Because I moved it because I have a class from 12 to 230 on Tuesdays, but that's going to end soon and I don't know whether I should move it back to 12:30, or keep it here because some of you can't watch it 1230. So, tell me how you feel about this timeslot. And I'll consider keeping it if you like it or if you'd prefer 1230 Eastern Standard or one o'clock Eastern Standard, I can do that too. I am flexible. I just don't want to do a morning stream, that's all. I hope I will see you next time. Because you should be writing.

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